

# Sandwell on show

## READ THIS IF YOU WANT TO

- RAISE THE PROFILE OF COMMUNICATION
- FIND NEW WAYS OF REACHING OTHER PROFESSIONALS
- FIND OUT ABOUT MET AND UNMET NEED

*Diana McQueen and Jane Oates reflect on their involvement as exhibitors rather than visitors at the Education Show 2009, and consider the implications for speech and language therapy departments looking for creative ways to engage with other professionals.*

The Education Show at the National Exhibition Centre, Birmingham is the UK's largest showcase of educational resources of all kinds. It enables educators to see what is new, try out resources and take part in free continuing professional development so that they can teach and manage learning more effectively. It attracts up to 15,000 education practitioners each spring, but has limited focus on either special educational needs or speech and language impairment. As speech and language therapists with Sandwell's Children's Therapy Services, a few of us had visited the show at various times. In the year following the Bercow report (Bercow, 2008), we decided to tap into this opportunity to engage with a large number of delegates.



Jen Casson and Bethan Jones, speech and language therapists in Sandwell's Children's Therapies department, prepare for a hard day answering visitors' questions

Our aims in this initiative were:

1. Through a snapshot of attendees, to find out the national picture of how speech and language therapy is perceived
2. To showcase our resources
3. To act as a resource, offering advice and written handouts

We wanted to find out what those attending know about speech and language therapy, what they value, and what they would like. We did this via face-to-face conversations and a written survey, with a prize of £20 Marks & Spencer vouchers as an incentive to participate.

Our department publishes and sells a small range of therapy items such as CD-ROMs of pictures for both phonological and language therapy, 'The Talking Jigsaw' (a DVD concerning language interaction with children) and 'Make Talking Fun', a lavishly-illustrated book aimed at parents.

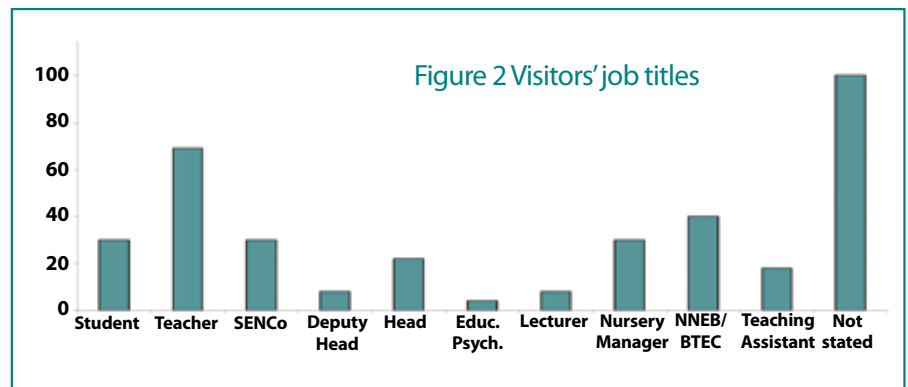
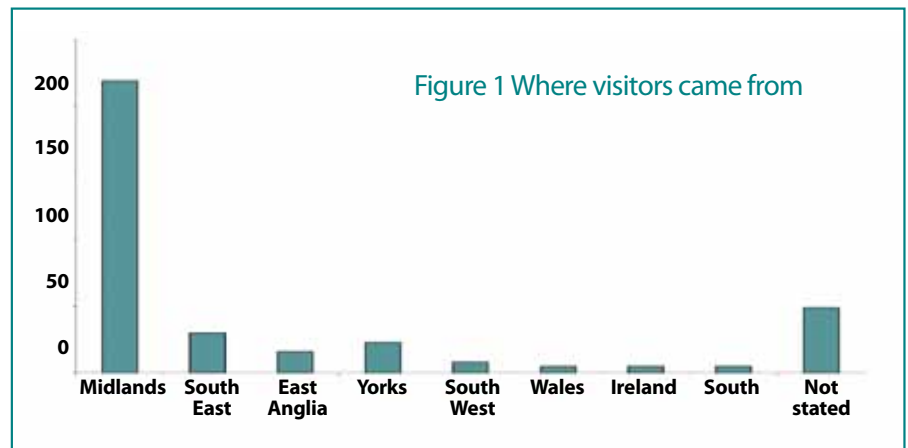
To this end, we prepared a series of 25 information sheets on various aspects of speech, language and communication in the classroom context. Some of these were taken directly from free material produced by other agencies, such as the British Stammering Association and the Department for Children, Schools and Families 'Inclusion Development Programme for SLCN', and were directly attributed. We wrote others especially for the show. They all offer fairly standard information and advice, and were designed to support whatever model of therapy was being offered to delegates locally. A list of the handouts is available to Speech & Language Therapy in Practice members at [www.speechmag.com/Members/Extras](http://www.speechmag.com/Members/Extras), together with four samples of purpose-written sheets.

