



16 October 2020

**1. What is your name?**

Vivienne Fitzroy

**2. Please provide an email address**

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**3. Are you responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation? An organisation – RCSLT NI.**

**4. Please provide the name of your organisation and outline briefly its context/ aims and scope?**

- The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) is the professional body for speech and language therapists (SLTs), students working in the UK. The RCSLT has almost 17,500 members, with around 700 in Northern Ireland, including nearly 95% of the speech and language therapists working in the UK.
- We promote excellence in practice and influence health, education, employment, social care and justice policies. SLTs play a major role in working directly with children and adults in health, social care, education and justice settings, and supporting their families.
- SLTs have a key role in assessing and supporting children with special educational needs (SEN) and have a lead role in training other professionals working with children with communication and swallowing needs. SLTs also provide universal, targeted and specialised services and associated training to ensure that all children develop the necessary speech, language and communication needs to support learning and mental well-being.
- RCSLT NI have been calling for greater recognition and promotion of speech, language and communication skills among all children and young people to help ensure that every child has the best start in life. Every child who requires specialist speech, language and communication support should receive it and RCSLT NI make representations to the relevant departments, bodies and consultation processes on SEND issues.
- In relation to universal SLCN, we have been lobbying for a regional SLC strategy to include early language development and the incorporation of some form of early language measure into any baseline data to inform programme for government outcome 14, giving every children the best start in life.
- RCLST NI hosts an early years language and communication forum (EYLCF), a cross sectoral forum for those interested in and working to support early language development and includes organisations such as Save the Children, Early Years, Libraries NI, Northern Ireland Child Minder's Association, Public Health Agency and Health and Social Care Board.

- We welcome the work of the panel and the opportunity to engage with members specifically around the importance of investing in and developing the best possible SLC skills for children in NI, with a particular focus on the well evidenced increased need among children from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
- SLTs are experienced in working in partnership with children, families, early years and education practitioners, childcare providers, the third sector and communities at large in promoting early language skills which are the foundational to school-readiness. The panel will be familiar with much of the evidence base around the importance of early language development and the need to provide ongoing identification and support for language development into foundation stage and primary school. We have sought to provide some examples of local evidence-based projects, run by SLTs in partnerships, that have been working to redress the evidenced and well-known language gap among children in some of our poorest areas.
- We would welcome any further engagement with the panel on how their framework and action plan could help drive regional improvement in the speech, language and communication skills of our children and young people to best support educational attainment.
- A copy of our full response to all questions, with references and appendices, has been attached using the link for supplementary documents. For further information contact Vivienne Fitzroy, RCLST NI Policy Adviser, at [vivienne.fitzroy@rcslt.org](mailto:vivienne.fitzroy@rcslt.org).

**5. Are you responding as? Please choose from the options below: Professional Body**

**6. What would you say are the main causes of educational underachievement?**

**Links between speech, language and communication and educational underachievement:**

- Speech, language and communication (SLC) skills are fundamental to learning and achievement and are a key indicator of educational success. Oral language development is central to a child's ability to access the school curriculum and develop literacy skills.
- Unidentified and unsupported speech, language and communication need (SLCN) put children and young people at risk of a range of negative outcomes in relation to behaviour which in turn can become a contributing factor to educational underachievement. For example, children with SLCN can have difficulties forming friendships, resulting in fewer opportunities to learn how to behave and communicate well; they may be at risk of peer rejection which can lead to further behavioural problems<sup>1</sup>
- It is widely recognised that impoverished oracy and language development, particularly in the early years, is a key factor in educational underachievement and can affect children and young people's life chances into adulthood:

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<sup>1</sup> Menting B., van Lier P.A., Koot H.M. (2011) Language skills, peer rejection, and the development of externalizing behavior from kindergarten to fourth grade. *Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry*. 52(1), 72-79.

