



## **Spending Review 2021 representation**

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) urges the UK Government to use the Spending Review to ensure that speech and language therapy services are adequately funded so that everyone who requires speech and language therapy is able to access it. This is key to delivering the Government priorities of:

- (1) ensuring strong and innovative public services; and
- (2) levelling up across the UK to increase and spread opportunity.

The RCSLT is calling for speech and language therapy services to 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 supported;
- 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.

In addition, investment in the speech and language therapy workforce, both current and future, is essential to ensure that there are enough speech and language therapists trained, retained and in receipt of continuing professional development to:

- support people with communication and/or swallowing needs, their families and the other professionals working with them; and
- ensure speech and language therapists can make their full contribution to delivering relevant Government policy objectives in education, health and social care (including mental health and community rehabilitation), and justice.

## **Ensuring strong and innovative public services**

### ***Delivering for people with communication and swallowing needs***

The impact of COVID-19 on access to speech and language therapy has been extensive. As the RCSLT's *Speech and language therapy during and beyond COVID-19* report shows, 82% of children and young people and 52% of adults received less speech and language therapy than required to meet their needs during the first national lockdown. This impacted people's quality of life in a variety of ways -- including their education, social life and friendships, mental health, work and home and domestic life.

Services being stopped or delivered in ways which some people could not access meant that people who needed speech and language therapy -- for example, a child with delayed language development, or with a speech, language and communication need, such as developmental language disorder, or a working age adult recovering from a stroke -- did not receive it.

However, it is not enough to simply remedy the issues brought about by COVID-19 or to build back to where we were in March 2020. COVID-19 has only exacerbated pressures on speech and language therapy services which began far before the start of the pandemic. Service users have told us that "the issues with access to speech and language therapy pre-date the pandemic and even with services restored access is inadequate." Speech and language therapists have confirmed this. The Head of a Children's Speech and Language Therapy Service said to us that "services were holding excessive waiting lists, carrying ridiculous pressures on staff and not delivering a service to the standard they aspired to well before COVID."

The identification and intervention backlog facing speech and language therapy services is significant. This includes:

- the need to provide therapy to people with long COVID, a brand new clinical area;
- the need for additional support for children whose language development has been impacted by lockdown;

- the need for additional support for adults due a deterioration in their condition following delayed or stopped speech and language therapy;
- increasing recognition of the links between communication and swallowing in mental health services; and
- the increased emphasis on access to community rehabilitation.

Adequately funding speech and language therapy services is critical to bettering the lives of people with communication and/or swallowing needs. It is estimated that 1 in 5 people in the UK will develop a communication difficulty at some point in their lives. Therefore, investing in speech and language therapy services goes hand in hand with making people's lives better across the country, enabling them to achieve their potential, both in education and the work place, supporting them to be as economically active, while living as independent lives as possible.

***Securing the speech and language therapy workforce to ensure strong and innovative public services***

To ensure that this happens, it is critical that there is sufficient investment in the speech and language therapy workforce, both current and future, securing and developing the existing workforce and expanding it in the future.

Even before the pandemic struck, speech and language therapy was a workforce under pressure. The Government has recognised the role of speech and language therapists in delivering the NHS Long Term Plan. The NHS Long Term Plan itself highlighted that speech and language therapy is a profession in short supply. In addition, in its submission to the Migration Advisory Committee's Full Review of the Shortage Occupation List, the Department of Health and Social Care argued that speech and language therapists should be added to the Shortage Occupation List because the profession is facing a range of pressures including increasing demand, in mental health in particular.

Those pressures have only increased due to the pandemic.

The scale of backlog, unmet needs and increased demand post-COVID that we have identified, suggests a minimum increase in the skilled workforce is required in the region of 15%. While it is encouraging that applications to speech and language therapy pre-registration courses have risen in the last two years, those additional speech and language therapists will not be available in the short term, nor in the numbers needed. It is vital that in this scenario the profession is supported practically and financially in rapid upskilling and enhanced continuing professional development for existing speech and language therapists to try and bridge that gap.

### **Levelling up across the UK**

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has recently talked of the need to tackle “the disease of disparity”. That disease has existed for far too long for people with communication and/or swallowing needs and their families; and the pandemic has highlighted and widened pre-existing health inequalities, particularly in areas of social disadvantage.

Our survey found that a higher percentage of people 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. Similarly, after lockdown ended, a higher percentage of people in the least deprived areas than the most deprived areas had access to face to face speech and language therapy.

The postcode lottery faced by people who need access to speech and language therapy is unacceptable -- it must be addressed through levelling up in the places that need it most, ensuring that speech and language therapy services across the country receive the funding that they need to serve their local populations. Access to speech and language therapy should be based solely on the level of a person’s need, not where

they live or their background, in order to level up across the UK and ensure equity of opportunity for people with communication and swallowing needs.

### **Building back better**

Investing in speech and language therapy services and ensuring access for all who need it are central to not only building back from the pandemic, but to building back better than where we were in March 2020.

Doing so is key to ensuring strong and innovative public services and levelling up across the UK, thus delivering the priorities of this Spending Review.