

## A Realist Examination of Service Delivery Conditions for Addressing Speech, Communication and Language Needs in Youth Offending Services

Anke Müller<sup>1\*</sup>, Tobias Schneider<sup>1</sup>, Julia F. Weber<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Medical Psychology, Faculty of Medicine, University of Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany.

\*E-mail ✉ [anke.mueller@gmail.com](mailto:anke.mueller@gmail.com)

### Abstract

Young people with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) are known to appear within the youth justice system at markedly higher rates than in the general population, with research suggesting that such needs are present in the majority of young people who offend. When these communication-related difficulties are not adequately recognised or addressed, they can significantly limit young people's ability to participate effectively in Youth Offending Services (YOS) and to express their views within justice processes. Ensuring equitable engagement therefore requires services to adapt their delivery in ways that respond to diverse communication profiles. This study adopts a realist methodological framework to examine how speech, language and communication provision can be integrated within Youth Offending Services. Drawing on qualitative interviews with a range of stakeholders (n = 15), the research investigates the contextual conditions and processes that support effective responses to SLCN in youth offending settings. The findings illuminate how practitioners' knowledge of communication needs interacts with service structures and practice approaches to influence young people's engagement. Seven overarching themes were identified that relate to key requirements for service delivery in youth justice contexts. These themes were used to generate programme theories that explain the conditions under which YOS are better positioned to meet the speech, language and communication needs of young people. The programme theories highlight several interrelated service conditions, including the development of shared understanding of communication needs among staff, the use of accessible and inclusive language within practice, collaborative learning across professional roles, and the active involvement of young people in shaping service delivery. Central to all theories was the role of practitioner awareness of SLCN, which was found to drive changes in professional behaviour and working practices, leading to improved engagement between young people and youth offending services.

**Keywords:** (SLCN), Youth Offending Services (YOS), Communication needs, Justice system

### Introduction

Studies repeatedly highlight the significant role that speech, language, and communication needs (SLCN) play in the offending behaviour of young people, with a recognised connection between communication challenges and conduct issues forming a key characteristic in the backgrounds of many youthful

offenders [1-3]. In fact, young people with SLCN are substantially over-represented in the criminal justice system, with prevalence estimates ranging from 60–90% compared to around 10% in the wider population [4]. Involvement with the criminal justice system subjects young people to various situations that place heavy demands on language abilities, such as police interviews, court appearances, and rehabilitative programmes [5]. For those with SLCN navigating the justice system, these needs can create substantial hurdles, including difficulties in fully grasping events, understanding expectations, and effectively participating in Youth Offending Services (YOS) [6].

In England and Wales, Youth Offending Services (also referred to as Youth Offending Teams—YOTs) oversee

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children and young people aged 10–18 who have received a court sentence or who have attracted police attention for offending but have been managed without formal charges (through out-of-court disposals). YOS are multi-agency partnerships based in local authorities, responsible for providing youth justice services locally. They report to the Youth Justice Board (YJB), an arm's-length public body created under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, with the principal objective of preventing offending among children and young people [7].

A certain degree of speech, language, and communication proficiency is essential for young people to engage successfully with YOS and to derive maximum benefit from interventions designed to promote lasting behavioural change as outlined in their YOS plan [4, 6, 8]. Yet a large proportion—potentially up to 90% [4]—of young people in contact with the justice system encounter considerable barriers due to unrecognised or unsupported SLCN. Examples include young offenders with limited narrative abilities being disadvantaged during the exchange of information required in police interviews or courtroom questioning [2, 4]. The Youth Justice Board [9] has also noted that many young people struggle with everyday justice-system terminology, such as “victim” or “breach”. As a result, interventions aimed at reducing future offending may not achieve their intended outcomes when delivered to young people with unmet SLCN. In response, numerous Youth Offending Services have introduced some form of SLCN support, though there remains limited research on how such provision should be structured and delivered within a YOS environment.

This study adds to the existing literature by formulating theories about the service delivery requirements in YOS for young offenders with speech, language, and communication needs. The theories are constructed using a realist methodology, which applies a framework to explore the interplay and significance of context (necessary conditions), mechanism (individual or collective reasoning and responses of participants), and outcome—that is, “what mechanisms for change are activated by a programme [SLCN-related provision in a YOS] and how do they interact with existing social processes?”.

By treating SLCN provision in a YOS as an intervention, the study examines how the new concepts and resources it introduces affect established social dynamics within the service. Adopting a realist perspective while accounting for contextual factors has enabled a deeper

understanding of the intricate processes operating in the systems encompassing both SLCN support and the YOS, leading to proposed theories regarding the service conditions considered essential for successfully integrating SLCN provision in this setting [10].

#### *Speech, language and communication need*

To establish the background for this research, it is essential to clarify the meaning of “Speech, Language and Communication Needs” (SLCN). SLCN is a broad umbrella term covering the complete spectrum of difficulties an individual may experience with speech, language, and communication. Although “speech”, “language”, and “communication” are frequently used interchangeably, important distinctions exist that aid in assessing their effects. According to the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists [11], “speech” encompasses not just spoken words but also vocal expression and clarity. “Language” involves both producing spoken content and comprehending what others say. “Communication” refers to interactions with others and may incorporate both verbal and non-verbal aspects. Defining SLCN simply is challenging, as the term carries varied interpretations across professions, leading to differences in understanding and application between disciplines [12]. Nevertheless, a common thread in most definitions is the core idea of being able to comprehend others and to express oneself clearly [8, 13]. This paper therefore adopts the following adapted definition: “a reduced capacity to understand others and/or to make oneself understood”.