- A two-year-old's language development can strongly predict their reading skills on entry into school, as well as their later attainment.<sup>2</sup>
  - Vocabulary difficulties at age five are associated with poor literacy in adulthood.<sup>3</sup>
  - The recently published *Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On* highlighted that 'strong communication and language skills in the early years are linked with success in education, higher levels of qualifications, higher wages and better health.'<sup>4</sup>
- Research by Save the Children has revealed:
    - 1 in 4 children who struggled with language at age 5 did not reach the expected standard in English at the end of primary school compared with 1 in 25 children who had good language skills at the same age<sup>5</sup>.
    - 1 in 5 children who struggled with language at age 5 did not reach the expected standard in maths at the end of primary school compared with 1 in 50 children who had good language skills at the same age.<sup>6</sup>

### **Prevalence of speech, language and communication needs in NI**

- Over 10% of children and young people in the UK have some form of long-term communication need which impacts on their daily life.<sup>7</sup>
  - *Of this 10%: 7.6% the equivalent of two children in every primary one classroom will experience developmental language disorder (DLD) - a condition where children have problems understanding and, or, using spoken language - no other condition explain it. 2.3% have language disorder associated with another condition such as autism or hearing impairment. 1% of children have the most severe and complex SLCN.*
- However, in areas of social disadvantage around 50% of children start school with delayed language and other identified communication needs<sup>2,3</sup> indeed some local studies have found this to be significantly higher in NI.
- In Northern Ireland, there is no regional tool for assessing children's speech, language and communication development, therefore, population level data is unavailable at the point of school entry. However, local research and evidence gathered as part of specific projects delivered by speech and language therapists (SLTs) and other organisations indicate the scale of the problem:
  - In 2013 a study in the Colin area of West Belfast found that 41% of children had a language difficulty. A similar study in Downpatrick found that 46% of children were

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<sup>2</sup>M Snowling, C Hulme, A Bailey, S Stothrad and G Lindsay (2011) Better Communication Research Programme: Language and literacy attainment of pupils during early years and through KS2: Does teacher assessment at five provide a valid measure of children's current and future educational attainments DfE RR 172a.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, et al (2010). Twenty-year follow-up of children with and without speech-language impairments: family, educational, occupational, and quality of life outcomes. *Am J Speech Lang Pathol.* 19(1):51-65. doi: 10.1044/1058-0360(2009/08-0083). Epub 2009 Jul 30.

<sup>4</sup> Institute of Health Equity (2020). *Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On.* <https://bit.ly/3cncyfo>

<sup>5</sup> Save the Children. Early language development and children's primary school attainment in English and Maths: new research findings. <https://bit.ly/394ysSh>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Norbury, C.F., Gooch, D., Wray, C., Baird, G., Charman, T., Simonoff, E., Vamvakas, A. and Pickles, A. (2016) The impact of nonverbal ability on prevalence and clinical presentation of language disorder: evidence from a population study.

<sup>2</sup> Locke, A., Ginsborg, J. & Peers, I. (2002) Development and Disadvantage: implications for early years *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders* Vol 37:1.

<sup>3</sup> Law, J., McBean, K and Rush, R. (2011) Communication skills in a population of primary school-aged children raised in an area of pronounced social disadvantage *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 46, (6) pp 657–664.

entering primary one with delayed language with 31% of those children requiring speech and language therapy interventions.<sup>8</sup>

- A project in the Limavady neighbourhood renewal area entitled ‘*Communicating Better Together – the Limavady schools project*’ screened over 300 children entering four nursery and primary schools in 2014 found that 68% had speech and language difficulties in 2014. The project was re-run in 2015 and found 62% of this cohort also had language difficulties – see case study below.
- A project called ‘*Now you’re talking Fermanagh*’ in 2014 found that 57% of nursery school children in the three most deprived areas outside of Sure Start wards (and therefore not in receipt of any early intervention programmes) had speech and language difficulties – see *appendix 1 for more information*.
- The Millennium Cohort Study found that in Northern Ireland 38% of five year olds who had no experience of poverty were below the average vocabulary level, this rose to 49% of children where they had intermittent experience of poverty and 68% of children who experienced persistent levels of poverty in Northern Ireland.<sup>9</sup>
- In a 2016 a Save the Children poll reported that 70% of teachers in Northern Ireland saw children arriving in primary one struggling to understand simple sentences and 75% of teachers reported that children were unable to use full sentences.<sup>10</sup>

