

NI Independent Review of Education – Briefing from the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT)

Speech, language and communication needs and educational outcomes

Summary

- There is a strong association between a child’s early language development and their educational and life chances, recognised in international research. Having good spoken language is central to children’s literacy and numeracy skills, their academic attainment and longer-term life outcomes.
- The evidence indicates children from the poorest backgrounds are most likely to have speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) that impact negatively on their school readiness and social and emotional well-being.
- In Northern Ireland (NI) there are gaps in provision and services required to support early language development and oracy. By investing in developing the best possible language and communication skills for all children in NI, utilising existing best practice models, we can help reduce educational inequalities and support attainment and well-being into adulthood.
- SLCN needs can be lifelong and many children with special educational needs (SEN) will require specialist support from a speech and language therapist. SLCN are among the most frequently reported types of SEN, however commissioning for speech and language therapy SEN services have not kept pace with need.
- Currently not all children with SLCN are receiving the service they need to maximise their education and well-being. There is an urgent need to invest in and commission more speech and language therapy SEN services. We must reform how we plan for and meet the needs of children with SLCN and SEN across health and education.

Key Statistics on speech, language and communication needs

At least **two children** in every classroom are estimated to have a speech, language of communication need (SLCN). This number increases in disadvantaged areas, where it is estimated **50% of school aged children** have a SLCN.

81% of children with emotional behavioural disorders have unidentified language difficulties.

23% of school pupils in NI have Special Educational Needs and SLCN are among the most reported SEN for all children, and the most common SEN for children with a statement

66% of pupils at risk of exclusion from school were found to have speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) – some studies of excluded boys have found this to be higher.

Statistics also show that **80% of young, unemployed men** have an unidentified SLCN.

In Northern Ireland there are no commissioned posts for Speech and Language Therapists in post-primary education.

RCSLT NI Recommendations

- The detailed briefing below outlines evidence and recommendations across three key themes:
 1. Early years language development
 2. The impact of SLCN on pupil attainment and well-being
 3. Special Educational Needs (SEN) and disability

- Within each section we have highlighted recommendations for addressing the challenges across these three areas. These are discussed in more detail below and include:
 - Development of a joint health and education early years speech, language and communication strategy for NI

 - Provision of training and development around SLCN for the early years and education workforce to ensure no child with SLCN goes undetected

 - Support to facilitate local approaches and joint working between schools, communities and health to boost language and communication skills

 - Improvements in support to identify pupils with SLCN in the post-primary sector

 - Greater SEN funding, collaboration and planning between health and education bodies in NI so that services to children are maximised, equitable and fit for the future.

- We thank the review team for the opportunity to engage with members and their work on the reform of education in NI.

1. Early Language development

The importance of early language skills to school readiness

- The case for early intervention is well evidenced. Early language development is critical to school readiness, ensuring that children have the oracy skills needed to access the curriculum when they start school.

- It is widely recognised that impoverished oracy and language development, particularly in the early years, is a key factor in educational underachievement. This can affect children and young people’s life chances into adulthood:

- A two-year-old's language development can strongly predict their reading skills on entry into school, as well as their later attainment.¹
- Vocabulary difficulties at age five are associated with poor literacy in adulthood.²
- The 2020 *Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On* report 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.'³
- 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 age⁴.
 - 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.⁵

The role of Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs) in education:

- 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.
- 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 access to the curriculum and mental well-being.
- 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.

The scale of the problem 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.⁶
 - *Of this 10%: 7.6% the equivalent of two children in every primary one classroom will experience developmental language disorder (DLN) - a condition where children have problems understanding and, or, using spoken language - no other condition explain*

¹M 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.

² 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.

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

⁴ Save the Children. Early language development and children's primary school attainment in English and Maths: new research findings. <https://bit.ly/394ysSh>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ 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.

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

³ 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.

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^{2,3} 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. 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:
 - 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.⁷
 - Anecdotally we are aware that COVID has had a negative impact on children’s language development as children and families were deprived of opportunities to enrich and develop early language – for example a child development clinic in NI in 2019 typically had 35 referrals on a waiting list, this has risen to around 140 children.

