**Response from the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists in Wales to the Welsh Government’s consultation on the development of the National Standards and Outcomes Framework for Children and Young People’s Advocacy Services in Wales**

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) is the professional body for speech and language therapists (SLTs), SLT students and support workers working in the UK. The RCSLT has 15,000 members (450 in Wales) representing approximately 95% of SLTs working in the UK (who are registered with the Health & Care Professions Council). We promote excellence in practice and influence health, education, care and justice policies.

Speech and Language Therapy manages the risk of harm and reduces functional impact for people with speech, language and communication support needs and/ or swallowing difficulties.

SLTs provide life improving treatment, support and care for children and young people who have difficulties with communication, eating, drinking or swallowing.  Using specialist skills, SLTs work directly with clients, carers and other professionals to develop personalised strategies.   They also provide training and strategies to the wider workforce; such as nursery staff and teaching assistants so that they can identify the signs of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), improve communication environments and provide effective support.

Response to Consultation

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists welcomes the development of the National Standards and Outcomes Framework for Children and Young People as a means of supporting children and young people to have a voice and be listened to. Our short response below highlights the prevalence of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) amongst looked after children and makes recommendations with regard to how the standards and framework could support services which meet the needs of children and young people with SLCN.

***Looked After Children and Speech, Language and Communication Needs***

Research suggests that many looked after children have unidentified and/or unmet communication needs. A study published in 2011 in *the International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders* found high levels of communication impairment amongst children and young people in residential care; much of which was severe, pervasive and largely unidentified[[1]](#footnote-1). The recent Prison Reform Trust report ‘*In Care, Out of Trouble*’ also highlights how young people, with a range of conditions and needs, including communication difficulties are overrepresented in the care and criminal justice system[[2]](#footnote-2). The majority of looked after children experience conditions of poverty and social disadvantage which are closely linked with communication difficulties. Over 50% of children in socially deprived areas may start school with impoverished speech, language and communication skills[[3]](#footnote-3).

Looked after children and young people’s communication difficulties include problems understanding language (making sense of what people say), with using language (words and sentences), and social communication (knowing how to speak to different people in the right kind of way at the right time and understanding the non-verbal rules of communication). Common difficulties they experience include naming and managing emotions (including self-control), self-awareness, vocabulary, concepts related to time, working memory and the ability to retain, process, recall and sequence information. Interaction difficulties can lead to problems developing positive relationships.

Communication needs are often hidden and older children in particular may have developed masking techniques for these needs. Some looked after children communicate through behaviour that may result in offending. In addition, children and young people with SLCN also face a range of potentially negative outcomes later in life;

* Up to 60% of young people in the youth justice estate have communication difficulties.[[4]](#footnote-4)
* 88% of long-term unemployed young men have speech, language and communication needs.[[5]](#footnote-5)
* Without effective help, a third of children with speech, language and communication difficulties will need treatment for mental health problems in adult life[[6]](#footnote-6).
* Children with language difficulties have an impoverished quality of life in terms of moods and emotions, and are more at risk in terms of social acceptance and bullying.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Research indicates that children who experience abuse and neglect are more likely to have communication and interaction difficulties and this relates to the quality of interaction with and attachment to their care givers. Limited communication issues in themselves may also be an indicator of safeguarding issues[[8]](#footnote-8).

Given this compelling evidence, it is vital that advocacy services recognise that children and young people with unidentified and/or unmet communication needs could have limited understanding of and participation in decision making and ensure appropriate support is in place.

***Advocacy Outcome Statements***

We are very pleased to see that the Welsh Government has made specific reference to the importance of supporting children with SLCN under standards of service for outcome statement 3 – *Children and Young People are valued for their diversity, treated with respect and all forms of discrimination against them are challenged*. This outcome would not be achievable for many children with SLCN without appropriate support and we warmly welcome recognition of this as one of the standards of service – **“Advocacy services are responsive to the communication needs of individual disabled children and young people.”**

We recommend that this standard is amended to include speech and language in addition to communication.

It is also extremely positive that providers will be asked to evidence use of augmented communication approaches to support those with the greatest needs. We would also wish providers to evidence use of alternative approaches. We would be very interested to hear plans for how such evidence may be collated. For example, how might competencies be demonstrated.

RCSLT believes that given the prevalence of SLCN amongst looked after children, there is a need to consider SLCN as a key element within an ‘accessible service’ and look beyond the specific standard noted above. For example, consideration should be given to;

* training for all advocacy services, as a commissioning requirement, to support awareness of communication needs. Such training would make it easier for advocates to recognise communication needs which are often not visible or obvious, enable them to modify their own interactions and environment to maximise looked after children’s engagement and improve the relationship between staff and children and young people. It would also support staff to know when to refer to specialist support such as speech and language therapy.
* ensuring availability of accessible information about services which can be shared in ways everyone is able to understand.

ensuring access to speech and language therapy services, where appropriate, to enable advocates to support those children and young people with more complex needs, including by the provision of direct therapy for those children, where needed, to enable them to make themselves understood and to demonstrate that they can understand what is being said to them and help support their full involvement in informed decision-making about issues affecting them.

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists would welcome the opportunity to offer our support in developing advice and best practice guidelines to ensure that children and young people receive the communications support, most appropriate to their needs, when accessing advocacy services.

**For further information, please contact:**

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1. McCool S and Stevens I,C (2011). Identifying Speech, Language and Communication Needs among children and young people in residential care. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders.* 46 (6). pp.665-74 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ‘In Care, Out of Trouble’. Prison Reform trust (2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Locke A, Ginsborg J, Peers I. (2002) Development and disadvantage: Implications for the early years and beyond, International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders, 37(1), pp. 3-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bryan K, Freer J, Furlong C. Language and communication difficulties in juvenile offenders. International Journal of Language and Communication Difficulties 2007; 42, 505-520. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Elliott, N (2009). PhD thesis on an investigation in to the communication skills of lnog-term unemployed young men. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Clegg J, Hollis C, Rutter M ‘Life Sentence’. *RCSLT Bulletin* 1999. 571;16-18 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Lindsay G, Dockrell J, (2012) The relationship between speech, language and communication needs and behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD), Department for Education research report DFE-RR247-BCRP6. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. RCSLT (2017). Safeguarding CHcildren with Communication Needs Factsheet. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)