SLCN does not present in a single form. Individuals differ widely in the type, combination, and severity of difficulties, with some being temporary and resolving over time while others persist and affect a person throughout life [14]. The specific nature of the challenges determines their impact on daily functioning. For instance, communication is fundamental to social participation, directly influencing opportunities to learn, build relationships, and improve life prospects [15]. Inadequate communication skills increase the risk of social exclusion. Deficits in conversational abilities, non-verbal cues, or social awareness can all impede the formation, development, and maintenance of relationships [14, 15]. Such isolation carries further consequences, including struggles to develop conflict-resolution strategies, barriers to educational access and engagement, and strained peer or family connections [16].

## Materials and Methods

### *Realist approach*

Realism is a theory-led methodological approach that goes beyond assessing whether an intervention is effective, instead seeking to explain how and why it produces outcomes, for which groups, and under what conditions [17]. When applied to speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) provision within a Youth Offending Service (YOS), a realist perspective enables exploration of the specific elements of the provision that generate change, the populations for whom it is effective, and the contextual factors that influence its impact.

A key strength of realism lies in its capacity to both gather data from real-world social settings and interpret those data through an explanatory framework that foregrounds underlying causal mechanisms and contextual influences on human action [18]. Context is particularly salient when considering the delivery of SLCN-related provision in youth justice settings, as this provision is typically rooted in health-based systems—most notably the National Health Service (NHS) in England—but is implemented within a criminal justice environment. As a result, conventional healthcare delivery models may not be appropriate, necessitating modifications to both communication strategies and modes of delivery. For instance, rather than relying on standard NHS appointment systems that depend on service users responding to written invitations, SLCN provision within a YOS may require an outreach-based model of engagement. In this approach, speech and language therapists work in ways aligned with YOS practice, actively engaging young people through familiar and accessible methods.

Within realist evaluation, outcomes are understood to arise from the interaction between context and mechanism. This interaction provides insight into how SLCN-related provision influences service delivery practices within a YOS, as well as its effects on young people's engagement with the service. These interactions are articulated through context–mechanism–outcome (CMO) configurations, which function as explanatory propositions or programme theories. As the research develops, these programme theories are continually refined. Empirical evidence is used to interrogate and

adjust the theories, enabling a more detailed and accurate understanding of how the intervention operates in practice [18].

Programme theories play a central role in realist inquiry, offering a means of articulating assumptions about how complex social interventions function, why they are effective, and the conditions under which they are most likely to succeed. Within realist research, programme theories serve as the primary units of analysis [19, 20]. Data collection and analysis proceed iteratively, with ongoing movement between empirical evidence, theory refinement and interpretative conclusions. This process continues until a strong alignment is achieved between the developed programme theories and observable patterns within the empirical data, and no additional themes emerge. At this stage, attention is given to critically examining the role and influence of the researcher within the research process [21]. This phase is commonly described as “theory consolidation” [22].

Realist approaches have been increasingly adopted in health and social care research to explore why innovations succeed or fail (e.g. [23, 24]). This growing use reflects the approach's explicit recognition of the role played by contextual environments in shaping intervention outcomes, as well as its ability to account for differential impacts across individuals and settings [18]. Applying a realist framework to SLCN provision within a YOS enables a detailed examination of generative mechanisms, facilitating a clearer understanding of what aspects of the intervention are effective, for whom they work, and in which circumstances.

### *Research context*

The study was undertaken within a single case-study Youth Offending Service located in the North East of England and operating within a large County Council. The area is characterised by a diverse population and geography, alongside comparatively high levels of socioeconomic deprivation and lower life expectancy when compared with national averages for England [25]. At the time of data collection, the YOS was in the process of implementing a three-phase strategy to embed speech, language and communication provision within its service model. A summary of these stages is presented in **Table 1**.

**Table 1.** Staged approach to the integration of SLCN provision within the local authority Youth Offending Service

Stage	Focus	Description
Stage 3	Direct work with young people who offend and have identified SLCN	The SLT provided direct therapeutic input to young people engaged with the YOS who were identified as having suspected speech, language and communication needs, where this was required and consent was given. This work formed part of the YOS intervention plan. The SLT also offered consultation, advice and guidance to YOS staff to support effective practice with young people with SLCN.
Stage 2	Supporting communication needs of young victims of youth crime	The SLT developed communication-friendly materials aimed at improving understanding and participation of young people and their families within restorative justice processes. This included adapting restorative conferencing resources and exploring methods to increase the involvement of young victims of youth crime in restorative justice activities.
Stage 1	Staff training and development of communication-accessible practices	A Speech and Language Therapist (SLT) was seconded into the Youth Offending Service to review existing service delivery systems and ensure they were responsive to communication needs. The SLT delivered training sessions to YOS staff on speech, language and communication needs and developed practical written resources to support practitioners in engaging young people with SLCN.

