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## **SPEECH AND LANGUAGE THERAPY TEAM VOICE BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT PLAN**

A team of speech and language therapists from Stirling University has relocated to the adjacent Innovation Park to develop its voice as an independent enterprise.

The Talking Mats Research and Development Centre will operate from the Scion House business incubation unit on the park to develop its unique system of helping people with communication difficulties to communicate more effectively.

For an initial period of two years they will operate as an arms length unit of the University's Research and Development Department to fully test and develop their business model before moving towards becoming a social enterprise.

The Talking Mats communication technique was developed 11 years ago by speech and language therapist Joan Murphy to assist people with cerebral palsy to communicate the benefits of a research programme in which they participated with her.

The Talking Mats method has since been developed to help people with dementia, learning difficulties, autism, motor neuron disease and those who have communication difficulties as a result of having a stroke.

Continuing research and development results in new products such as the latest Talking Mats package that will be launched next month (November 2009) aimed at assisting young people in social care and education settings to express their views on their needs and progress.

The project has been developed over nine months in collaboration with staff and pupils at Starley Hall School, near Aberdour, Fife, an independent service for young people requiring residential support and education.

The Talking Mats framework, in the Starley Hall case designed to facilitate consultation with young people, uses a series of specially designed symbols which are used by the professional (e.g. carer, teacher, social worker, doctor, therapist etc.) in one to one sessions to express thoughts, views and feelings accurately. These are complemented by DVDs and written material.

As well as carrying out research, leading to the development of practical resources to assist a wide variety of communication difficulties, the Talking Mats Team also provide accredited training courses for professionals to use the technique.

Regular training programmes are currently run out of Stirling and London and dedicated courses for organisations are run in other parts of the UK.

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Talking Mats/

The Centre also has strong links with Sweden and Finland where the Talking Mats material is already translated into these languages and where regular training programmes are run.

Other target markets include Australia where four accredited trainers are already in place and America where discussions are underway with a major distributor.

Speech and language therapist Lois Cameron, a partner in Talking Mats, explained why they have decided now is the time to test their business plan. "Joan and I have been trying to manage this on a part time basis but the demand has outstripped our capacity to meet it. We needed to take a decision to leave it or give it our all, so we are giving it our all," said Lois.

Commenting on why they chose to relocate to the Innovation Park she said: "It was extremely important that we maintained strong links with the University because our research networks in terms of other people we collaborate with are heavily shaped by the University. On top of that it's an extremely pleasant environment to work in and the people have been so welcoming."

Lynn Blaikie, the Innovation Park's Operations and Business Development Manager, said: "We are delighted to welcome Talking Mats to the Innovation Park. The work they are involved in is extremely important in providing an effective means of communication for people who need to be heard. One of our strategic aims is to support businesses providing people centred health care and Talking Mats fits that objective."

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