## Considerable autonomy

We benefited from the support given by our PCT, including the £1000 cost implication. Their style is relaxed, and individual services already enjoy considerable autonomy. We explained why we wanted to exhibit at the Education Show and the go-ahead was immediately given. Our decision to take a stand was made at least six months before the date and, with hindsight, this was sensible. It enabled us to plan the activities and resources according to a timetable which did not detract from our clinical commitments. It also allowed us to book a small corner stand, carefully situated between the Early Years and the SEN zones.

The booking arrangements were all done electronically. We were given access to a website which guided us through a myriad of forms from health and safety to lighting and furniture requirements. We did experience some frustration when, having allocated time for specific pieces of work, either our own systems were down or certain sections of the site were non-operational on that day.

We designed our display around the maximum capacity of the stand shell, opting for four large posters with connected themes. Themes were general enough to have post-show application during the usual course of service delivery. These were professionally drawn, printed and laminated, and we felt that the expenditure was easily justified by their long-term usefulness. Since the Education Show, we have already used them for two more exhibitions as well as for the AGM of our PCT. The wall display also included a banner providing brief information about the specific resources we were showcasing. Apart from this, we kept equipment to a bare minimum: two laptops to demonstrate



the electronic resources, questionnaires and resource samples.

Exhibitors were allowed access to the halls on the day before the exhibition. For us this was probably the trickiest day as access and time allowed in the unloading bays (without incurring a financial penalty) was challenging and somewhat reminiscent of 'It's a Knock-out'. We were grateful for our minimalist display and the forethought which saw us taking our own wheeled trolleys. This also meant that dismantling was done with military efficiency.

We staffed the show with the eight speech and language therapists and assistants who comprise our department's Sales and Marketing working party. A minimum of three of us were at the show and around the stand at any one time. This allowed for breaks and the opportunity to go off and learn from other displays at the event, whilst also making enough people availa-

ble to answer questions immediately.

We estimate that easily 500+ delegates visited the stand and engaged in discussion. Over the three days, 119 people completed our survey sheet and 102 people requested handouts.

By far the majority of the visitors to our stand were from the Midlands (figure 1). This initially surprised us, given that The Education Show is UK-wide. However, we are aware of several more SEN-specific shows (for example in Islington, London, and Bolton, Greater Manchester) and also specific Early Years shows, and it could be that nationally the various elements of our target audience attend these in preference.

We were less successful in establishing the job titles of respondents (figure 2). The high number of 'job title not stated' was possibly the result of pen fatigue, this question coming towards the end of a 2-A4 page questionnaire which some

delegates had been encouraged to complete mainly to get a chance to win the prize vouchers.

We established that 55 per cent of our visitors worked in Foundation Stage, 27 per cent in Key Stage 1, 21 per cent Key Stage 2, 9 per cent Key Stage 3 and 5 per cent Key Stage 4. (Some visitors worked across more than one Key Stage, thus percentages added up to more than 100.)

We based the menu of options in our questionnaire (figure 3) on what we provide as a quality service in Sandwell, and used it as a starting point for seeking information from delegates – do they have access to speech and language therapy locally and / or would they want access if it was available? It was interesting that, despite the evolution of the profession in explaining our role as facilitators, 74 per cent of respondents still identified the fact that they wanted regular specific help – and only 31 per

cent perceived that they had access to training.

### Confidence

Confidence in working with children with speech, language and communication needs was largely engendered by having lots of help and advice coupled with experience. The delegates did not rate reading / self-study so highly in helping practical approaches. They did consider training courses to be more useful, but not as useful as help and advice plus experience. Around a third of respondents felt that they lacked confidence in meeting the needs of pupils with speech, language and communication needs. Almost half of these under-confident delegates said they felt this way because they needed more help / advice and support.

We identified an increased amount of unmet need within independent schools, compared to

schools in the state sector. Whilst within Sandwell we do not have an independent school where this appears to be an issue, it is of note for the profession generally. Whilst most practitioners within the state sector reported contact with the speech and language therapy profession and collaborative help in meeting the speech, language and communication needs of the students, the experience of those in the private sector was frequently:

*“we’re told not to bother referring as they won’t be seen”*

*“we would like more support in our setting but don’t get it”*

*“our local service is unmanned so can’t offer help”.*

Hearing impairment, in both the state and independent sector, was often mentioned as an area of concern:

*“We are teachers of the deaf and so much of what we do seems to overlap with speech and language therapists. We would like more liaison.”*

There were moments of gentle humour for us as well, including the Irish special school contingent led by a delightful man. His lifetime’s (largely unsuccessful) quest for speech and language therapy in his school resulted in him passing the stand more than once, staff posse in tow, for the sole purpose of counting the number of therapists he could see in one place at the same time!