Fieldwork commenced during the third phase of implementation, at which point the essential groundwork for embedding speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) provision within the Youth Offending Service (YOS) had largely been established. The study therefore sought to work collaboratively with the YOS to explore local service requirements, with particular attention to identifying the mechanisms necessary to deliver an effective model of practice that incorporates SLCN provision. The research was guided by two central questions: what constitutes an effective YOS service delivery model that integrates SLCN support, and which elements are critical in enabling such a model to function effectively?

### Methods

Preliminary theory-building discussions were held with senior personnel at the case-study YOS site. These initial consultations took the form of structured meetings between the researcher and YOS representatives, during which the original intentions underpinning the introduction of SLCN-related provision were explored. This process involved organising and interpreting the experiences, assumptions and expectations of those responsible for designing and implementing the provision, in line with realist principles [26]. Insights gained from these discussions helped to surface early themes related to SLCN integration prior to data collection in the field [22]. The outcome of this phase was the development of an overarching initial programme theory, which informed both the construction of

interview topic guides and the overall analytical focus of the study.

The initial programme theory proposed that when targeted provision is introduced (mechanism I) within the YOS environment (context) and is adapted to address speech, language and communication needs (mechanism II), young people with SLCN are better able to engage with the service (mechanism III). Enhanced engagement was hypothesised to lead to improved participation in YOS interventions (outcome I), with a subsequent effect on reducing rates of reoffending (outcome II).

Building on this foundational work, thirteen qualitative interviews were conducted with a total of fifteen stakeholders linked to the YOS case-study site. Participants included ten members of YOS staff (comprising seven practitioners from delivery teams, one health-related professional and two individuals in strategic management roles), alongside five external stakeholders representing organisations such as the Police, the Youth Justice Board (YJB) and community-based Speech and Language Therapy services.

All interviews were undertaken by the author, who had no prior involvement with the YOS beyond the research context. A semi-structured interview format was employed, using a topic guide designed to examine propositions derived from the initial programme theory and to explore the circumstances under which SLCN provision within the YOS was perceived to be effective or ineffective [22]. Interview durations ranged from approximately 20 minutes to one hour. Discussions focused on understanding how speech, language and communication support aligns with a young person's

progression through the youth justice system. In particular, interviews explored stakeholders' views on what an effective YOS service model incorporating SLCN provision should entail, as well as the essential components that enable such a model to operate successfully.

To structure discussion, the concept of a young person's pathway through the YOS was used as a guiding framework. Stakeholders were invited to consider the types of interventions required at different stages of engagement, including pre-engagement, initial contact, sustained involvement and eventual disengagement from services. Questions centred on identifying the specific supports, resources and adjustments needed to meet the communication needs of young people at each stage. The overarching aim of the interviews was therefore to determine what forms of SLCN-related provision should be embedded within YOS practice, and youth justice interventions more broadly.

All interviews were transcribed in full prior to analysis. Data were analysed using a thematic content analysis approach, with attention given to identifying meanings and concepts within the data that related to context, mechanism and outcome. Transcripts were initially coded by the researcher, with codes developed inductively to capture key elements within each realist category, as well as relationships between them. This process involved breaking the data into manageable segments and iteratively reviewing transcripts to refine and expand the coding framework. Ongoing reflection, alongside discussion with the wider research team, informed the development and interpretation of themes, which were synthesised into programme theories.

Participation in the study was voluntary. Recruitment took place through an initial introduction to the research during a staff team meeting, followed by the circulation of an email outlining the study and participation process to all YOS staff ( $n = 56$ ). The email included the researcher's contact details, allowing staff to opt in to the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and all staff members who expressed an interest in participating were subsequently interviewed.

## Results and Discussion

The analysis revealed seven primary themes related to delivery requirements in Youth Offending Service (YOS) settings for effectively supporting young offenders with Speech, Language, and Communication Needs (SLCN).

The findings are organised below by theme, highlighting key context, mechanism, and outcome elements that contribute to developing programme theory.

### *Awareness of SLCN*

This theme focuses on the initial limited understanding within YOS teams of SLCN and its effects on young people, alongside the resources and training initiatives used to build awareness.

YOS managers noted that in the past, the team had not approached issues with a specific focus on speech and language, explaining that they "...hadn't really considered things from a speech and language perspective..." (YOS Management A). As a result, staff required targeted training (mechanism) to encourage them to integrate speech, language, and communication strategies into everyday service delivery, an aspect that had previously been overlooked. However, the training needed to be practical and applicable. The Speech and Language Therapist (SLT) delivering the sessions was embedded in the YOS team (context), which enabled her to "...familiarise herself with the terminology used in youth justice..." (Speech and Language Therapist A). This familiarity ensured the training aligned with criminal justice procedures, making it easier to apply SLCN approaches to young people with highly complex needs (outcome).