Opportunities to improve school readiness- early intervention

- Parents are a child’s first and most important educator. However, support for parents to develop their children’s pre-school oracy is inconsistent and depends on where you live in Northern Ireland. For example, access to Sure Start is based on postcode and other initiatives are small-size locality-based programmes which offer an excellent service but with limited reach.
- 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 and offer easily scalable models.

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

⁷ Source: Analysis of Millennium Cohort Study waves 1 and 3 by UCL Institute of Education.

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 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 0-2⁸ for those families who live in qualifying postcodes and services are supported strategically by a regional Sure Start SLT coordinator.

- Northern Ireland does not have a coordinated regional plan around early language support for all parents or the early years workforce. Currently in NI speech, language and communication training is not embedded in early years qualifications and this represents an untapped resource to help support children and parents.
- As a result, not all parents or early years practitioners have the early language information and support that could help make a positive impact on their child's school readiness. This has a disproportionately negative effect on children from poorer households. This is reflected in the local NI studies referenced above. Findings from 'A Fair Start – report and action plan' have also highlighted the need for a redirection of focus to early years and early language development⁹.
- This situation is not unique to Northern Ireland, particularly as there is growing evidence that COVID has exacerbated delays in children's early language development¹⁰.
- There is recognition that investing in early years language supports is a well-evidenced and cost-effective intervention. For example:
 - In Wales the 'Talk with Me' initiative¹¹ is a national early language support delivery programme. Led by an SLT seconded into central government, it is cross-departmentally funded, widely promoted and freely available to all parents and early years practitioners.
 - 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-19.¹²

RCSLT recommendations

⁸ Sure Start regional pathways available here <http://childcarepartnerships.hscni.net/sure-starts/regional-sure-start-speech-language-communication-programme/>.

⁹ Department of Education (2021), A Fair Start - Final Report and Action Plan available here <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/fair-start-final-report-action-plan>.

¹⁰ <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/lockdown-led-to-major-decline-in-ni-childrens-language-skills-41532390.html>

¹¹ For more information visit <https://gov.wales/talk-with-me>

¹² More information available here <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/early-years-support-package-to-help-close-covid-language-gap>.

The Departments of Education and Health jointly develop and fund a regional early years speech, language and communication strategy for NI to support early language development to include:

- universal parental support
- an early language screen / measure informing baseline data for the programme for government outcome 14, giving every child the best start in life
- funded training and professional development opportunities around early language and oracy for the early years workforce.

2. The impact of SLCN on pupil attainment and well-being

- 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.
- *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.⁹
- *In school* - without support, children from poorer backgrounds who are behind in language are less likely than their peers to catch up over time:
 - 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.¹⁰
 - Vocabulary skills at age 13 strongly predict both maths and English GCSE results.¹³
 - Behavioural problems among school-aged children are strongly linked to SLCN¹⁴; in a study of pupils at risk of exclusion from school, two thirds were found to have SLCN¹⁵.
- *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.¹²

¹³ Sencer, S., Clegg, J., Stackhouse, J., and Rush, R. (2017). Contribution of spoken language and socioeconomic background to adolescents' educational achievement at age 16 years. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 52, pp. 184-96

¹⁴ RCLST Factsheet: Understanding the links between communication and behaviour available here <https://www.rcslt.org/-/media/Project/RCLST/rcslt-behaviour-a4-factsheet.pdf>

¹⁵ 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.

- A study of unemployed young men found that 88% had some level of language difficulty.¹³ a recent study in south London, due to published later this year has confirmed these findings
- Up to 60% of young people in the youth justice estate have communication difficulties,¹⁶ with 46-47% of these being in the poor or very poor range¹⁷. Many of these individuals have experienced poverty and adverse childhood experiences.

