

Independent practice

Introduction

The role of an independent speech and language therapist (SLT) offers a unique blend of flexibility, autonomy, and diverse professional experiences. As more speech and language therapists choose to step into independent practice, understanding the full scope of responsibilities, legal obligations, and benefits becomes essential.

These pages aim to provide comprehensive insights into the benefits and challenges of working independently, ensuring therapists are well-equipped to navigate this successfully and within the appropriate frameworks. By detailing the necessary regulatory frameworks, sources of professional support, and practical advice, this document serves as an essential resource for independent speech and language therapists.

Who is this guidance for?

This guidance is relevant to speech and language therapists working as sole traders, those who own or are employed by independent practices, and SLTs who balance independent work with roles in public sector organisations such as the NHS or educational institutions. Speech and language therapists employed directly by schools, or with the tertiary or charity sector will also find valuable insights within the RCSLT guidance on working in **education settings**.

Portfolio careers that blend multiple employment types are becoming increasingly common, making it essential to understand the nuances of independent practice to foster professional growth and ensure high-quality service delivery. See RCSLT guidance on **portfolio careers**.

Professional responsibilities

All speech and language therapists must be registered with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) to legally practice under the title of Speech and Language Therapist. Independent practitioners bear the additional responsibility of ensuring full compliance with the HCPC's regulatory standards without the direct oversight that public sector employment often provides.

Key **HCPC standards** include:

- Standards of conduct, performance, and ethics
- Standards of proficiency for SLTs
- Standards for continuing professional development (CPD)
- Standards of education and training

Independent SLTs must proactively manage their practice, including the setting of their fees to ensure they take into account the full scope of their role and the time required for non-contact clinical activities as well as resources, training and additional expenses that may be accrued using their professional and commercial judgement. It must be noted that UK competition law prevents suggested fees or rate cards and therefore ASLTIP and the RCSLT cannot advise on fee structures. They must also engage in reflective learning, and ensure their skills remain current. The RCSLT provides additional guidance that aligns with HCPC requirements, offering tailored resources to support professional development and benchmark alignment.

The scope of responsibility for independent SLTs varies depending on their area of focus; however, independent SLTs are encouraged to have their own safeguarding policy that aligns with local protocols, whilst those developing online content must ensure materials meet ethical and professional standards. Safeguarding training can be accessed by Independent SLTs via Local Children's Safeguarding Partnerships and ASLTIP provide level 3 safeguarding training as part of their Duty of Care Essentials Package included with ASLTIP membership. SLTs balancing public sector and independent roles must apply HCPC standards consistently across both settings.

Key organisations supporting independent SLTs

The Association of Speech and Language Therapists in Independent Practice (ASLTIP) provides valuable support to speech and language therapists working outside traditional employment frameworks.

ASLTIP offers specialised training, networking opportunities, and a community forum for support and exchanging insights and advice. Membership benefits include access to business guidance, alongside a public directory to connect clients with qualified speech and language therapists across the UK.

Membership with ASLTIP requires:

- registration with the HCPC
- active membership with the RCSLT, and
- a minimum of two years post qualification experience.

ASLTIP also offers Affiliate Membership for newly qualified SLTs and returners to practice. Affiliate members must work under the supervision of a Full ASLTIP member until they meet the requirements for full membership. They can access the ASLTIP community and other benefits but cannot be listed.

See [ASLTIP website](#) for further information.

The RCSLT, as the professional body for speech and language therapists in the UK, offers extensive resources, including clinical guidance, educational materials, and CPD frameworks. Participation in **RCSLT hubs** and **Clinical Excellence Networks** (CENs) provides opportunities for continuous learning and collaboration.

Collaborative working practices

Collaboration is central to effective therapy provision. The HCPC mandates that SLTs partner with colleagues across disciplines to ensure the best outcomes for service users. Independent SLTs should build strong relationships with NHS teams, educational institutions, and third-sector organisations. **See RCSLT guidance on collaborative working.** ASLTIP advocates for Independent Practitioners building relationships with local NHS teams to promote communication and collaborative working for the best possible outcome.

Ways to foster collaboration include:

- joining Clinical Excellence Networks (CENs) to engage in peer support and knowledge sharing
- attending multidisciplinary meetings to align service provision
- networking with local services to facilitate referrals and joint working
- effective communication across areas between independent SLTs and local NHS teams.

Data protection and information governance

Independent SLTs are considered Data Controllers under UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), making them responsible for managing sensitive client information. Adhering to GDPR is not just a legal obligation, but a crucial aspect of maintaining client trust.