"[The SLT secondment] really put speech, language, and communication at the centre of our work [in the YOS]; before that, we weren't well prepared to recognise it." (YOS F)

The training provided by the SLT directly within the YOS environment (context) significantly improved staff knowledge (outcome). Team members admitted they had previously lacked understanding of SLCN and its influence on a young person's ability to engage with YOS services. Simply becoming aware of the issue (mechanism) was described as the crucial factor that drove changes in how staff approached their roles (outcome), with one participant observing:

"...once you become aware of it [SLCN], you're much more likely to notice, spot, and address [related difficulties]." (YOS G)

Staff strongly felt that the awareness training (mechanism) delivered in the YOS setting (context) built effectively on their existing expertise and helped them develop new ways of working based on what they had learned (outcome).

Beyond general awareness, participants emphasised the importance of understanding the distinct differences between young people accessing mainstream SLCN services and those involved with YOS (context). In typical services, young people are usually still in school and surrounded by supportive networks, including family. By contrast, YOS clients with SLCN are often excluded from mainstream education or placed in alternative provision. Many of their parents or carers also have their own communication difficulties, and the young people frequently present additional challenges such as mental health issues or substance misuse, creating a far more complicated profile of needs (context).

The awareness training encouraged staff to reflect on their interactions with young people and stressed the value of tailoring their methods to each individual's requirements (mechanism).

"...often we assume they [young people in YOS] fully grasp what we're telling them...sometimes their behaviour is seen as deliberately difficult...but in reality they simply don't follow what's happening..." (YOS E). One case worker explained that before the training, their sessions with young people had depended entirely on spoken explanations, noting it was "...all just verbal, nothing visual or supportive." (YOS D). This insight (mechanism) later prompted a change (outcome) in how these sessions were conducted (context). Staff now use picture-based flash cards—created by the SLT—to explain complicated terms during meetings with young people (context), helping to make technical language more accessible (mechanism).

The skills acquired through training were seen as essential for giving staff practical tools to handle the situations they encounter daily (mechanism) in their roles (context). Many workers described the importance of being able to interpret what is happening in the moment, understand the young person's state of mind, consider the surroundings, and recognise their possible emotions (mechanism). One team member highlighted the need to look beyond the words spoken:

"You walk into a room and notice a great deal; you read between the lines...you become highly attuned to the subtle cues in the situation." (YOS B).

A frequent challenge for YOS staff is the limited time available to work with each young person (context). In this setting, staff stressed the necessity of quickly establishing connection and trust (mechanism). They viewed it as vital that young people "...feel at ease with

the person they're working with." (YOS A) to enable meaningful engagement (mechanism).

"...develop that connection [between worker and young person], establish trust, because without good communication nothing else will succeed." (YOS F)

From the interviews, it was clear that staff had modified their approaches—including gaining new abilities to interpret situations and form relationships (outcome)—as a direct result of the SLCN training (mechanism) when supporting young people (context). While the advantages of awareness training were widely acknowledged, some noted potential barriers to uptake. Staff often manage heavy caseloads, so adding mandatory training sessions can feel like a lower priority amid demanding schedules.

### *Communication*

This theme centres on the intricate language and procedures that young people encounter within the Youth Offending Service (YOS). Staff described how they often serve as interpreters for the young people during interactions with police or court environments, simplifying information presented in formal settings (context) into clearer, more understandable forms (mechanism).

"...I attend court, receive the details in official legal jargon, then rephrase it into everyday English...and after that, I have to explain it further in a way the young person can grasp." (YOS C)

The ability to rephrase specialised terms (mechanism) when supporting young people (context) connects closely to the earlier emphasis on establishing trust and connection with them to facilitate open dialogue. As one participant noted, "...if you're unable to connect through conversation with the young person, they won't open up in return..." (YOS A).

The youth justice system involves sophisticated procedures and vocabulary (context). Staff require both recognition of SLCN and appropriate techniques (mechanism) to successfully involve and support young people in this setting (outcome).

### *Resources*

This theme covers tangible tools and materials created for YOS staff, such as "word buster cards" (which display technical terms on one side and include pictures or straightforward explanations on the reverse), along with individual strategies developed from personal expertise, and the various supports (including awareness sessions, guidance, and printed materials) supplied by the

embedded Speech and Language Therapist (mechanism) during work with young people (context).

On the whole, these resources received strong positive feedback from both YOS team members and external colleagues regarding their practicality and effectiveness. They were regarded as valuable for encouraging staff to consider and incorporate SLCN into their interactions with young people (mechanism and context), with one team member commenting, "...you won't overlook something if it's right there in front of you..." (YOS G). Tools like word buster cards assisted in converting complicated, justice-related terminology into simple language (mechanism) for the young people (context). For instance, one card helped clarify the meaning of "revoking the sentence" for a young person—a term that had often been used without much breakdown in the past, leaving uncertainty about whether young people truly understood it.

While the communication aids were generally welcomed, staff recognised the importance of using professional discretion when interacting with young people (context) to apply them suitably, noting that in certain situations the materials might come across as "...belittling..." to some individuals (mechanism).