Links between SLCN, behaviour and social and emotional well-being

- Many children who are at increased risk of developing mental ill health, are also likely to have communication needs such as those with autism, learning disabilities, children in care and young people in the justice system.
- It is important to note the links between SLCN and mental well-being extend far beyond school and can have life-long negative impacts:
 - children with a mental health disorder report having speech or language problems five times more than those without¹⁸
 - 81% of children with emotional and behavioural disorders have significant language deficits¹⁹.
 - men who have speech difficulties in adolescence have a significantly higher risk of mental health problems²⁰
 - 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 services²¹. This reflects a wider trend identified in services across the UK.²²
- We welcome the approach taken in the NI Children and Young People’s Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework (2021) which recognised that all behaviour is communication. However, we must ensure there is sufficient awareness among teachers and Learning Support Coordinators in schools about when to refer to SLT for children who may have SLCN.
- Identifying and supporting communication needs can help avoid incidents of challenging behaviour and minimise the use of seclusion and restraint. Proactive support may include communication strategies for a child or young person and/or changes in the communication environment. Verbally-based behavioural interventions may not be effective with young people who have unidentified communication needs.

¹⁶ Bryan K, Freer J, Furlong C. Language and communication difficulties in juvenile offenders. *International Journal of Language and Communication Difficulties* 2007; 42, 505-520.

¹⁷ 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).

¹⁸ NHS Digital. (2018). *Mental Health of Children and Young People in England*, 2017.

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ 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.

²¹ Data provided by WHSCT SLT Service, October 2019.

²² RCLST SLT Factsheet, Looked After Children available <https://www.rcslt.org/-/media/Project/RCLST/rcslt-looked-after-children-factsheet.pdf>

SLCN and pupil exclusion

- 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:
 - 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.²³
 - 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.²⁴
 - In a study of pupils at risk of exclusion from school, two thirds were found to have speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).²⁵
 - In a study of excluded boys, 100% had undetected communication needs and behavioural issues.²⁶
- Up to 60% of young people in the youth justice estate have communication difficulties,²⁷ with 46-47% of these being in the poor or very poor range²⁸. Many of these individuals have experienced poverty and adverse childhood experiences.
- SLTs can support educational staff in identifying pupils who may have underlying difficulties contributing to underachievement, mental ill health and behaviours at risk of exclusion. Where SLTs are commissioned in the post-primary sector in other parts of the UK, 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.²⁹

Multidisciplinary and joint-working opportunities

- SLTs as core in the multi-disciplinary team within the RISE service, mentioned above. 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

²³ 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

²⁴ 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.

²⁵ 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

²⁶ Ripley, K., & Yuill, N. (2005). Patterns of language impairment and behaviour in boys excluded from school. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 75, 37-50.

²⁷ Bryan K, Freer J, Furlong C. Language and communication difficulties in juvenile offenders. *International Journal of Language and Communication Difficulties* 2007; 42, 505-520.

²⁸ 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).

²⁹ 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>

behavioural issues. Examples of these programmes include ELKLAN³⁰ and Talkboost³¹.

- 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 especially where delayed language and SLCN is overrepresented among their school populations.
- The Limavady Schools project, summarised in appendix A, demonstrates how one principal and community identified SLCN as an issue. They used extended schools money to provide a local solution with excellent results – SLT led interventions improved the percentage of children with age appropriate language skills from 32% to 64%. However, delivering these types of projects depends very much on individual schools and principals’ motivation. They require significant amounts of time to trail blaze new ways of working. Often these cannot be sustained, the Limavady project has since ended.
- The review members will be aware of the increasing focus on oracy and the work in England calling for a renewed focus on oracy teaching³². SLTs, if commissioned, are ideally placed to support the education sector to boost oracy from early years through to post-primary.

RCSLT Recommendation

The review may wish to consider ways to better facilitate local approaches and joint working between schools, communities and health where a need to boost oracy is identified. In addition, what means could be deployed to incentivise, acknowledge and reward schools who are working to address speech, language and communication skills potentially through the inspection regime, professional networks, or others if appropriate.