## 7. In your view, what is the main impact of educational underachievement?

- Unidentified and unsupported speech, language and communication needs and the resultant effect on educational attainment and social and emotional well-being can have lifelong and sometimes life-changing consequences for children and young people. This is outlined in the 2018 RCSLT and I CAN report ‘Bercow: Ten Years On. An independent review of provision for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs in England’<sup>11</sup>:

*“Without a shift in approach, children and young people will continue to leave school without basic language and literacy skills. We will continue having disproportionate numbers of young people with SLCN who are not in education, employment or training, who need mental health support or who are in contact within the youth justice system. Children and young people with lifelong communication needs will not get the support and adjustments they require. As a result, children and young people with the potential to do well will struggle to make an active contribution to society as adults. We cannot afford, socially or economically, to continue with the status quo.”*

- **In the earliest years** - the ‘word gap’ opens up in the early years:
  - Studies have found that at age three children in the lowest income group had language skills on average 17.4 months behind children in the highest income group. By the age of five, the gap is 19 months. This gap is larger in the UK than in other developed countries.<sup>9</sup>
- **In school** - without support, children from poorer backgrounds who are behind in language are less likely than their peers to catch up over time:

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<sup>8</sup> Jordan, J., Coulter, L., McKeever, A and Dowling, C. (2013) *Prevalence Of Speech And Language Delay In Primary One Children In The Downpatrick Area*, South Eastern Health And Social Care Trust Speech And Language Therapy Department.

<sup>9</sup> Source: Analysis of Millennium Cohort Study waves 1 and 3 by UCL Institute of Education.

<sup>10</sup> BBC News report: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-38045420>

<sup>11</sup> Available at <https://www.bercow10yearson.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/337644-ICAN-Bercow-Report-WEB.pdf>

- Children living in poverty who experience delayed language at age three are significantly more likely to be behind in literacy at age 11 than children in better-off families who also experienced delayed language.<sup>10</sup>
- Behavioural problems among school-aged children are strongly linked to SLCN<sup>12</sup>; a study of pupils at risk of exclusion from school, two thirds were found to have SLCN<sup>13</sup>.
- **In higher education, employment and later life**– there is also strong evidence that poor language in childhood predicts poor employment prospects, as well as a range of other negative associations:
  - The UN concluding observations on the right of the child in NI notes that, *(f) Many children living in poverty, particularly boys, do not meet the expected level of language development at pre-school level, which has a negative impact on their primary education, hindering their development throughout their life.*
  - Five year olds with poor language skills are twice as likely to be unemployed in their thirties.<sup>12</sup>
  - A study of unemployed young men found that 88% had some level of language difficulty.<sup>13</sup> a recent study in south London, due to be published later this year has confirmed these findings
  - Up to 60% of young people in the youth justice estate have communication difficulties,<sup>14</sup> with 46-47% of these being in the poor or very poor range<sup>15</sup>. Many of these individuals have experienced poverty and adverse childhood experiences.
- **For social, emotional and mental well-being throughout life** - It is also important to note the links between SLCN and mental well-being:
  - children with a mental health disorder report having speech or language problems five times more than those without<sup>16</sup>
  - 81% of children with emotional and behavioural disorders have significant language deficits<sup>17</sup>.
  - men who have speech difficulties in adolescence have a significantly higher risk of mental health problems<sup>18</sup>
  - A screening of 34 looked after children in secure residential settings in the Western Trust has found 64% of children have speech, language and communication needs – only 2 of these were previously referred to services<sup>19</sup>. This reflects a wider trend identified in services across the UK.<sup>20</sup>

## 9. In your experience what has worked to address educational underachievement?

<sup>12</sup> RCLST Factsheet: Understanding the links between communication and behaviour available here <https://www.rcslt.org/-/media/Project/RCLST/rcslt-behaviour-a4-factsheet.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Clegg, J. (2004). Language and behaviour: an exploratory study of pupils in an exclusion unit. British Psychological Society Conference, University of Leeds, UK, September 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Bryan K, Freer J, Furlong C. Language and communication difficulties in juvenile offenders. *International Journal of Language and Communication Difficulties* 2007; 42, 505-520.

<sup>15</sup> Bryan, K., Freer, J. and Furlong, C. (2007), Language and Communication Difficulties in Juvenile Offenders. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 42 (5), 505-520).