Beyond physical items, staff described emerging practices in supporting young people (context) that added to an expanding collection of informal tools (mechanism). These included sketching out complex procedures visually, using storytelling to emphasise key elements (for example, of the police caution), and redesigning schedules provided to young people by using simpler wording and adding illustrations to make them "...more accessible for speech and language needs..." (YOS E). In health-related discussions within the YOS, visual aids were frequently mentioned as helpful for enabling young people to describe their experiences. One worker shared an example of using a drawing to encourage a young person to open up about their thoughts and feelings (mechanism):

"I was supporting a young person who had a lot on his mind, so I sketched a quick picture of a skeleton on paper—he really liked it—and I drew a hollow space and said that's what's inside your head, then added arrows pointing to things like his dad, and he completely understood it..." (YOS F).

The embedded Speech and Language Therapist was herself viewed as a vital resource. Her placement directly within the team (context) drew many favourable remarks and promoted casual knowledge exchange among

colleagues, fostering ongoing education and heightened awareness of SLCN (mechanism). Being on-site (context) allowed the therapist to gain insight into the specific workings of the YOS, including how support was provided, which helped tailor SLCN strategies to the setting (context and mechanism). This integration (context) also enabled regular, informal chats with staff, which lessened the felt need for structured training sessions (mechanism).

"...you can approach challenges from fresh perspectives in a short, unplanned chat...those spontaneous moments...like 'I've got this young person I'm really struggling to reach'...someone else jumps in, and suddenly you have a new way of looking at the problem..." (YOS B)

#### *Service delivery*

This theme relates to the fundamental mechanisms that shape and guide the provision of services within the Youth Offending Service (YOS).

The YOS demonstrated a vibrant culture of creativity and innovation (context), which played a key role in encouraging and supporting service improvements (mechanism). Close-knit relationships among team members were emphasised as a vital factor in driving organisational change after SLCN gained greater prominence (mechanism). Several staff members noted that the team could easily share suggestions with managers, highlighting successful practices or areas needing enhancement. This strong team unity fostered a feeling of empowerment among staff, enabling them to actively contribute to positive changes (mechanism).

The embedded Speech and Language Therapist observed that the flexible and encouraging leadership within the YOS (context) had established an ideal environment at the service level to support transformation (mechanism). Across all interviews, YOS staff displayed clear enthusiasm and dedication to supporting young people (mechanism). One team member emphasised this commitment:

"...the determination shown by many of our team members when liaising with other organisations, and their willingness to push hard in every direction to secure the support a young person needs, has been outstanding in my view. Staff will go above and beyond to ensure they get what they believe is right for their young person." (YOS B).

Furthermore, the embedded Speech and Language Therapist described YOS staff as eager and committed to

acting in the best interests of the young people (context), which led them to embrace adjustments and make the service more accessible for those with communication difficulties (mechanism and outcome).

The placement of the Speech and Language Therapist directly within the YOS was noted to have streamlined the process for obtaining specialist support, making it "...much faster" and "...far simpler" (YOS A). Previously, staff reported that "...we might have to wait weeks..." (Health A).

#### *Staff-mix*

The YOS operates as a multi-disciplinary team comprising professionals from diverse backgrounds (context). This composition, frequently referred to as "staff-mix," was mentioned throughout the interviews. Comments about staff-mix were predominantly positive, with participants highlighting how the varied expertise complemented one another and how strong connections existed among colleagues (mechanism). Team members retained their ties to their original professional fields while working under the YOS structure (mechanism). One staff member shared an illustrative example of these differences:

"...I was seated beside a nurse from CAMHS [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services] and a probation officer with social work training, and just observing how they handled discussions was eye-opening. The way they answered calls revealed clear distinctions—their choice of words and how they described similar issues to other professionals on the phone clearly showed one came from a health background and the other from social work..." (YOS B).

"Staff-mix" captures the wide array of professional disciplines within the team, which collectively support a comprehensive and rounded approach to supporting young people (mechanism).

#### *System*

This theme concerns the broader Youth Offending Service (YOS) framework, including the strategies and interventions implemented, typically guided by senior leadership decisions (mechanism) within the wider criminal justice environment (context). It is closely connected to the earlier theme of awareness.

Building on awareness, YOS team members recognised that recognition of SLCN "...didn't happen suddenly..." (YOS A). About eighteen months earlier, staff admitted they had little knowledge of SLCN, so it often went

unnoticed. They believed this pattern likely reflected experiences in other agencies that had previously worked with the same young people, where communication needs had also been overlooked (context). However, the systematic integration of SLCN support across the YOS—driven by the embedded Speech and Language Therapist (mechanism)—had led to far more young people being identified with these needs (outcome). Managers supported this view, reporting that 53 young people received specialist SLCN assessments from the therapist in the most recent 12-month period, compared to just 5 over the prior decade. This sharp rise (outcome) was attributed to staff now understanding the signs to watch for (mechanism). Thanks to the training, team members had become more attuned to SLCN (mechanism), enabling them to spot potential issues during their routine work (outcome and context).

The embedded Speech and Language Therapist also noted that, during the secondment, they collaborated with professionals in various roles outside the YOS as part of individual case support. These included education staff, CAMHS practitioners, youth workers, and social workers. Such connections were formed on an as-needed basis according to each young person's requirements (context). The therapist regarded every collaboration as a chance to increase awareness of SLCN and to enhance results for the young person (mechanism).

