

# InFOCUS

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READ INTERVIEW  
ON *page 20.*

**ENGAGING  
IN EYE GAZE**

**TANITH BRIEN AND MICHELLE LIDDICOAT**

**agosci**  
inc.

## COMMUNICATION MATTERS

Communication Matters, a UK-wide charity that supports people of all ages within the Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) sector, celebrated its very first AAC Awards Ceremony late last year, directly in line with AAC Awareness month. Hosted at the University of Leeds, and supported by the university's conference and events facilities MEETinLEEDS, the awards ceremony honoured the individuals that use all forms of communication, their families, as well as the companies and professionals that provide support in these areas.



Amongst the winners, who were all credited for their hard work and dedication to the AAC community, **LAITH RITCHIE**, a 16-year-old augmentative and alternative communication user, scooped up **Communication Matters' Rising Star award** for making such a significant impact on the lives of many AAC users over the past 12 months.

It all began in 2018, when Laith attended the UK's leading AAC event, the Communication Matters conference, where he was able to take part in a unique forum with an array of representatives across multiple disciplines, including AAC users, parents, personal

assistants, professionals and more. One year later, Laith achieved the Rising Star Award at Communication Matters' very first awards ceremony in October, highlighting his huge achievements within the sector over the past 12 months, which all stemmed from inspiration which came from his time at the Communication Matters conference last year. Not only has his attendance at the conference led him to huge personal achievements, but his dedication to the sector has also enabled him to make a positive impact on AAC parents, carers and users of AAC equipment.



### DID YOU KNOW?

Communication disability in the UK affects millions of people. Up to 20% of the UK's population experience communication difficulty at some point in their lives, and more than 10% of all children have a long-term communication need.

Laith's involvement in AAC has generated further support in such an important sector that relies heavily on volunteers.

For more information about MEETinLEEDS, please contact **Stacey Kedwards** or **Niamh Boylan**.

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## LAITH TALKS ABOUT HIS JOURNEY

### What inspired you to get involved within the AAC sector?

- I was first inspired to get involved when I **attended the 2018 Communication Matters conference**. It was really interesting to hear from the many different people who presented at the conference, as it broadened my horizons on what I could do to support AAC.
- Afterwards, I immediately **registered my interest**.
- I then **applied for a job as an AAC mentor**.
- One month later, I **had an interview with AT Mentors** and was thrilled to have been **offered the job on a voluntary basis**.
- In April this year I was **offered a permanent position** - a great achievement and it's all thanks to the conference I attended last year!

### What have you learned since becoming an AT Mentor?

Since becoming a mentor I have learnt an incredible amount, including how other AAC users need support to learn how to use the technology. I love my job a huge amount and it's great to be able to deliver training to parents, carers and schools who are new to supporting an AAC user.

### Why is AAC important to you?

I've always felt that AAC is such a vast and important area that affects so many people's lives, which is why I was so keen to contribute. AAC enables me to achieve things that I would not normally be able to do, due to my speech impediment. If more individuals like me had a chance to access AAC, the dreams of many would become a reality. As part of my work I see so much potential and with AAC they can achieve anything that they want!

### How did you feel after winning the Rising Star Award?

“ **ACHIEVING THE AAC RISING STAR AWARD WAS SUCH A WONDERFUL MOMENT WITHIN MY CAREER, AND IT'S FANTASTIC TO SEE THAT MY HARD WORK IS BEING RECOGNISED BY SO MANY PEOPLE WITHIN THE SECTOR.** ”

The awards were a fantastic way to celebrate all those within the AAC sector, and they act as great motivation to continue the hard work!

