1. **Key points**

- The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) very warmly welcomes the Bishop of Gloucester’s debate and believes that there is a strong case for improved early years interventions to support children and families.

- Such improved early years interventions could make a significant difference to the many children in the United Kingdom (UK) who have speech, language and communication needs:
  - over ten percent of all children and young people – some 1.4m in the UK – have some form of long-term communication need.\(^1\)
  - in areas of social disadvantage children are at much greater risk with around 50% of children starting school with delayed language and other identified communication needs.\(^2,3\)

- Communication is a fundamental life skill, which directly impacts on children's school readiness, their academic achievement, mental health and employment.

- The first few years of a child’s life are particularly crucial for language development – if a child’s language is not supported, their development may be permanently affected.

- Early interventions to support children’s speech, language and communication are effective, and can result in economic benefits in both the short and long term, while cuts to early intervention services can result in more children requiring targeted and specialist approaches, with an impact on both children's outcomes and the public purse.

- National government policy supports the prioritisation of children’s early language and communication, but local provision of early interventions to support children’s speech, language and communication is variable.

- To ensure consistency, the government should require all areas to have a joint strategic plan in place which assesses the level of speech, language and communication needs in their area, and outlines the joint commissioning plans to meet that need.


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“The inability of children to communicate, either with their peers or with others including their teachers, is a scourge that blights their lives in our communication-focused society. It has a knock-on effect on many aspects of their schooling and on their future opportunities in the workforce.”

Lord Ramsbotham, Co-Chair of the APPG on Speech and Language Difficulties

Foreword, APPG on Speech and Language Difficulties report:

‘The links between speech, language and communication needs and social disadvantage’ (2013)

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2. **Communication is a fundamental life skill**

- The consequences of not intervening early to support children’s language development are far reaching:
  - **School readiness**: Children’s vocabulary and ability to talk in two-to-three word sentences at the age of two is a strong predictor of school readiness at age four.\(^4\)
  - **Educational attainment**: Language skills at age five are the most important factor in reaching the expected levels in English and maths at age 11, more important than poverty or parental education.\(^5\)
  - **Mental health and employment**: Children with poor vocabulary skills at age five are three times as likely as their peers to have mental health problems in adulthood, and twice as likely to be unemployed.\(^6\)
3. **The case for early intervention**
   - A child’s development of language is dependent on the quantity and quality of language they are exposed to in their first months and years of life. If this input is lacking, and interventions are not put in place, then certain skills may be permanently affected.
   - Activities that improve a child’s home communication environment, such as the early ownership of books, trips to the library, and parents teaching a range of activities, are all important predictors of expressive language development at age two and at school entry.\(^7\)
   - Efforts to ‘catch up’ during the pre-school years are not as impactful as providing an enriched home learning environment from the start.\(^6\)
   - NHS England has recognised speech, language and communication services for under-fives as an example of an evidence-based intervention which reduces health inequalities.\(^9\)
   - Early intervention is also associated with better outcomes for children with long-term speech, language and communication needs, including those with hearing impairment,\(^10\) stammering\(^11\) and autism.\(^12\)

4. **Current government policy in England**
   - The Department for Education’s social mobility action plan (December 2017) includes an ambition to close the word gap in the early years.\(^13\)
   - The RCSLT has been delighted to work closely with colleagues in the Department for Education and Public Health England on a number of initiatives to support this ambition, including a training programme for health visitors, guidance for commissioners on speech, language and communication services for under 5s, and Hungry Little Minds, the Department for Education’s campaign to improve the home learning environment.
   - While supportive of national policy, the RCSLT is concerned that it is not consistently translating to local decision making, where early interventions to support speech, language and communication are still subject to cuts. This issue was highlighted by the Children’s Commissioner in her report, *We Need To Talk: Access to Speech and Language Therapy*.\(^14\)
   - The report found a postcode lottery of access to services:
     - Over half (57%) of areas in England saw a real-terms reduction in reported spending on speech and language therapy over the last three years.
     - There was enormous variation in reported spending between areas in England, with the top 25% spending at least £16.35 per child, and the bottom 25% spending 58p or less per child.
     - Only half of areas are jointly commissioning speech and language services.