Identifying and supporting SLCN in post-primary sector

- 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. Particularly as some communication difficulties, such as Developmental language Disorder (which affect around 7% of the population), are lifelong and can be masked by behaviour as discussed above.
- Research for the UK Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) found that teachers believe the transition between primary and secondary school can negatively impact pupils’ vocabulary. Year 7 pupils are exposed to a huge amount of new language, up to 3 or 4 times as many words a day, partly as a result of the increase in “academic vocabulary”, with 43% of pupils identified as having a word gap.³³
- Teachers need support to be able to identify children and young people who may have communication needs as early as possible. However, it is well evidenced that behaviour can

³⁰ More information available here <https://www.elklan.co.uk/information/commissioners-schools/benefits-for-schools>

³¹ More information available here <https://ican.org.uk/training-licensing/i-can-programmes/talk-boost-ks1/>

³² More information available here <https://oracy.inparliament.uk/speak-for-change-inquiry>

³³ Speak for Change Inquiry Final Report (April 2021) - https://oracy.inparliament.uk/sites/oracy.inparliament.uk/files/2021-04/Oracy_APPG_FinalReport_28_04%20%284%29.pdf

mask an underlying communication need. This is borne out in research around the needs of children in contact with the youth justice system where around 60% of children and young people have SLCN.

- It is important to provide a safety net for older children in NI, particularly when considering children from deprived backgrounds given that they experience such high levels of delayed language and SLCN, with potentially lifelong consequences.
- Primary Schools in NI have access to the RISE support service³⁴ which will assess, identify and support pupils with a range of SLCN as well as social and emotional difficulties. However currently in NI there are no commissioned SLT services in a school-setting in the post-primary sector.
- SLCN isn't covered in initial teacher training. RCSLT have worked with both teacher training universities in NI to develop links over a number of years and this has resulted in SLTs providing a guest lecture as part of SEN undergraduate module each year. While this receives excellent feedback, the reach of this input is limited.
- Our members would welcome further commissioned opportunities to work collaboratively with education students to enhance training opportunities for teachers. This would help ensure a child's needs don't go undetected – teachers must be supported to spot the signs of SLCN and know where and when to refer.
- 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, potentially modelled on the existing RISE service.

RCSLT Recommendation

We would urge the review to consider how greater training and development on SLCN for the education workforce might best be achieved in the context of undergraduate or NQP training courses and professional career development.

The review may wish to consider current support available to the post-primary sector for children with possible speech, language and communication needs who are at risk of exclusion. This is particularly relevant in areas / schools with a high percentage of children on free school meals.

3. Special Educational Needs (SEN) and disability

The needs of children with SLCN

³⁴ RISE – the regional integrated service in Education is a well-developed school support service in NI available to nursery and key stage 1-2 primary school pupils.

- Speech, language and communication is one of the most prevalent types of SEN amongst all pupils in Northern Ireland³⁵.
- More than 10% of children and young people have speech, language and communication needs which create barriers to communication or learning in everyday life:
 - 7.6% the equivalent of two children in every primary one classroom will experience developmental language disorder³⁶- a condition where children have problems understanding and, or, using spoken language. There is no obvious reason for these difficulties – no hearing problem or physical disability explains them.
 - 2.3% have language disorders associated with another condition such as autism or hearing impairment.³⁷
- There are 11,000 children in Northern Ireland with a learning disability³⁸. Evidence shows that around 89% of people with a learning disability will require SLT interventions³⁹.

SEN – Challenges

- Challenges in the SEN system and the growth in demand for special school places will be well known to the review. Between 2016 and 2020 the enrolment in special schools had increased by roughly 26%, however investment in SLT staffing has not kept pace with this increase. This has resulted in a widening gap between capacity and demand, with the same number of SLTs supporting growing numbers of children within special schools.
- SLT interventions for children with SEN are most in demand in the nursery and key stage one years. More than 80 – 100% of children in nursery, primary one and primary two in special schools require support for SLCN and/or eating, drinking and swallowing needs, as included in their statement of SEN. The increase in nursery and P1 intake in special schools across Northern Ireland has driven up demand for SLT services exponentially as the youngest children require the most intensive support.
- Currently there is no funded commissioning plan for SLT service provision for children, families and education staff in the additional units attached to mainstream schools and this is of significant concern. There is a mixed model across the region which results in a postcode lottery and an inequity of access to provision and has implications for compliance to SEND legislation.
- A key issue for everyone is both increasing numbers and the complexity of children has greatly increased. The skill mix required to meet the needs of these children for SLTs is much greater now than in previous years and this takes years to develop within the system. We would urge the review

³⁵ Department of Education Special Educational Needs 2017/18 key Statistics available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Special%20educational%20%20needs%202017-18.pdf>

³⁶ 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. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 57(11): 1247-1257.