The debrief had been put into our diaries well before the Exhibition so that the maximum number of people could be there to contribute to the feedback and discussion. Learning encompassed a variety of themes: about the team themselves as individuals with different personalities and skills, about the delegates and their knowledge and skills and about life in general when faced with something completely different.

Figure 3 Questionnaire responses

Where do you usually go for advice about children with speech, language and communication needs?	SENCO (Special Educational Needs Coordinator)	50%
	Speech and language therapist	40%
	Educational Psychologist	17%
	Advisory teacher	6%
	Other	20%
Where are children in your setting seen for speech and language therapy?	School	63%
	Clinic	40%
	Home	20%
	Children’s Centre	12%
	Other	5%
How often are they seen?	Weekly	31%
	Termly	19%
	Half-termly	15%
	Less often	10%
	No access to speech and language therapy	5%
Delegates identified what they were able to access locally from speech and language therapy from the menu on the right. (Almost universally, those who did not currently have access to speech and language therapy identified that they would like to.)	Training	31%
	Face to face contact	48%
	Detailed advice	44%
	Resources	36%
	Advice to parents	36%
	Regular updates on progress	31%
	Support in writing Individual Education Plans	35%

As a group, the themes included:

- how scary it can be to operate outside the usual comfort zone and initiate conversation with complete strangers when the agenda is unwritten and not controlled by the professional
- how confidence increased markedly as time went on and experiences were positive
- how much the delegates wanted to know
- how little (or how much) people already knew
- how good some people's experiences of speech and language therapy are
- how difficult it is in some parts of the country where services are scarce and stretched.

## Universal issues

Staff recognised how much they themselves know, but how challenging it can be to answer some queries in a practical and useful way in five minutes. There was considerable satisfaction in being able to talk about children with speech, language and communication needs and to know that issues for our education colleagues are universal across the country and not just close to home in Sandwell. The team learned that the Sandwell model of service delivery is based on sound principles and delivers what school and nursery staff actually want. Life may be more hectic and physically demanding for the therapists but the high level of user satisfaction (which can only improve outcomes for children) more than makes up for this.

We should be pleased that, post-Bercow and across the range of professionals concerned with child language impairment, we are generally making an impact. Eighty two per cent of practitioners who responded to our questionnaire at the Education Show were either confident or neutral

about their abilities to meet the needs of their students. Our experience suggests that, as a profession, we still need to 'get out there' and give advice in person. Whilst people overwhelmingly stated they would use websites for information (84 per cent), only 19 per cent had any current awareness of websites that could help them. Where people were confident it was because they felt they'd had lots of help and advice, from speech and language therapists and others, and were adequately experienced.

## as a profession, we still need to 'get out there'

So, would we do it again?

The expense for the PCT and commitment of staff time mean that exhibiting at the show is something we would be unlikely to undertake every year. It was, however, a very valuable and worthwhile experience, and we would like to repeat it when the opportunity presents itself. Everybody enjoyed it and, as a team, we got to know each other far better than we had before. Those relationships will endure well beyond the shared experience of the exhibition.

If you are thinking of undertaking a similar exercise, our advice would be:

### 1. Budget carefully

We had not originally realised that the cost of hiring a stand would not include the necessary lighting, furniture, electrical power points and display boards. You may not be permitted to take your own lighting and display boards without exhaustive certification that they are safe.

### 2. Book early

This lets you choose the position of your stand strategically. We were pleased to secure our corner position in the location we wanted, and it afforded us more space than a similarly sized stand along a row.

### 3. Limit equipment and paraphernalia

Think ahead as to where you will store your coats and bags. We used plastic crates, covered with a drape, to store our possessions and resources.

### 4. Include a quiz and a prize

This really does attract people to your stand, and gives you something to talk about with them as they visit. [SLTP](#)

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#### Reference

Bercow, J. (2008) Bercow Review of Services for Children and Young People with Speech Language and Communication Needs. Available at: <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/slcnaaction/>.

#### Recommended resources

- British Stammering Association – [www.stammering.org](http://www.stammering.org)
- Department for Children, Schools & Families Inclusion Development Programme (SLCN) – <http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/165381>.

## REFLECTIONS

- DO I CAPITALISE ON NATIONAL INITIATIVES WHICH HAVE RAISED AWARENESS AND INTEREST?
- DO I PLAN EVENTS SUFFICIENTLY IN ADVANCE AND BUILD IN TIME FOR DEBRIEFING AFTERWARDS?
- DO I RECOGNISE THAT PERSONAL CONTACT IS VITAL IN MAKING PEOPLE FEEL CONFIDENT TO FOLLOW MY ADVICE?

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