Steps to ensure compliance:

- register with the [Information Commissioner's Office](#) (ICO)
- utilise the ICO self-assessment tool to verify registration requirements
- implement clear policies on data collection, storage, and disposal
- see [RCSLT position statement for independent practitioners on GDPR](#)
- review the [RCSLT data protection guidance and scenarios](#) information.

Ethical and Safe Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Independent Practice

Independent Speech and Language Therapists must demonstrate responsible, ethical, and legally compliant use of AI tools within their practice. Practitioners are expected to:

- adhere to GDPR and data protection requirements, ensuring no client-identifiable information is entered into AI systems that cannot guarantee appropriate privacy, security, or data processing controls
- maintain accountability for all clinical decisions, recognising that AI-generated content must be critically evaluated, verified, and never used as a substitute for professional judgement
- actively monitor AI outputs for accuracy, relevance, and potential bias, and ensure that any AI-assisted materials or recommendations meet professional, evidence-based standards
- stay informed about emerging guidance and regulatory changes relating to AI use in health, education, and therapeutic contexts
- use AI transparently, making its role in assessment, intervention, documentation, or resource development clear to clients, families, and relevant stakeholders where appropriate.

Legal considerations: DBS checks, tax, and VAT

Self-employed SLTs must obtain criminal record checks (known as Disclosure and Barring Service or DBS checks in England and Wales, Protecting Vulnerable Groups (PVG) in Scotland and Access NI in Northern Ireland) to verify their suitability to work with vulnerable populations. Basic checks can be applied for independently, while enhanced checks often require facilitation by client organisations. ASLTIP offers streamlined checking services for its members across all four nations.

For further information, see [Disclosure and Barring Service](#) (England and Wales), [Disclosure Scotland](#) (Scotland), [AccessNI](#) (Northern Ireland).

Tax and VAT obligations include:

- registering for self-assessment with [HMRC](#)
- monitoring [VAT](#) thresholds and registering when necessary
- managing National Insurance contributions based on income levels.

Insurance

RCSLT insurance includes Public Liability Insurance to the value of £10 million. Before entering into a contract, independent SLTs should check whether any other types of insurance are required by the contracting body and obtain these separately.

Other considerations for insurance include:

- extending coverage for home-based clinics or specialised services
- reviewing policy limits to ensure comprehensive protection
- insuring vehicles used for business for that purpose
- ensuring that insurance policies are aligned in their start and end dates so they run consecutively without gaps or overlap, as overlapping cover can complicate or invalidate claims.

For further information, see [**RCSLT insurance and legal support**](#) and [**HCPC professional indemnity**](#) information.

Intellectual property rights

Self-employed SLTs creating educational materials or online resources typically retain intellectual property rights. However, clear agreements should define ownership, particularly in collaborative ventures or dual employment scenarios. See [Intellectual Property Office](#).

Self-employed SLTs must ensure they hold the necessary rights or licences to use any third-party content (such as images, videos, texts, or frameworks). Using intellectual property without permission can lead to legal or contractual consequences. Practitioners should make use of openly licensed materials (e.g., Creative Commons) where appropriate, or obtain formal permission from the rights holder before using protected content.

Continuing professional development (CPD) and supervision

CPD is essential for maintaining HCPC registration and ensuring professional competence.

Independent SLTs must proactively seek CPD through:

- using RCSLT hubs, webinars, and online courses
- participating in CENs and peer support groups
- establishing supervision arrangements to foster reflective practice. When SLTs work across both independent and NHS roles, they must have separate professional supervision arrangements for the two contexts. Supervision must conform to specific standards to be valid as professional supervision and peer supervision arrangements should be reviewed to ensure they meet standards.

ASLTIP have guidance around navigating supervision and support in Independent Practice.

See RCSLT guidance on [**CPD and lifelong learning**](#).

Associate work and contractual safeguards

Working as an associate SLT

Speech and language therapists may work within an independent practice on an associate basis rather than as a directly employed team member. An associate SLT is typically self-employed and contracts their services to another SLT practice. In contrast, an employee has a contract of employment and receives benefits such as holiday pay, sick leave, and employer pension contributions.

The key distinctions are:

- **Autonomy:** associates generally control when and how they work, whereas employees follow agreed schedules and protocols.
- **Financial Responsibility:** associates handle their own tax, insurance, and CPD, while employers take care of these aspects for their employees.
- **Legal Status:** an associate is a separate legal entity and must invoice for services rendered; an employee is paid through payroll with tax and national insurance deducted at source.

