

## **Education and Lifelong Learning Committee**

### **Afasic Cymru presentation to ELL Committee – Early Intervention (25 February 2004)**

#### **Afasic Cymru**

Founded in 1968, Afasic is the UK charity which supports children and young people with speech, language and communication difficulties. Last year, Afasic were awarded a substantial Community Fund grant and this has enabled Afasic to open an office in Wales for the first time.

Afasic believes that communication is the cornerstone of education and playing a meaningful role in society. Children with a speech, language and communication impairment may find it hard to make friends, understand lessons at school, reach their potential or get a job. They are at risk of social isolation and exclusion. Afasic seeks to support children and young people affected by this impairment and their families. It does this by providing information so that they can access appropriate services, by working with speech and language therapists, teachers, and government to create better services and by raising awareness of their difficulties.

#### **Context**

Many skills are needed for speech and language to develop – so there are many ways that children's speech and language can go wrong. Some children can have difficulty in moving the muscles that control speech; others can't understand how a conversation works or the meaning of a sentence. Some children can't understand or use language at all. These children struggle to understand what people are saying to them, and they can have tremendous difficulties both with conveying their thoughts and feelings, and with their learning and development. Despite the large numbers of children affected, there is very low awareness of this often hidden disability. Most people have little understanding of the difficulties these children face and the inadequate support available to meet their need.

Language is fundamental in education and underpins the entire curriculum. Children with these difficulties often struggle with the acquisition of literacy, maths – in fact, all subjects and activities depend on a child's ability to understand and use language.

Evidence is also accumulating that teenagers with speech, language and communication difficulties are more likely to be excluded from school and that a large proportion of young offenders have undiagnosed speech and language difficulties.

#### **Identified need in Wales**

In Wales there are approximately 29 000 children and young people that have enough of a difficulty to affect their educational attainment and social inclusion. Which is average of two children in every primary classroom. In Wales there are about 1000 school age children who will retain a severe, long term difficulty into adulthood and beyond. i.e. one child in every 500 at Secondary school age.

The aim of the project is to reach children and young people with speech, language and communication difficulties within Wales, and support their parents and carers. In Wales there is a huge imbalance between the needs of our client group and the provision of information and services available to them.

## **Key issues**

- Conflicting policies and priorities across health and education services have led to variations in the way in which the speech, language and communication needs of children and young people are prioritised and met. This has led to inequities in service provision across Wales
- There is a lack of equity over the funding arrangements for the delivery of services to children and young people with speech, language and communication difficulties in a school based context, together with varying priorities between health and education services in the allocation of resources.
- There is an escalating demand for SLT services due to clearer identification, and recognition of the need.
- There are insufficient speech and language therapists to meet demand and too few are currently undertaking training. There are particularly, too few bilingual speech and language therapists.
- There are insufficient resources generally and , more specifically, through the medium of Welsh.
- There is a general lack of information available to parents about language development, particularly in bilingual settings.
- There is little support to ethnic minority families who require speech and language therapy.
- There are few opportunities for training to both parents and professionals in the field of speech and language difficulties in Wales.
- There remains a general lack of understanding and awareness of the needs of children with speech and language difficulties within Wales.
- There is growing recognition that school based intervention is often most effective. While ‘direct therapy’ may be beneficial for some children, in the majority of cases programmes need to be delivered in an educational context and be embedded within the curriculum.

## **Evidence**

The Director of Afasic Cymru has been involved with an audit and consultation document in response to a request by the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning and the Minister of Health and Social Services. The audit and subsequent consultation document highlights, for the first time, concerns that are specific to Wales. Consequently, the Wales Assembly Government continues to need consider issues such as bilingual therapy and information, varying service provision throughout Wales and retention and

recruitment of professionals, particularly in rural or deprived areas.

Wales needs to provide opportunities to support parents and their children who deal with the difficulties of speech and language impairments in their daily life. Continuing lack of intervention from NHS Trusts and statutory agencies, has led to parents and children feeling socially isolated and excluded. The special educational needs of children with speech, language and communication difficulties require specialist intervention from both teachers and speech and language therapists. At present, there is only one specialist school in Wales, and this is only for primary school aged children. Children with speech, language and communication difficulties need the earliest intervention, with a good skill mix of professionals in order to overcome their difficulties.

**Clare Moyle**  
**Director Afasic Cymru**