   “I am also worried that it is these kinds of early help services, which councils do not have a legal duty to provide and that can help to prevent other issues emerging further down the line, which are most at risk as budgets face increasing pressures. We need to be able to monitor the spending on these services, in order to hold local areas to account for the funding decisions they take, as well as hold national government to account for the constrained circumstances in which those decisions are taken.”

   Anne Longfield, Children’s Commissioner for England
   *We need to talk: Access to speech and language therapy* (2019)

5. **Policy recommendations**
   - Given the wide-reaching impact of early language skills, leaders across education and health should prioritise and jointly commission early years speech, language and communication services, in line with the upcoming Public Health England guidance.
     - To ensure the guidance is followed across the country, the Government should require all areas to have a joint strategic plan in place which assesses the level of speech, language and communication needs in their area, and outlines the joint commissioning plans to meet that need.
While early intervention to support speech, language and communication is important for all children, children with long term speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) will need support during and beyond the early years.

- Government should develop an evidence-based integrated pathway for children and young people with SLCN aged 0-25, building on the guidance Public Health England is due to publish on speech, language and communication services for children aged 0-5.

6. **Examples of early years interventions making an impact**

### Stoke Speaks Out
- In 2004 a local prevalence study indicated that as many as 64% of 3-year olds in Stoke-on-Trent presented with significantly delayed language on entry to nursery. This led to a collaborative, multi-agency strategy being developed called Stoke Speaks Out. Its vision is to ensure speech, language and communication are supported at every contact point, from antenatal information through to early identification and first line targeted interventions, to enable every child to have the best start in life.
- The strategy has enabled all services to sign up to shared joint messages around early speech, language and communication and shared ways of working. A multi-agency training framework has been developed, resulting in improved confidence of practitioners and parents and shared key messages around speech, language and communication as part of public health campaigning.
- All early years settings and schools in the city have been trained to use the Early Communication Screen and they routinely screen their children aged 2 to 5 years. They have also been trained in early intervention packages for those children identified as needing support.
- **Impact:** From October 2017 to July 2018 the percentage of children in high need of early language development reduced from 29.8% to 11.6%, while the percentage of those who were on track or ahead on early language development improved from 38.6% to 57.2%.
- Return on Investment calculations in 2016 indicated that in the short term, £1.19 worth of value was created for every £1 invested while in the long term the programme showed a return of £4.26 for every £1 invested.\(^\text{15}\)


### Nottinghamshire Home Talk\(^\text{®}\)
- Home Talk\(^\text{®}\) is a targeted service for children aged 2-2½ years at risk of long-term language difficulties. Children are referred to Home Talk\(^\text{®}\) following a review by health visitors or health visitor assistants, as part of the Healthy Child Programme.
- Home Talk\(^\text{®}\) consists of up to six therapy sessions with the child and parent lasting around one hour each, delivered over around 6 to 12 weeks, by a speech and language therapy assistant. Sessions are delivered at home to facilitate access to the service, and to help parents embed changes into their home learning environment and routine.
- The aims of the sessions are to coach parents to: develop their use of interaction-supporting and language-modelling strategies; provide a supportive environment for language learning, and encourage use of language-rich activities such as book sharing and one-to-one play times.
- **Impact:** Completion of Home Talk\(^\text{®}\) is associated with accelerated age-adjusted language development for 2-year olds at risk of long term SLCNs. Additionally, it achieved early identification of children with previously undetected wider SLCN who were in need of specialist speech and language therapy support.\(^\text{16}\)

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References

5 Save the Children (2016). The Lost Boys: How boys are falling behind in their early years.