<sup>16</sup> NHS Digital. (2018). *Mental Health of Children and Young People in England*, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Hollo A, Wehby JH, Oliver RM. Unidentified Language Deficits in Children with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders: A Meta-Analysis. *Exceptional Children* 2014; 80(2): 169-186.

<sup>18</sup> Sadiq FA, Slator L, Skuse D, et al. Social use of language in children with reactive attachment disorder and autism spectrum disorders. *Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 2012; 21: 267.

<sup>19</sup> Data provided by WHSCT SLT Service, October 2019.

<sup>20</sup> RCLST SLT Factsheet, Looked After Children available <https://www.rcslt.org/-/media/Project/RCLST/rcslt-looked-after-children-factsheet.pdf>

## **I. Early intervention; partnership and collaboration**

- The case for early intervention is well evidenced and we welcome that the scope of the panel's work reflects this. Early language development is a public health issue and is critical to school readiness, ensuring that children have the skills needed to access the curriculum when they start school.
- We welcome the inclusion of the Save the Children NI report Tackling the Poverty-Related Gap in Early Childhood Learning in Northern Ireland, in the panel's reference document as it explores the ways in which poverty impact on the communication and home learning environment of families here. It also sets out the case for early intervention particularly in relation to socially disadvantage children and young people.
- Parents are a child's first and most important educator. SLTs play a significant role in empowering and training parents about the importance of early language development and offer parents practical strategies to use at home and in everyday interactions with their child. SLTs are also expert in training early years practitioners, the work of Sure Start and RISE – outlined below - are examples of best practice in NI, however as yet SLC training is not embedded in early years qualifications.
- Across Northern Ireland SLTs and the third sector have led and been involved in excellent and innovative examples of evidenced based, partnership programmes that provide training and interventions to promote early language development, some examples are cited below.
- Save the Children have developed excellent programmes focussing on supporting parents and families in deprived socio-economic areas to better support their child's SLC, for example the Wonder Words programme.<sup>21</sup>
- These programmes are often associated with targeted services such as Sure Start, or small-scale, locality funded programmes<sup>22</sup> such as 'Help Kids Talk' in Down and Lisburn (see below). As such their reach is limited, with the continuity of the projects uncertain because of funding. Nonetheless these programmes, which have drawn on national and international models of best practice, with a focus on a community wide approach, provide a rich basis for considering how we can further scale and spread universal early language promotion in NI to best support school readiness.

### **Belfast Sure Start: Changing time is Chatting Time Series – Empowering parents with information and support**

Changing Time is Chatting Time (CTCT) and Anytime is Chatting Time (ATCT) form a suite of resources developed by the Sure Start Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) Team in Belfast Health & Social Care Trust (BHSCT).

Parents are provided with information about how a baby's brain develops from 0 – toddler, and the simple message that when you smile, talk, laugh, sing and share stories with your child, you are helping to build their brain. The information is based on the latest research about the

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/what-we-do/uk-work/in-homes/wonder-words>

<sup>22</sup> See also appendix 2 'Now you're talking Fermanagh: early intervention speech and language project for Bump – 3s' (see appendix 2 for more detail).

importance of serve and return interactions for the developing brain and aligns with the Solihull Approach and the NI Infant Mental Health Framework. It is packaged in a simple, accessible way to support behaviour change. Parents can access resources, songs and videos via a QR code from their phone.

***In addition to specific initiatives such as Chatting time, Sure Start provide a regional speech, language and communication pathway from 0-2<sup>23</sup> for those families who live in qualifying postcodes and services are supported strategically by a regional Sure Start SLT coordinator.***

### **Help Kids Talk – Community Partnership with SET SLT Services and Barnardo’s**

The Help Kids Talk initiative funded by Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council was launched on the 4th March 2020 in Lagan Valley Island Centre. It is a community wide project involving everyone who has a responsibility for a child, whether that is a parent, carer, grandparent, other family members, childminders and staff in an organisation that provides services for children in Lisburn.

The project was initiated by the South Eastern Trust SLT service and Barnardo’s and following a screening programme identified that 32% of children in the locality are starting school with a mild to severe speech, language and communication problem.

