

From: Open letter from a coalition of over 80 organisations (see below)

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To:

The Rt. Honourable Boris Johnson MP  
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London SW1A 2AA

cc:

Secretary of State for Education  
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care  
Secretary of State for Justice  
Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government

17 March 2021

Dear Prime Minister,

***Building back better with people who have communication and swallowing needs***

We are writing to urge you to build back better with people who have communication and swallowing needs.

As professionals and representatives from over 80 organisations working with, representing and supporting people who have communication and swallowing needs, we hope the Government can act now on the findings of a newly published survey by the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists into people's access to speech and language therapy during the first UK-wide lockdown (March-June 2020). A copy of the report is enclosed.

The survey has revealed that some people continued to receive speech and language therapy during lockdown. A number of people liked the new ways in which they received their therapy. For example, over the telephone or online via video call.

Sadly, however, these positive experiences were not shared by all. The survey has revealed that lockdown had a negative impact on people's communication and swallowing. It also had a negative impact on their access to speech and language therapy. This was especially the case in the most deprived areas of England. People also reported how their lives and the lives of their families and carers were made worse because they had less therapy.

- 62% of children and young people did not receive any speech and language therapy at all during lockdown. Of those who did receive some therapy, 81% said it was less than they received before lockdown.
- 44% of adults aged over 18 did not receive any speech and language therapy during lockdown. Of those who did, 52% said it was less than before lockdown.

- A higher percentage of people of all ages in the most deprived areas in England received less speech and language therapy during lockdown than in the least deprived areas. In addition, a higher percentage of respondents in the least deprived areas than the most deprived areas received in person speech and language therapy during lockdown.
- For a variety of reasons, some people were unable to access online therapy. People who are deaf reported the particular difficulties they faced with this type of delivery.
- 67% of respondents to the 0-18 survey told us having less speech and language therapy made their education worse. 59% said it made their social life and friendships worse. 45% said it made their mental health worse.
- 56% of people aged 18 and over said their mental health had got worse. 54% said their social life and friendships had got worse. 51% said their home and domestic life had got worse.

People also reported concerns about being able to access speech and language therapy in the future. They are worried about the potential effect on their education, social life and friendships, mental health and home and domestic life if they cannot access therapy.

These concerns are borne out by academic research. This has shown that not identifying and appropriately responding to communication and swallowing needs can have a range of negative impacts on people's lives. These include physical and mental health and wellbeing, educational attainment, the forming of positive relationships and employment. For some people, it can also risk their involvement in the criminal justice system, whether in youth justice settings or adult prisons.

At the same time as sharing their concerns about the impact of not receiving therapy, survey respondents of all ages were clear: speech and language therapy makes their lives better. Many also said that it makes the lives of their families and carer better.

As we rise to the challenges facing us, it is essential that we build back better with people who have communication and swallowing needs. The totality of people's individual needs must be identified. They must also be responded to appropriately. Where people require it, they must have access to speech and language therapy. At the same time, we must also level up so people in the most deprived areas of the country do not face an inequality of access to services.

We urge you to undertake the following action now:

- **National and local recovery policies** must identify and provide appropriate response to an individual's needs and specifically:
  - support for **children and young people's** communication and language development should be central to education recovery plans;
  - support for **adults'** communication and swallowing should be integral to the restart of rehabilitation services; and
  - given the clear links between communication and swallowing needs and mental health, speech and language therapy should be recognised as an integral part of the recovery plan for **mental health services**.
- **Speech and language therapy services** must be appropriately resourced to ensure that:
  - the **increase in demand** for speech and language therapy services as a result of the pandemic (including those with long COVID) can be addressed;

- those who have developed a **higher level of need** due to delays in identification and reduced support during the pandemic can be properly supported;
- staff who have been redeployed to other parts of the NHS are able to **return to their substantive posts** as soon as possible; and
- speech and language therapists are able to play their vital role in **protecting and promoting the general mental health and wellbeing** of people with communication and swallowing needs and their family and carers - this could potentially reduce the risk of people then needing to access mental health services.

We hope the Government will seize this once in a lifetime opportunity to not only address the huge backlog facing services, but also ensure that building back is not just about catching-up. It really must be about building back better – securing a real, sustained improvement in the lives of the people we work with, support and represent and their families and carers.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

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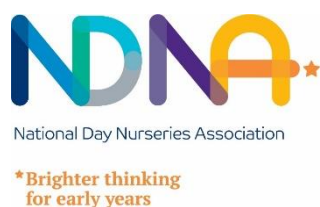
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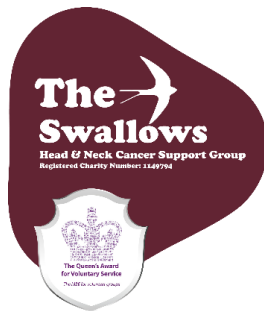
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