



Introduction: With a 23% vacancy rate; there are not enough SLTs to meet demand¹ and people with aphasia (PwA) may not receive an adequate therapy dose^{2,3} Speakeasy (an aphasia charity based in Bury) is delivering an NHS funded project of virtual SLT for PwA and carers. This addresses i) workforce issues by engaging therapists who don't want the usual pattern of NHS work; ii) issues of health inequality (e.g. through virtual delivery); iii) plugs gaps in NHS SLT provision (e.g. supporting people on waiting lists).

Methods: Speakeasy commissioned time from a highly experienced aphasia SLT. Neuro-rehab SLTs across Greater Manchester were invited to refer PwA to the project commencing mid-January 2023. Referrals were electronic via the charity website, they were triaged by phone and all answered a short questionnaire regarding any information or services already received. Subsequent Speakeasy services by phone, Zoom, email and post, as 1:1 and in small groups, were delivered in a bespoke pattern for both PwA and also for carers. The individually tailored support included: information provision about both stroke and aphasia with support to make sense of it, conversation partner training, impairment-based treatment using aphasia software, peer support for carers and PwA, online SLT-led themed conversation group therapy, weekly drop in for structured discussions and support for accessing existing Speakeasy or stroke services. Input was limited to 3-4 months and could be delivered as appropriate at the same time as NHS SLT, whilst a patient was on a waiting list, or at the time of discharge. Existing Speakeasy staff, including two who have aphasia, assisted with peer support and help to access non NHS sources of support. Monitoring data were collected electronically via a bespoke system including data for the Sentinel Stroke National Audit Programme (SSNAP).

Results: From January – June 2023 62 PwA and 46 carers were referred (79% followed up within 5 working days). Median time post-onset was <6 months and referrals reflected greater diversity than usual Speakeasy referrals. All areas of GM referred though some had higher uptake than others.

PwA received up to 2.5 hours input per week which increased further as 35% engaged with existing Speakeasy services, 80% of these through online support, and the therapy dose increased for those using aphasia software. Support for carers in employment was given outside of a normal working pattern if appropriate. Speakeasy's structure and staffing can support this model and can respond quickly and flexibly.

Conclusions: Data indicate that this model has potential to assist the NHS to offer a service for people with aphasia and carers. A regional approach appears to offer in terms of economies of scale, for matching and clustering of activity. It seems able to support the discharge process and increase the therapy dose. SLTs feedback indicates an appreciation of ongoing specialist support for PwA, which can facilitate discharge, and complement and supplement NHS treatment. From within the third sector it supports easier access to therapy in real-life settings, assists with navigating into ongoing community support and delivers support for individual stroke related challenges.

What people said

“Speaking to you was like the sunshine coming out from behind the clouds” [Patient]

‘The clients I see who are accessing your groups are finding them really worthwhile.’ [SLT]

‘The online groups are really helping to support her therapy rehab. She has turned a real corner in the last few weeks and we are starting to see some generalisation which I am really excited about’ [SLT]

References

Vacancy rates reach 23% in speech and language therapy. Available at: <https://www.rcslt.org/news/vacancy-rates-reach-23-in-speech-and-language-therapy/> Accessed 10th May 2023.

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.Palmer, Witts, H. & Chater, T. (2018) What speech and language therapy do community dwelling stroke survivors with aphasia receive in the UK? *PLoS ONE* 13(7): e0200096. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0200096>

Summary for people with aphasia



Sometimes speech and language therapy departments are so busy they not able to give enough help and therapy to people with aphasia and carers.

Question

Can a specialist aphasia charity help by giving virtual speech and language therapy and support?



Answer

Jan–June 2023 62 people with aphasia and 46 carers were referred to Speakeasy by NHS therapists

79% were contacted by the Speakeasy therapist within 5 working days

People were given support and therapy in different ways

Via Zoom



by phone



computer therapy



Our information shows that this service has potential to help give support when people need it, and to have more therapy.



Comments made by people with aphasia, carers and speech and language therapists show that this service is useful and is appreciated