The project now funded by the Council runs awareness sessions for parents/carers and other family members on what speech, language and communication development should look like, what you can do to encourage your child’s development and where to go if you need help and support. Help Kids Talk also have training and programmes available that support a child’s development for organisations that provide services for children<sup>24</sup>.

***Help Kids Talks has been modelled on the approach used by a best practice, placed-based early language intervention programme – Stoke Speaks Out<sup>25</sup> which has been running since 2004. In 2018 return on investment research commissioned by RCSLT has found that for every £1 invested in the programme’s work on school readiness at age 5, £1.19 is created. In the long-term, it is estimated that every £1 invested in the programme could create £4.26 of savings.***

More information see appendix 2. <https://setrust.hscni.net/helping-kids-talk-launch-in-lisburn/>

- To improve early intervention, RCSLT NI recommends that a more coordinated and consistent approach is needed, ideally as part of a wider regional SLC strategy, but crucially linked to any action plan to improve school achievement. This would include:
  - a joint health and education audit and action plan on early language interventions
  - working in partnership with the third sector and parents
  - considering and utilise existing provision, research evidence and best practice
  - identifying gaps in early language support and consider actions to redress these, particularly how best to provide parents with timely and accessible information

<sup>23</sup> Sure Start regional pathways available here <http://childcarepartnerships.hscni.net/sure-starts/regional-sure-start-speech-language-communication-programme/>.

<sup>24</sup> Help Kids talk Initiative <https://setrust.hscni.net/helping-kids-talk-launch-in-lisburn/>

<sup>25</sup> More information on the Stoke Speaks Out programme available here <https://www.stokespeaks.org/professionals>



- address the identified training gaps to support early language development particularly in relation to early years qualifications and offer professional training opportunities around SLC for the early years sector.

## II. Professional development of education workforce

- Teachers need to be able to identify children and young people who may have communication needs as early as possible and support them effectively, particularly where schools are serving communities with high levels of deprivation.
  - RISE – the regional integrated service in Education is a well-developed school support service in NI available to nursery and key stage 1 primary school pupils which includes SLTs as core in the multi-disciplinary team. As part of the RISE service SLTs provide a range of training for teachers and classroom assistants for whole class, targeted and specific interventions to support pupils with SLCN, as well as social and emotional and behavioural issues. Examples of these programmes include ELKLAN<sup>26</sup> and Talkboost<sup>27</sup>.
  - The panel may wish to consider how professional development of the education workforce might best be achieved in the context of undergraduate training courses or any early career professional development for new teachers in NI.

## III. Incentivising schools

- With increasing pressures on their time and budgets it is essential that schools are encouraged from the top to give speech, language and communication the priority it deserves. This should include providing guidance to schools on how funding can be used to develop language skills, and what training and support can be made available to schools where delayed language and SLCN is overrepresented among their school populations.
- The Limavady Schools project, summarised below, demonstrates how initially one principal and community identified this as an issue and used extended schools money to provide a local solution. However, delivering these types of projects depend very much on individual schools and principals' motivation and require significant amounts of time to trail blaze new ways of working, and often these can not be sustained, the Limavady project has since ended.

### **The Limavady Schools Programme (LSP)**

LSP was launched in response to concerns arising around the levels of Speech, Language and Communication Need (SLCN) in children starting nursery and primary school in the Limavady Neighbourhood Renewal Area.

In its first year, 2014, the programme was funded by Community Education Initiative Programme (CEIP) and project managed by the Dry Arch Children's Centre. In 2015 and 2016 the majority of funding came from a cluster of local schools using their extended schools funding; smaller amounts came from WHSCT and the Department of Social Development.