³⁷ Norbury, C.F., Gooch, D., Wray, C., Baird, G., Charman, T. , Simonoff, E., Vamvakas, A. and Pickles, A (2016) *ibid*

³⁸ Webb &, Kelly (Jan 2018) Mencap NI Briefing Paper No.1. Creating brighter futures: early intervention for young children with a learning disability

³⁹ Bradshaw J (2007). Chapter 6: Between You and Me. *Learning Disabilities Today*. Carnaby S (Ed). Pavilion: Brighton.

panel to consider how health and education together can better plan for SEN children in 5-10 year's time. At present, our members are really concerned that the system isn't set up to do this.

SEN – solutions to improve provision for children with SLCN

- Education commission several services to support schools and children. SEN capacity building should utilise a multidisciplinary approach and SLT is a key part of that.
- Communication access underpins access to the curriculum and an increasing number of children have more complex communication needs, for example, using AAC. Communication systems can take time to establish and more training for education and support staff are required and must be commissioned.
- Supporting children with severe challenging behaviour also requires proper communication support, advice and training for education staff. SLT are a key professional to ensure the best communication environment of these children can support the work being done by other professionals.
- There have been welcome efforts to improve the collaboration between Health and Education around SEN in more recent years. For example, the appointment of AHP SEN coordinators in each Trust, a dedicated AHP / Education lead at the PHA and the inclusion of the Chief Allied Health Professions Officer in a SEN steering group.
- However, it is our members experience that we remain in a place where Health and Education are better at informing each other rather than undertaking strategic integrated population-led planning. We believe there are more opportunities to ensure that traditional boundaries are not a stumbling block to maximising our limited resources to improve SEN support. For example, would it be possible to have strategic SEN planning posts that are jointly funded, jointly reporting to Education and Health structures?

RCSLT Recommendations

We believe there is an urgent need to make improvements in SEN funding, collaboration and strategic planning between health and education bodies in NI so that services to children are maximised, equitable and fit for the future.

The panel should consider the divergence in SEN services across mainstream schools, support units and special schools. What impact this has children and how it can best be ameliorated through greater commissioning of a multidisciplinary workforce

About the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT)

- 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

20,000 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.
- For further information contact Vivienne Fitzroy, RCSLT NI Policy Adviser, Vivienne.fitzroy@me.com

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Appendix a: The Limavady Schools Project summary – a whole community approach to boosting children’s language skills

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 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:

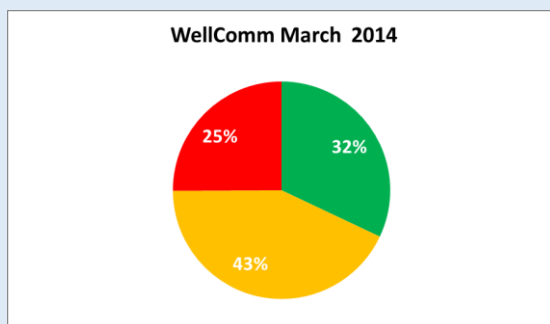
- Green – language developing at an age appropriate level
- Orange – language is delayed
- Red – language is severely delayed

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:

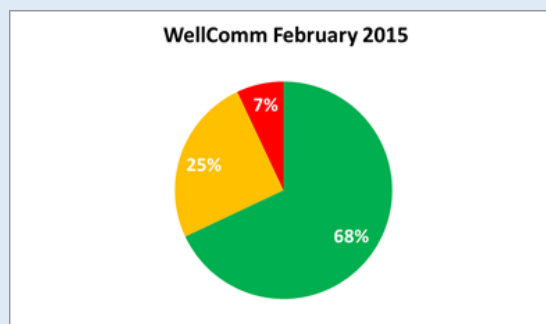
- Whole class language enrichment groups
- Smaller language groups for the more severely delayed children
- Individual therapy – this is generally for children who have previously been discharged from the health centre for non-attendance at clinic.
- Training for parents, teaching assistants and teachers.

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.
