

RCSLT statement: Redeployment of staff and impact on outcomes for service users in future COVID-19 surges

November 2021

During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the RCSLT supported appropriate redeployment of speech and language therapists into other roles. Our members were keen to volunteer at this time of national crisis

However, 20 months later we have seen the impact that the pandemic, including this period of redeployment, has had on speech and language therapy services and the people who rely on them.

This impact, outlined below, could result in significant risks to service users' safety and wellbeing and that of their families and carers.

Given these risks, the RCSLT **does not support the redeployment of speech and language therapists** away from services that are already under extreme pressure as they attempt to restore services, reduce waiting lists and meet targets.

Impact on service users and their families and carers

Between November 2020 and February 2021, the RCSLT conducted a survey of people's experiences of accessing speech and language therapy during the first UK-wide lockdown (March-June 2020).

Children and young people:

- 81% of children and young people received **less speech and language therapy** during lockdown; 62% did not receive any speech and language therapy.
- 70% reported **no improvement** in their communication or swallowing. 47% said it had stayed the same. 24% said it had got worse.
- 67% said that receiving less speech and language therapy had **negatively impacted** their education; 45% said it had negatively impacted their mental health.
- **Families and carers** were also affected. 64% said their home and domestic life had become worse because their children had less speech and language therapy. 58% said it impacted on their mental health.

Adults:

- More than half of the respondents (52%) received **less speech and language therapy** during lockdown, with 44% not receiving any speech and language therapy during this time.
- 80% reported **no improvement** in their communication or swallowing. 43% said it had stayed the same. 37% said it had got worse.
- 56% reported a **decline in mental health** as a result of receiving less speech and language therapy.
- **Families and carers** were also affected. 62% said their mental health was worse because their loved ones had less speech and language therapy. A similar percentage said their home and domestic life became worse.

Impact on services

In a survey of 676 speech and language therapists and services across the UK in October 2021:

- Over three quarters of respondents reported that the **demand on their services had increased** since before the pandemic; 29% indicated the demand 'had at least doubled'.
- As a consequence, services are **reporting longer waiting times**, a **reduction in face-to-face therapy**, and a negative impact on **staff wellbeing**.

- The reasons for the increased demand on services included addressing the **backlog**, an increase in individuals requiring speech and language therapy due to **deterioration/exacerbation of needs** during lockdown.'
- A common issue highlighted in free text responses was **the impact of the redeployment of speech and language therapists** in the NHS efforts to manage COVID-19.

Impact on the workforce

We are also concerned about the negative impact of redeployment on staff wellbeing, and the ability of services to recruit new speech and language therapists and retain current staff. We are already hearing that these are huge challenges for parts of the system.

Future redeployment

The RCSLT **does not support the redeployment of speech and language therapists** away from services that are already under extreme pressure as they attempt to restore services, reduce waiting lists and meet targets.

There are more cost-effective alternatives that have been used successfully in some areas and could be used more widely, for example bringing back retired staff or using volunteers or students to increase system capacity.

If, against our advice, the need to redeploy speech and language therapists is identified, a comprehensive risk assessment of the service being stepped down should be undertaken. Where speech and language therapists are redeployed, the roles to which they are redeployed should use their skills and expertise to best effect. For those roles that are outside of their normal scope of practice, it is essential appropriate training and supervision is provided.

If you have any feedback on this statement, please contact info@rcslt.org