

## **Talking Mats within the context of joint investigative interviewing: a position statement**

**July 2025**

The National Joint Investigative Interviewing Team is a collaborative partnership between Social Work Scotland, Police Scotland and COSLA (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities). The team works with Specialist Speech and Language Therapists and together offer a current position statement on the use of Talking Mats in a joint investigative interview. This position statement may also offer information for those considering investment in Talking Mats for use more broadly across children's services, for example in the wider context of Bairns' Hoose.

### **Background and context**

Talking Mats is an evidence-based visual communication tool that can be used to support someone to express their view, feelings, thoughts and experiences. It is described as 'a visual communication framework which supports people with communication difficulties to express their feelings and views'<sup>1</sup>. Talking Mats conversations include a "thinker" who is sharing their views on a given topic and a "listener". The aim of Talking Mats is to facilitate conversation. There will be a topic symbol, top scale symbols (which usually represent positive, unsure and negative views) and then option symbols which the thinker will consider and place under the top scale as appropriate, at the same time as the thinker being encouraged to share wider views verbally. At the end of the Talking Mat the desired outcome is the visual representation of the conversation, and the 'listener' will summarise what has been discussed.<sup>2</sup>

Talking Mats can be used with the person who is being supported both physically (paper format) or in a digital form i.e. on a tablet or computer as there is an app equivalent to the physical Talking Mat symbol sets that can be used.

### **Training and Funding Considerations**

Talking Mats requires someone to be trained by an approved trainer before use to support someone's communication.<sup>3</sup> Those trained require a licence that is renewable every year to use the resources for the digital version. Trainers also require licences to be renewed in a train the trainer model. There is a cost element to participate in Talking Mats training, as well as a cost element to resource physical symbol sets. For digital resources there requires to be an annual subscription to access the software. In order to become a Talking Mats trainer there is a further

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.talkingmats.com/about/what-is-a-talking-mat/>

<sup>2</sup> Hayden, et al. 2024 - [A narrative review on analysing and reporting research conducted using Talking Mats®, an inclusive communication tool](#)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.talkingmats.com/do-you-need-training-to-use-talking-mats/>

cost for training and licensing of the same; as well as options for trained individuals to access advanced resources. As such this is a business model which requires significant and ongoing funding to ensure its continued use.

These are likely to be relevant important considerations in respect of longevity and sustainability of any partnership considering wholesale or even partial use in the Bairns' Hoose space.

### **Applicability in the forensic interview space and joint investigative interviewer role**

It is helpful to separate out different aspects of the interview when considering the potential use of Talking Mats by interviewers conducting joint investigative interviews (JII).

Firstly, and most importantly perhaps, are considerations relevant to the Substantive phase of the JII – when the child talks about the event(s) under investigation.

As a form of 'tool' or prop in the forensic interview space, Talking Mats present a real risk of increasing suggestive practice and increasingly unreliable answers from children and young people. Talking Mats does this by limiting the options and potential responses that an interviewee can give and could result in additional but unreliable details being added to the account.

Offering potential options for answers also reduces the likelihood of interviewers using a greater proportion of open-ended questioning strategies. While there is no research that directly relates to the efficacy of Talking Mats<sup>4</sup> in a forensic interview context, other studies have looked at approaches which offer visual support to communication and perhaps similar in some ways are use of contextual cues. This means cues are offered by reinstating the setting. An example might be revisiting a physical scene, showing a photograph of somewhere or asking someone to visualize in their mind a setting that could prompt their memory to add detail or talk about what happened.

Talking Mats may propose to offer some generalised contextual cues for children in relation to places, events and people. It has been argued that this has the potential to enhance memory retrieval because features of a memory trace may bring into awareness other parts of the memory. To be effective and credible this would need to be in conjunction with free recall memory tasks – where no or minimal information is provided by the interviewer.

However, contextual cues are highly subjective and unique to each individual and the circumstances of their abuse experience. Talking Mats uses standard and very generic pictures to create prompts for supporting communication. These are not individualised i.e. a picture of a house/home would come from stock images as would images of people. Research has shown that inferences made from cues that are generic, not specific, are subject to suggestibility and interpretation – and require significant follow up prompts and questions. Therefore, there is

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.talkingmats.com/>

## PROTECTION CHILD CENTRED JUSTICE

currently no strong empirical evidence supporting any substitute for a good verbal interview in the forensic context. This may shift in time with more detailed and updated communication aids as further studies are undertaken (Lamb et al 2018).

Use of Talking Mats by interviewers in the pre-substantive phase of the JII – i.e. rapport building, ground rules and episodic memory training phases or pre interview could be viewed by some as being less vulnerable to risk of inherent suggestibility or less credible questioning approaches that are more impactful in the substantive phase.

Supporting a child or young person to communicate regarding their strengths and interests (for example in the rapport building phase) and offering some visual support that represents the ground rules in JII alongside good verbal communication using Talking Mats could understandably be a potential consideration for interviewers. In principle, reducing the demand on someone's communication does have an evidence base that would support this thinking around potential uses in the JII space. However, there are ethical considerations here in respect of offering, then taking away, a communication tool in an already demanding communication interaction. Starting an interview with this available to the child in the pre-substantive phase would therefore warrant some caution as to then withdraw it could be confusing or even distressing and conflict with the intention to offer support.

Again, even in the pre substantive phase the options for a child or young person are still limited by the 'mat' the interviewer chooses to use. There is a risk of closed questioning practices increasing by the nature of the way the mat is used. It requires skill and practice to use the options chosen by the child and fully explore these by applying the principles of an open questioning strategy that is the expected practice of those in a forensic interviewing role.

Importantly, Talking Mats encourage and expect the person facilitating the mat with the child to summarise the conversation at the conclusion of the 'mat' chosen – known as the 'top scale'. For example, 'interests' or 'likes/dislikes' if applying potential areas for use in the rapport phase. Summarising, as a practice, is not permissible or helpful in the forensic context and must be avoided throughout the interview.

Individualisation of a mat is possible, but requires significant skill, time and attention.

In conclusion, there is no current, credible evidence base supporting the use of Talking Mats in a justice, evidence gathering context, specifically here the JII.

***As part of a collaborative partnership with The National Joint Investigative Interviewing Team, this article was co-written by –***

*Jennifer Morrison, Social Work Team Manager*

*AnneMarie MacRae, Highly Specialist Speech and Language Therapist*