

**M**otivated by limited employment opportunities in the public sector and a desire not to waste our skills, a group of four newly-qualified practitioners (NQPs) from the University of St Mark & St John decided to form a limited company – LTL Speech and Language Therapy – in August 2011.

While filled with enthusiasm for our venture we were initially challenged by aspects of the speech and language therapy culture that had evolved out of the strong public sector tradition of employment. At the time, RCSLT guidance for NQPs did not reflect the realities of the new employment landscape, where NQPs might choose a more independent route, and the RCSLT NQP Competency Framework was written predominantly for public sector employees. Similarly, Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) guidance, while quite rightly requiring NQPs to practise within the bounds of their competence, did not appear to offer a proactive or supportive way forward for us, a group of NQPs working ‘outside the box’.

Pioneers often attract considerable negativity and we were no different; this new way of working was viewed with scepticism, because few practitioners at the time were aware of the scale of public sector cutbacks and the implications for access to speech and language therapy services.

Over the past two years there have been some tangible shifts in thinking that acknowledge the move towards a more diverse service delivery model. The RCSLT has worked hard to provide a broad base of information for alternative career routes, while ensuring the strong message around quality and the protection of the public remain in place. The Association of Speech and Language Therapists in Independent Practice (ASLTIP) has also introduced an introductory membership fee for practitioners with less than two years’ experience.

### **Journey to viability**

We began our journey with a number of key priorities: to build an appropriate client base; secure high-quality supervision; develop a brand; ensure access to high-quality business and legal advice; establish a multi-professional network of independent and public sector

# Breaking new ground

**Lisa McGowan, Sharon Henderson and Maggie Cooper on a group of NQPs forging ahead in independent practice**

ILLUSTRATION BY Robert Ball

professionals; and publish key information.

Initially, we targeted individual clients, but gradually realised cuts in services were directing us towards schools. Waiting lists have grown and referral criteria within mainstream services have become so stringent that there is a growing number of children with mild to moderate difficulties who would never reach the referral criteria. This was somewhere we could make a difference. To date, we have had referrals concerning phonology, language, social skills/pragmatics and memory problems.

We have built good relationships with education colleagues, in particular special educational needs coordinators, educational psychologists and teaching staff. We work successfully alongside existing providers and deliver a service that is supplementary and complementary, thereby helping adults and children with speech, language and communication needs get the support they need.

Evaluation of our first year highlights the schools’ positive responses, describing us as ‘prompt and professional’ and stating we had made a difference to their pupils’ speech and language, and their own



From left: Lisa, Sharon and Maggie

awareness of student needs.

There is a general move towards contracting out services and in the past two years many have been taken over by private enterprise or community interest companies. We contribute to this diverse group of providers on an equal footing and there is a clear place for us in the market. We have attracted considerable interest from other NQPs who want to do the same thing, but they have tended to be individuals. Enquiries have come from all over the UK and as far afield as New Zealand.



## Want to start your own business?

Work as a group – it provides breadth of opportunity and a broad skills base

–  
Have solid foundations for your business

–  
Source professional advice – legal, financial, HR and professional

–  
Ensure supervision is in place

### Running a business

It would be folly to underestimate the variety of skills needed to run a viable business. We had a very clear idea of the kind of business we wanted. Once we had made the decision to go ahead and set up a limited company, with all the responsibilities it brings, we needed to ensure we had the right advice.

As directors, we knew that before we started earning money, we would need investment and a business plan. We set up bank accounts, joined business organisations, like the Chamber of Commerce, and found professionals who were experienced and generous with their time and knowledge. We also obtained sound legal, human resources and financial advice.

We then approached the University of St Mark & St John Speech and Language Therapy Department, where we had studied. Maggie Cooper, the head of the Department of Applied Language Sciences, was immediately positive and agreed to work with us to provide the necessary supervision. Because we were breaking new ground, there were many areas to consider to protect the university's reputation. We

then began the seven-month process of writing protocols for multi-professional working, risk assessments and ethical policies. We held our launch, hosted by the university, in February 2012.

At this point we had no regular income, but hundreds of emails later, we got our first break and working with schools began. We were overjoyed to receive referrals and needed to build a working model, which was new to the schools as well as us.

We are disciplined and organised in our record keeping, adhering to data protection legislation. This summer we will carry out our first audit of methods to ensure we are practising in the best way possible. In our first year, we have invested heavily in resources and assessments, just the beginning of our asset building.

### Continuing professional development

The fact that we are a group has been important to us, as we hold regular continuing professional development days and are currently setting up a journal club. The company supports access to clinical excellence networks, and a recent example

we all attended was Caroline Bowen's seminar on phonological disorders.

We make time to discuss interesting and challenging clients, which is helpful, and have regular supervision with lecturers, which is invaluable. Although we are close to having our NQP competencies signed off, we will still have supervision, because that external experience and discussion will only add to our learning.

At the end of our first full year of business, we have new adult and child clients on our books. Growing the company is important to us, so we joined a scheme called Growth Accelerator, which has helped develop our business expertise in marketing, management and leadership. We even acted as business advisers locally for the young enterprise scheme.

### The future

Our work with 25 schools is important, because we think there is so much we can do to make a difference to those who would otherwise not be seen. We raise awareness and spread the word about what SLTs actually do – it still surprises us that so many people have no idea. We like to think of ourselves as ambassadors for our industry and are trying to raise the profile of the profession. We are privileged to have a patron, the Rt Hon Lord Burnett, who cares as passionately as we do. ■

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