**Format:** An SLT was seconded from Western HSC Trust for 3 days per week. All children in their Nursery and Primary One year (around 300) in the five participating schools were screened using

<sup>26</sup> More information available here <https://www.elklan.co.uk/information/commissioners-schools/benefits-for-schools>

<sup>27</sup> More information available here <https://ican.org.uk/training-licensing/i-can-programmes/talk-boost-ks1/>



the WellComm Language Toolkit in their first term. The WellComm language screen awards children a score based on their responses to 10 questions around receptive and expressive language. This score equates to a colour code:

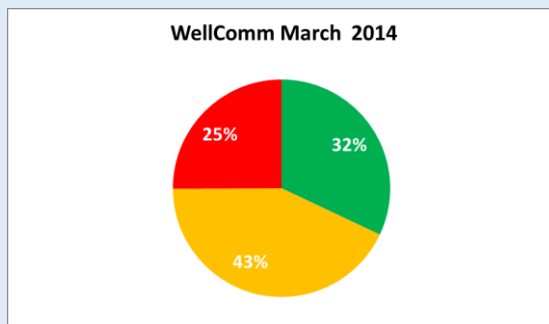
- Green – language developing at an age appropriate level
- Orange – language is delayed
- Red – language is severely delayed

**Intervention:** Based on the results and in consultation with school staff the SLT delivered a programme of intervention on a weekly basis. This could take the form of:

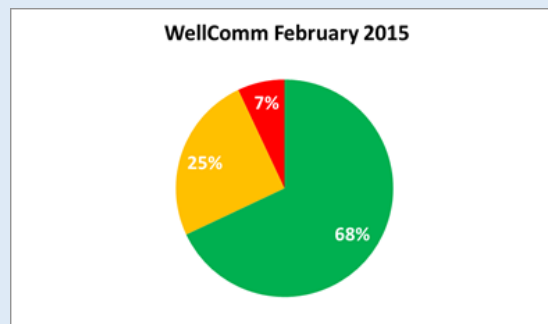
- Whole class language enrichment groups
- Smaller language groups for the more severely delayed children
- Individual therapy – this is generally for children who have previously been discharged from the health centre for non-attendance at clinic.
- Training for parents, teaching assistants and teachers.

**Results:** In term 3 the children have the WellComm screen repeated to measure progress. Below are the results from Year 1 for the whole cohort of 303 children.

Term 1: Results (pre-interventions year 1)



Term 3: Results (post- interventions year 1)



**Evaluation:** The programme has been viewed very favourably by principals and teachers and was shortlisted in November 2015 for a regional GAIN (Guidelines and Audit Implementation Network) award in the category of Service Improvement and in April 2016 for a UK Advancing Healthcare Award in the category of Public Health.

Further Information can be found in appendix 3.

- The panel may wish to consider ways to better facilitate local approaches and joint working between schools, communities and health where a need to boost language and communication skills is identified in order to ensure children have the necessary foundation for learning. In addition, what means could be deployed to incentivise, acknowledge and reward schools who are working to address SLC, potentially through the inspection regime, professional networks, or others if appropriate.
- Supporting and incentivising schools is particularly relevant when we consider the impact on COVID on the poorest families in Northern Ireland.
  - *In England £9 million has been invested in an evidenced-based 'catch up' language programme for schools, provided online by Nuffield Language Programme, for 5 year olds given the real concerns that these children's language skills have been further*

*affected by school closures during the lockdown of COVID-19.<sup>28</sup>*

#### **IV. Providing a safety net for children with SLCN**

- Whilst the evidence for early intervention is clear, it is important that we provide opportunities to identify speech, language and communication throughout a child and young person's life. This is especially important when considering children from deprived backgrounds given that they experience such high levels of delayed language and SLCN, with potentially lifelong consequences.
- Primary Schools – schools have access to the RISE support service for foundation service which assess, identify and support pupils with a range of SLCN as well as social and emotional difficulties. This service can pick up those children with SEN who have been missed or whose families have not engaged with services outside of school. However, there is no core commissioning of SLT in mainstream schools, which in areas of high deprivation may have significant demand from pupils with SLCN. However some schools have used extended schools monies to bring a SLT into their schools for example the Colin schools project in West Belfast have done this as there was such need and there was such a high rate on non-attendance in the local clinic.
- Post-primary schools - currently in NI there is no commissioned SLT services for schools or pupils in a school setting in the post-primary sector.
- RCSLT NI believe that there is an urgent need to redress this gap in services and provide secondary schools with specific support to help identify, refer and assess pupils who may have SLCN and SEN, potentially modelled on the existing RISE services for key stage 1. Particularly as some communication difficulties, such as Developmental language Disorder (around 7% of the population), are lifelong and can be masked by behaviour as discussed above.
- The expansion of RISE services through to key stage 2 would help ensure that children who have been missed in the earlier stages can be referred and supported within the school setting, potentially helping with those harder to reach families who are less likely to engage in clinic settings.
- Locally, given the absence of services, there is a lack of NI local evidence of the links between SLCN and under achievement and exclusion in post-primary sectors. However there is a clear correlation between many of the group of pupils who are disproportionately more likely to be excluded, and the groups of children and young people who are more likely to have communication needs, including looked after children, children in need, pupils eligible for free school meals, and pupils with special educational needs and disabilities.
- The national research evidence base is well developed and demonstrates a clear link between behavioural difficulties, communication needs, and school exclusions:

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<sup>28</sup> More information available here <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/early-years-support-package-to-help-close-covid-language-gap>.

- A review of 26 studies found that 71% of children formally identified with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) experienced clinically significant language deficits, and 57% of children with diagnosed language deficits also were identified with EBD.<sup>29</sup>
- A study of secondary age pupils at risk of school exclusion found that for a high proportion of the pupils, language difficulties were a factor in their behaviour problems and school exclusion.<sup>30</sup>
- In a study of pupils at risk of exclusion from school, two thirds were found to have speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).<sup>31</sup>
- In a study of excluded boys, 100% had undetected communication needs and behavioural issues.<sup>32</sup>
- SLT services working to support pupils and educational staff have a role in identifying pupils who may have underlying difficulties contributing to underachievement, mental health and behaviours at risk of exclusion. They provide training and advice for staff working with pupils at risk of exclusion to recognise and respond to often invisible communication needs and provide direct speech and language therapy support who need it.<sup>33</sup>

#### **10. How has the Covid-19 lockdown impacted on educational underachievement?**

- Whilst firm evidence is not currently unavailable, there is strong anecdotal concerns across the UK that children are entering or returning to school with even more delay in their language skills due to the school closures and access to CYP services during this pandemic.
- During the initial surge SLCN services for our CYP were mainly offered by way of telehealth. However, we are aware that due to digital poverty this may not have been effective for these children and families. We are aware that some vulnerable families did not access the school digital platforms during lockdown.
- SLTs in NI are now providing blended approaches to service delivery with some innovative ways to make services accessible to our vulnerable children, e.g. Sure start offering “Garden Gate therapy”.
- It is also encouraging to see the government in England invest in a £9million online Nuffield Language Programme, as mentioned above, for children of 5 year old in schools, given the real concerns that these children’s language skills have been further affected by school closures during the lockdown of COVID-19.

#### **11. Please add any other comments that you would like the panel to consider.**

<sup>29</sup> 3 Benner, G. J., Nelson, J. R., & Epstein, M. H. (2002). Language skills of children with EBD: A literature review. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 10 (1), pp. 43-59

<sup>30</sup> Clegg, J., Stackhouse, J., Finch, K., Murphy, C. & Nicholls, S. (2009). Language abilities of secondary age pupils at risk of school exclusion: a preliminary report. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy*, 25, 123–139.

<sup>31</sup> Clegg, J. (2004). Language and behaviour: an exploratory study of pupils in an exclusion unit. British Psychological Society Conference, University of Leeds, UK, September 2004

<sup>32</sup> Ripley, K. & Yuill, N. (2005). Patterns of language impairment and behaviour in boys excluded from school. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 75, 37-50.

<sup>33</sup> For a full discussion on schools exclusion and SLCN please see RCSLT’s written evidence on school exclusions available here <https://www.rcslt.org/-/media/Project/RCSLT/exclusions-review-rcslt-written-evidence.pdf>

RCSLT NI would welcome any request by the panel to meet directly with members working in the areas outlined above, or indeed facilitate engagement with the early years language and communication forum which we convene. Please contact Vivienne Fitzroy ([Vivienne.fitzroy@rcslt.org](mailto:Vivienne.fitzroy@rcslt.org)) and Ceara Gallagher ([Ceara.gallagher@rcslt.org](mailto:Ceara.gallagher@rcslt.org)) for any further information.