Although efforts to build awareness and embed SLCN initiatives were mainly concentrated within the YOS (context), their influence extended much further. Sharing insights at local and regional meetings (mechanism) had begun to shape approaches in other agencies and sectors, such as the broader children's services department in the Council, neighbouring YOS teams, local police, courts, and health providers (outcome). One manager described the integration of SLCN support at the core of the YOS as triggering "...a profound transformation in mindsets..." (YOS Management A) (outcome).

Some YOS staff felt that the complexity of the criminal justice system itself acted as a barrier to recognising SLCN (context). The procedures are intricate, leaving many young people—particularly those with communication difficulties—confused about proceedings, yet they might agree to things to avoid appearing uninformed (YOS G). The environment was portrayed as "...unfamiliar and intimidating..." to most young people involved (YOS A), creating confusion about expected behaviour (context). Additionally, fear—especially during first contacts with the justice system—

could influence how young people act (mechanism). This view of young people's unease within the system was shared by leads from core (community-based) speech and language services, who stressed the importance of all professionals supporting young people having basic SLCN knowledge to deliver suitable assistance (mechanism):

"...every adult working with a child or young person has a part to play in supporting them according to their own expertise...any professional can contribute to fostering the young person's progress." (Speech and Language Therapist B)

Awareness of SLCN was seen as improving professionals' capacity to "...engage effectively, enable access to services, and help the young person navigate what's required within those services." (Speech and Language Therapist C) (mechanism).

Differences in operational style were highlighted between mainstream SLCN services and the provision developed within the YOS (context and mechanism). The strict timelines in YOS work do not align with those in community services. In the YOS, cases can be fast-tracked for early assessment to address needs before critical milestones, such as court dates. Core service leads believed that being based directly in the YOS setting (mechanism) would make the therapist far more familiar with the specific pressures and processes affecting young people, leading to better-tailored decisions (outcome).

The recent surge in referrals does not reflect a sudden increase in need but rather reveals longstanding unmet SLCN requirements within YOS populations (context). Greater awareness has equipped staff with the ability to recognise indicators (mechanism), resulting in more referrals (outcome). Consequently, existing practices across the system must evolve to respond to these newly identified communication needs among young offenders.

#### *Working practices in YOS*

This theme examines the working practices (context) that have emerged and adapted within the YOS (mechanisms). Participants called for stronger national guidance on addressing SLCN, not only in YOS teams but throughout local authority children's services. The introduction of AssetPlus was regarded as an initial positive move toward recognising the role of SLCN in service provision. This national screening tool is applied to every young person entering the YOS (mechanism). However, its effectiveness was described as depending entirely on the competence of the staff applying it, with

one manager noting that it is "...only as effective as the people operating it." (YOS Management B). Without adequate training, staff may lack the insight to detect relevant signs (mechanism), causing needs to go unidentified (outcome). Furthermore, clear referral routes must be established for young people flagged through screening. In the study site, direct access to an on-site Speech and Language Therapist exists, but this is not standard across all YOS teams, and routes into community services are often slow.

The addition of dedicated SLCN expertise through the embedded therapist post (context and mechanism) enabled the team to pinpoint "bottlenecks" (YOS Management B) in processes (outcome), allowing targeted adjustments to make services more communication-accessible.

Staff welcomed the emphasis on SLCN provision (context), and managers observed that team members had fully embraced it (YOS Management B). This has led to noticeable shifts in daily practices and supported professional growth among staff (outcome). Key to these developments has been the therapist's on-site presence within the YOS (mechanism).

Only one YOS interviewee questioned whether the YOS should bear primary responsibility for SLCN initiatives. They argued that, while internal adaptations can improve accessibility, the YOS cannot solve everything, and specialist health professionals should ultimately address these needs. The YJB Advisor shared this concern, stating that YOS teams should not have to take on interventions or host a therapist to tackle SLCN. Yet the advisor added:

"...they [YOS teams] are stepping in to address it because no one else did earlier, or because the young people have grown older—either the needs weren't caught soon enough, or they've developed ways to mask them." (YJB Advisor)

In contrast, another YOS staff member suggested that, given the multi-disciplinary nature of the team (context), the YOS could legitimately serve as a comprehensive hub for delivering whatever support young people require (mechanism).

The role of YOS workers is evolving in response to SLCN provision, as one Speech and Language Therapist explained:

"With AssetPlus, they must check every young person for possible SLCN...so their initial task is screening, followed by referring for expert input when needed...then they adapt their own methods to make

reasonable changes and collaborate with my work so that our efforts reinforce each other.” (Speech and Language Therapist A)

Daily practices in the YOS (context) have transformed significantly since the therapist’s secondment (outcome). Nevertheless, debate persists about the extent of the YOS’s responsibility for SLCN support. Most participants strongly felt that recognising SLCN and offering appropriate adjustments falls squarely within the YOS remit to promote meaningful engagement with young people in the service (mechanism).

