

# Will cheap be cheerful for those who need communication aids?

The impact of iPads and Androids on the world of AAC was the big theme for the Communication Matters annual conference at the University of Leeds last week.

Communication aids which can play back pre-recorded speech or generate synthetic speech have revolutionised the lives of many of the 300,000 children and adults in the UK who will need Augmentative and Alternative Communication at some point in their lives.

✘ Many people who need AAC have severe and permanent physical disabilities from birth as a result of conditions such as cerebral palsy. Others have degenerative conditions which leave them unable to speak.

It is a disgrace that in a wealthy country such as Great Britain children and adults are being left without the power of speech simply to save money.

One solution is to find cheaper alternatives to the specialist aids. In recent times, companies have started to develop apps which will work with iPhones, iPads, Androids and other tablet devices.

Good news you might think. The trouble is that the users need support, training for themselves and their carers, robust devices which will bounce off pavements and ongoing research and development to make the next generation of communication aids the best that they can be. Buying a tablet online and downloading an app does not even begin to address these problems.

Catherine Harris, [Chair of Communication Matters](#), summed up the dilemma saying: “It is an exciting time for the sector. Developments in adapting technology have increased the range of options for people and the growth of access methods, such as eye gaze, provide people with alternative ways to use their equipment. However, these developments need underpinning by comprehensive assessment, funding of equipment and longer term support services if they are going to be really effective.’

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## Requiem for a trail blazer

The Oxford ACE Centre is to close this summer unless there is a change in government policy or an investor comes forward. The ACE Centre Oxford was a pioneer in assistive technology for children and young people who need computer support to help them speak, study and lead their lives with dignity.



If Oxford ACE closes,  
who will help her?

Oxford ACE has been in the forefront of research, developmental projects, assessments and technology provision since it was set up under a Tory government 28 years ago.

Many young people have benefited from their expertise. One example is Alice who is now 19. She was born with athetoid cerebral palsy. She was a very bright girl but when she started school she could not a pencil or make herself understood. When Alice was six years old she received her first computer. Even so, typing was laborious. She typed very slowly, using just her left hand.

When Alice started her GCSEs she was assessed by the Oxford ACE Centre to see what technology she would need to fulfil her academic potential. She got a laptop with Internet access and voice recognition. This marked a turning point as she could produce work much more quickly and accurately and found the whole process of composition much less tiring. Now she no longer needed a scribe so the school saved money too. Alice is now studying for a degree in Environmental Sciences.

The Oxford ACE Centre was the first organisation of its kind in England and set a very high standard. Its research always focused on the leading edge technologies, most recently eye gaze technology for those who cannot use their hands to navigate a mouse.



Becta was a victim of governemtn cuts, now Oxford ACE

Chris Stevens, formerly Head of Inclusion at Becta, itself a victim of government cuts, commented, "This is very sad news. Oxford ACE was a trail blazer and set very high standards with its assessments and research. It made such a difference to the lives of so many young people. I worry that the next generation of youngsters with disabilities will not get the same rigorous assessments and decisions about technology support will be made purely on the basis of cost"

[Oxford ACE](#)