

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.’

[Leicester Lions and Eye Gaze help Teresa to communicate](#)



tobii eye gaze in
action

2011 is The National Year of Communication which highlights the importance of good communication skills for children and young people. Some of those children need help from technology if they are to have a voice.

Last week, I was invited by Northgate Managed Services to an event called “Engage, Evolve, Excel”. It had Professor Stephen Heppell as the keynote speaker and was an ICT showcase for the great work done in Leicester schools.

There I met Teresa, a year 11 pupil from Ash Field, a day and weekly boarding special school. She demonstrated a Tobii Eye Gaze system that lets users with severe physical disabilities control their computer just by using their eye movements.

Her school had bought the system but the camera was provided by Leicester Lions Speedway. Teresa uses Eye Gaze to access

her communication device which enables her to speak. The school invited some Leicester Lions into assembly and Teresa used her Eye Gaze to deliver her presentation thanking them for their fundraising efforts.

What a difference a bit of kit can make!