#### *Discussion: development of programme theories*

Programme theories are often described as the unit of analysis for realist research and are used as explanatory formulae to postulate ideas and assumptions as to how, why and in what circumstances complex social interventions such as SLCN related provision within the YOS, work. The research explored the concepts of the initial programme theory postulated, identifying what provisions are required to be in place, how and what

adaptations to practice should be made, which contexts will facilitate these changes and the outcomes these will have. As with the iterative nature of realist research, through this exploration, the initial programme theory was extrapolated and refined into four new programme theories which reflected the emerging findings as detailed above. These new programme theories were developed to provide further detail, replacing the initial programme theory, postulating how and why SLCN provision impacted on the YOS and the young people involved. The development of the programme theories included looking across the seven themes for commonalities and explanations within context, mechanism, outcome configurations to describe the impact of incorporating SLCN provision within the YOS. The four programme theories focus on an increased understanding of SLCN, unpicking terminology and becoming communication friendly, staff cohesion prompting learning together and co-construction approach to service delivery (**Table 2**).

**Table 2.** Overview of programme theories

Programme Theory	Description
Programme Theory 4	Clear vision and leadership in shaping service provision (context) foster a collaborative approach to developing the service and a shared perspective on priorities for improvement (mechanism I), drawing on the diverse expertise of individual team members (mechanism II), ultimately delivering more relevant and impactful support (outcome).
Programme Theory 3	Strong team unity (context), fostered by a common recognition of the importance of integrating SLCN support into YOS work (mechanism I), encourages collaborative learning among staff (mechanism II), which in turn creates a service that is more accessible for those with communication needs (outcome).
Programme Theory 2	Making the YOS a truly communication-accessible service by raising staff knowledge of SLCN (mechanism I) within the intricate setting of the criminal justice system (context) increases the likelihood that young people will better grasp and follow proceedings (mechanism II), allowing them to participate more meaningfully and productively in the service (outcome).
Programme Theory 1	Enhanced knowledge of appropriate SLCN support (mechanism I), achieved through targeted efforts to build awareness of SLCN (mechanism II) in the Youth Offending Service environment (context), results in lasting changes to everyday practices within the service (outcome I), ultimately enabling better and more successful interactions with young people who have SLCN (outcome II).

Programme Theory 1 emphasises the critical role of building awareness of Speech, Language, and Communication Needs (SLCN). It proposes that effective SLCN support within Youth Offending Services (YOS) can only emerge after focused efforts to raise awareness. Everyone involved with the service—staff and stakeholders—must recognise what SLCN entails and how it can affect a young person’s ability to

participate meaningfully. This knowledge helps identify and remove potential obstacles to engagement. By gaining insight into how new approaches differ from established ones, clarifying who takes responsibility for specific tasks, and determining how to sustain momentum, these changes can become fully integrated into the routine operations of the YOS.

Programme Theory 2 underscores the need for the YOS to become a truly “communication-accessible” service. It suggests that young people must clearly comprehend the events affecting them and the surrounding processes to fully grasp the consequences of their behaviour and any resulting legal obligations or restrictions. This improved comprehension is believed to foster deeper and more productive involvement with the YOS.

Programme Theories 3 and 4 address the multi-disciplinary nature of the YOS environment. The diverse professional composition of the team was repeatedly highlighted as essential for delivering a unified and comprehensive service. The embedded Speech and Language Therapist (SLT), combined with proactive and progressive YOS leadership, was frequently cited as pivotal in driving organisational improvements. The SLT contributed extensive expertise on SLCN and spearheaded various initiatives to enhance team knowledge. By collaborating closely with frontline staff, the therapist tailored training and resources to fit the specific realities of the YOS context.

#### *Contextual factors*

The Youth Offending Service (YOS) can be understood as a “social system” shaped by both internal factors (such as team members, organisational structures, and shared values) and external factors (including the political landscape and national policy directives). The developed programme theories highlight several key contextual elements that support the integration of Speech, Language, and Communication Needs (SLCN) provision. Most of these elements are internal, including team unity, staff knowledge of SLCN, and a clear sense of purpose in service provision, which are reflected in Programme Theories 1, 3, and 4. This emphasis on internal factors is expected, given that, although the initial impetus for incorporating SLCN support originated from a national government document [8], the actual success stemmed from strong local commitment and leadership within the YOS to adapt and embed these changes.

This strong local motivation was a recurring theme throughout the data. Most staff and associated stakeholders demonstrated a clear enthusiasm for creating a communication-accessible service that places the young people’s needs at its core. Participation was mainly realised through individuals enhancing their own knowledge and insight into SLCN issues and their relevance to the young people they support. While YOS

management provided direction, there was widespread willingness across the team to engage, learn, and grow. This growing expertise drove shifts in daily practices and attitudes, altering the contextual environment within individual teams and the service as a whole. With greater awareness and training, staff found it easier to recognise and connect effectively with young people who have SLCN. This collective eagerness to deepen understanding of SLCN and adjust approaches accordingly transformed the local service delivery context of the YOS. Consequently, the majority of the programme theories centre on internal rather than external contextual influences.

The main exception is Programme Theory 2, which focuses on the intricate nature of the criminal justice system as a key contextual factor. This complexity is regarded as significant because it influences broader macro- and meso-level systems, with substantial effects on the YOS. In this theory, the challenging structure of the wider criminal justice environment is recognised as creating a setting that can be particularly hard for young people to navigate.

