

Summary Report: Assessment Report Survey

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1. Background

Moretalk has been providing Communication Assistant (CA) services to the Ministry of Justice across Aotearoa since 2012. This service includes the assessment of participants with communication difficulties, and providing an assessment report to the court. We want to ensure that these reports are clear, concise, and accessible, enabling all stakeholders to easily find and use the information they need.

In October 2024, Moretalk conducted a survey to gather feedback on the content and format of our Communication Assistant (CA) assessment reports. The survey consisted of 19 questions focusing on the usefulness and level of detail in key report sections, including Conclusions of Assessment, Recommendations for Accommodations, and Assessment Details. It also explored preferences for a one-page summary, the utility of CA reports in preparing for Ground Rules Hearings (GRHs) and other interactions, feedback on report length and language, and whether working with a CA improved respondents' ability to engage effectively with participants with communication difficulties.

2. Respondent Demographics

We sent the survey to 200 professionals working in the Aotearoa justice system who have worked with a CA and read their reports. We did not include judges this time, but we will in the future. 37 respondents completed the survey. Respondents were asked to specify their role

within the justice system. The survey was completed by one police officer, one Lawyer for Child, one Family Court coordinator, one health assessor, one Youth Justice coordinator, three Crown prosecutors, eight youth advocates, nine Family Court lawyers and 17 defence lawyers.

3. Important Findings from the Survey

3.1 Key Sections of the Report

Conclusions of Assessment

This section gives a summary of the participant's communication skills and how their skills will impact on their participation in the justice process. This section indicates whether involvement of a CA would be beneficial and gives a brief summary of the recommendations for accommodations.

The majority of respondents (89%) rated the Conclusions of Assessment section as either 'somewhat useful' or 'very useful'. Respondents noted that this section was beneficial for preparing before trials or interactions with participants. The level of detail in this section was generally considered appropriate; only a few respondents thought there was too much detail. A respondent commented *"I think succinct information is helpful for the lawyer and Court as both have voluminous amounts of information to read daily"*.

Recommendations for Accommodations

This section describes in detail the accommodations recommended by the CA to make the justice process as accessible for the participant as possible. This includes accommodations for outside and inside the courtroom. For example, adapting documents to easy-read, preparing questions for trial alongside the CA, using visual supports or structuring of the day to include more breaks.

Over 90% of respondents found the Recommendations for Accommodations section 'somewhat useful' or 'very useful.' This section was seen as crucial for trial preparation and effective courtroom communication. The level of detail in this section was generally considered appropriate; only a few respondents thought there was too much detail. A respondent commented that this section *"provides clear information"*.

Assessment Details

This section gives detailed description of the communication skills assessed (such as responding to different types of question structures, understanding of legal jargon or reading) methods of assessment, and the participant's response to assessment tasks.

Opinions on the Assessment Details section varied. The majority of respondents rated this section as 'somewhat useful'. Overall, the level of detail in this section was considered

appropriate, but respondents were less likely to read it thoroughly compared to the Conclusions and Recommendations sections. It is possible that the information provided in this section is less practically applicable to the courtroom environment, and therefore perceived less useful. However, the information in this section may provide specific detail and context that informs the conclusions and recommendations made. One respondent commented that this section is *“very worthwhile and gives all a better understanding of ability”*.

3.2 One-Page Summary

We asked the respondents to tell us if a one-page, easy-read summary at the front of the report would be helpful. Nearly all respondents (94%) supported the idea of a one-page summary, commenting that *“bite-sized material is always useful for the busy lawyer”* and *“less is more”*. Many highlighted the value of quick access to key details, with one stating it would *“focus counsel on needs and limits”* and another noting, *“easy to read when time is limited”*. Respondents emphasised that a summary would help *“draw all readers eye to the critical aspects contained in the report”* and make report *“easier to remember and refer to”*.

3.3 Ground Rules Hearings and Interactions with Participants

We asked the respondents how useful the report is for preparing for Ground Rules Hearings (GRHs). A GRH is a pre-trial meeting to establish guidelines for questioning vulnerable participants, such as children or those with communication difficulties. The majority of respondents said that CA reports are helpful for preparing GRHs. One respondent commented *“I was able contact the CA for more detail when I made my submissions, which was particularly helpful”*.

We also asked respondents how useful the report is for preparing for interactions with participants with communication difficulties, both in and out of court. For example, during pre-trial meetings to discuss the Summary of Facts or during a hearing. The majority of respondents (89%) said that CA reports are helpful for preparing for interactions with communication difficulties.

3.4 General Feedback on Assessment Reports

The general feedback about Moretalk’s CA assessment reports was mostly positive reflections on CA reports and suggestions for improvement. Respondents noted that *“CA reports generally [are] useful”* and described them as *“very helpful to the client”*. One respondent stated, *“I really like the idea of a summary; I find [the reports] too wordy at present,”* while another remarked, *“The reports from Moretalk are simply excellent.”* Suggestions included developing a ‘Communication Passport’ to help young people navigate different settings and a reminder that *“some professionals still need to utilise the information made available”*.

3.5 General Feedback on working with CAs

We asked the respondents for general feedback about working with a CA. 86% of respondents said that working with a CA made it easier for them to engage with their participants with communication difficulties.

The general feedback about working with Moretalk CAs highlights overwhelmingly positive experiences with CAs. Respondents described CAs as *"very helpful – in fact essential"*, *"awesome"* and *"great to work with"*. They appreciated how CAs *"make ALL the difference for parties when dealing with the Court process"* and noted, *"I couldn't do my job without the assistance of CA"*. One respondent shared, *"Your CA's are brilliant"*. Another noted, *"It has been fantastic, and I know so many more of our clients need it"*. Respondents valued their role in *"call[ing] out jargon at an early stage"* and recognised that *"communication [is] critical in Court proceedings"*. While some mentioned that working with CAs *"can lengthen the court process"*, they acknowledged this is *"of benefit to the participant"*. Many respondents concluded with gratitude, saying, *"thank you"* and *"always a good experience"*.

4. Conclusions and Next Steps

The results of the survey tell us that respondents find CA reports generally useful, particularly the sections on conclusions and recommendations. These sections were valued for their clarity and practical application. There was strong support for the addition of a one-page summary to improve accessibility of key information and usability. CA reports were seen as beneficial for preparing for Ground Rules Hearings and interactions with participants. Feedback on working with CAs was overwhelmingly positive, highlighting their essential role in ensuring effective communication and equitable participation in the justice process.

Based on the feedback we have received, we will take the following steps to improve our assessment reports:

- Creation of a one-page, easy-read summary template that will go at the front of all Moretalk assessment reports.
- Collaboration among our CA team to work on minimising the length of the reports, while still presenting the most relevant and useful information, particularly in the Assessment Details section.
- Distributing the survey to Judges across Aotearoa to receive their feedback on our reports.