It is essential that both parties clarify the nature of the working relationship from the outset to avoid legal ambiguity around employment status. [HMRC's Check Employment Status for Tax \(CEST\)](#) tool can help clarify the correct classification.

Contracts and agreements

Clear, written agreements are critical for safeguarding all parties in independent practice. The three main types of contracts an SLT might use include:

1. Service Level Agreements (SLAs)

These define the scope, delivery standards, and terms of service provision between your practice and a school, local authority, or organisation. SLAs should specify:

- roles and responsibilities
- reporting requirements
- expected outcomes and timeframes
- fees and payment terms
- exit clauses
- SLAs are particularly useful when working with education settings or NHS subcontracting arrangements.

2. Parent or client contracts

These outline the therapy terms for private clients. A parent contract should include:

- session length and frequency
- fees and cancellation policy
- confidentiality and data handling
- consent for treatment and information sharing
- complaints procedure

Transparent parent agreements build trust and reduce misunderstandings.

3. Associate contracts

These govern the relationship between a practice owner and an associate SLT. Standard contract templates are available from ASLTIP for a fee for both members and non-members.

Essential elements to associate contracts include:

- clarification of independent contractor status
- session rates and invoicing terms

- clinical supervision arrangements
- confidentiality and intellectual property ownership
- data protection responsibilities
- indemnity insurance requirements.

You may wish to include a non-compete clause (to protect client relationships) and a termination clause detailing notice periods.

Legal considerations and protection

Establishing clear agreements before service delivery begins is essential for legal protection, clarity of expectations, and safe information handling. Contracts should set out responsibilities for data protection and GDPR compliance, particularly where information is shared between associates and the main practice. Each practitioner must hold appropriate professional indemnity insurance; associates who are RCSLT members are required to maintain their own individual cover, and the main practitioner should ensure their policy appropriately reflects any subcontracting arrangements.

We recommend seeking legal review of contracts, especially before entering long-term or collaborative arrangements. Templates from ASLTIP or the RCSLT can provide a helpful foundation, but tailored legal advice ensures agreements reflect your practice structure and meet UK legal requirements.

Managing conflicts of interest

Independent SLTs balancing multiple roles must identify and mitigate conflicts of interest and ensure that independent work does not breach other contracts of employment. You may be expected to declare any independent work undertaken and should seek guidance from your employer before embarking on multiple roles. Transparent communication with clients and employers, along with clear documentation of professional boundaries, helps sustain trust and professionalism.

Where legal support is required, it is important to contact your **Indemnity Insurance** provider who can provide additional support and advice.

See RCSLT guidance on **portfolio careers**.

Useful resources and contacts

- **ASLTIP (Association of Speech and Language Therapists in Independent Practice):** [Visit ASLTIP website](#) for membership details, training, and networking opportunities.
- **RCSLT (Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists):** [Access RCSLT resources](#) for clinical guidance, CPD frameworks, and professional support.
- **ICO (Information Commissioner's Office):** [Register and learn about GDPR compliance](#) for Data Controllers and use the self-assessment tool.
- **Intellectual Property Office:** [Find out more about intellectual property rights](#) for materials you develop.
- **DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service):** [Apply for DBS checks](#) and ensure legal suitability to work with vulnerable populations in England and Wales.
- **Disclosure Scotland:** [Apply for a criminal record check](#) in Scotland.
- **AccessNI:** [Apply for a criminal record check](#) in Northern Ireland.
- **HMRC (Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs):** [Manage tax, self-assessment, and VAT obligations](#) to ensure compliance with financial regulations.

Direct engagement with these organisations offers tailored advice and support for navigating independent practice complexities.

Get involved in RCSLT workHelp us to make sure that RCSLT guidance is relevant to all members, including independent practitioners. Here are some suggestions:

1. Fill in your member profile to let us know you work in independent practice, so that you receive appropriate communications.
2. Check out the [current projects](#) page to find out about current RCSLT work and how you can get involved.
3. Look out for opportunities in the member e-newsletter and Bulletin magazine.

Reflection questions

How do you currently manage your professional responsibilities, including CPD, collaboration, and data protection as an independent SLT?

What additional steps can you take to ensure continued professional growth and compliance with regulatory standards?

Contributors

- Nicola Holmes, Chair of ASLTIP
- Paula Walker, Highly Specialist Speech and Language Therapist