One strongly reinforced contextual point is that the YOS does not operate in a vacuum. It forms part of a larger ecosystem and is therefore subject to various external influences that shape its delivery mechanisms. Accordingly, relationships within the YOS are affected by interconnected links that either the young person or the service maintains with other agencies and organisations involved in the case. The precise impact of these external relationships was not examined in depth, as the study concentrated on the internal YOS structures and processes for embedding SLCN support. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that these external ties will influence the YOS context and, in turn, affect how staff respond to new mechanisms.

As systems within the YOS evolve and mature in relation to SLCN integration, they develop their own distinct characteristics and capabilities—they are dynamic rather than fixed. This adaptability was evident throughout the research, where ongoing refinements to service delivery during the study period gave rise to new emergent properties that reshaped contextual understanding. Staff gained fresh insights into how SLCN affects young people’s involvement with the YOS, driven by their accumulating knowledge. As a result, “awareness of SLCN” appears in some form across most programme theories, owing to its powerful role in shaping reactions to mechanisms and serving as a foundation for new ones.

*Generative mechanisms*

The contextual elements within the YOS system influence both how mechanisms associated with integrating Speech, Language, and Communication Needs (SLCN) provision are activated (“fired”) and how they are responded to (“received”). The mechanisms uncovered through the programme theories create “dynamic relationships” in which interactions and feedback among the various components produce non-linear patterns of change [27].

Programme Theories 1, 2, and 3 highlight mechanisms linked to individual-level awareness of SLCN and the resulting changes in behaviour. Staff awareness emerged as the central thread throughout the data and is recognised as a primary generative mechanism. Greater awareness of SLCN acts as a key resource that drives shifts in staff behaviour, thereby contributing to the observed outcomes. This emphasis on individual actions aligns with the concept of agency, which recognises the capacity of people to act as influential participants in social settings [28]. Staff knowledge repeatedly stands out in the study as the fundamental generative mechanism that supports and enables the successful embedding of SLCN provision within the YOS.

Programme Theory 4 points to the diverse professional expertise of staff members within the YOS as a mechanism that fosters improvements in the relevance and impact of service delivery.

*Associated outcomes*

Complex, non-linear systems like the YOS produce effects that exceed the simple addition of their individual components. For this reason, outcomes should be understood as emerging from mechanisms activated within specific contexts, rather than as fixed or universal results.

All four programme theories developed in this study converge on a shared outcome: improved engagement of young people with the YOS. To maximise the benefits of their involvement, young people’s participation must go beyond mere compliance or “passive presence”; true engagement involves genuine commitment to the goals of the programmes or interventions they are undertaking [29]. Furthermore, engagement has been characterised as encompassing strong positive relationships between staff and young people, the young person’s own motivation to change, and a clear understanding of the consequences of their actions [7]. It is therefore unsurprising that enhanced engagement emerged as the central outcome

across all programme theories. By recognising and embedding SLCN support within the YOS, various mechanisms are triggered with the ultimate goal of fostering meaningful participation, ensuring that every young person—regardless of their communication needs—has fair and equal access to services.

*Strengths and limitations*

The primary strength of this study lies in its detailed identification and separation of the mechanisms that deepen our understanding of the service delivery needs in YOS settings for young offenders with speech, language, and communication needs. By breaking down these mechanisms, the research has produced four core programme theories that outline the conditions considered essential for successfully integrating SLCN provision within a YOS. The study adopted a case-study design, examining in depth how one specific YOS incorporated SLCN support. A notable limitation, therefore, is that other services may operate within different contextual factors that affect their delivery. Additional research involving multiple sites would be needed to improve the generalisability of the findings. Moreover, the results reflect the views of professional stakeholders only; the perspectives of young people themselves were not included in the analysis. Future studies that incorporate young people’s voices would considerably strengthen the conclusions. Further investigation is also required to evaluate the longer-term impact and effectiveness of the mechanisms identified here.

**Conclusion**

If speech, language, and communication needs are not properly recognised or accommodated within the criminal justice system, the interventions delivered under a young person’s order may fail to achieve their intended impact. This is particularly true in relation to reducing reoffending, as limited understanding or ability to participate fully can prevent the young person from benefiting from the intervention. Engagement in this context means not only guaranteeing access to justice services for all young people, but also empowering them to actively take part in efforts to change their offending behaviour [30]. The idea of supporting engagement through targeted SLCN provision has been a consistent thread throughout this research, with the key generative mechanisms for successfully embedding such provision

in the YOS centred on heightened staff awareness of SLCN issues. This greater awareness has been shown to prompt adjustments in staff attitudes and practices, which in turn are believed to enhance young people's engagement.

The study has formulated four central programme theories that describe the conditions regarded as necessary for effective SLCN support within a YOS setting. These focus on building deeper understanding of SLCN, clarifying complex language and creating a communication-accessible environment, team unity that encourages shared learning, and a collaborative approach to service design and improvement. Crucially, the programme theories developed here aim to explain the specific elements within a YOS that enable SLCN-related services to succeed. Through this realist lens, which has examined relevant contexts and the mechanisms activated by SLCN provision in the YOS, an overarching conclusion can be drawn at an abstract level: If a YOS has staff with heightened awareness of SLCN (context), this knowledge (mechanism I) will shape their attitudes and actions (mechanism II), leading to greater engagement from young people within the service (outcome).

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