



Briefing ahead of the statement on Early Years Provision: Expansion of Flying Start, 27th September 2022 from the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists in Wales

Key points

- We warmly welcome the expansion of Flying Start. Due to the strong evidence on the relationship between disadvantage and early language delay, the Flying Start programme has prioritised speech, language and communication from its inception with speech and language therapists employed at every Flying Start team.
- We have been concerned for a number of years that many young children living in poverty in Wales have been unable to access the speech, language and communication support offered by Flying Start due to the very targeted nature of the programme and are delighted that coverage will be expanded.
- We are pleased that discussions are also taking place with regards the expansion of the speech and language element of Flying Start as part of the roll out. However *it* is vital that the speech and language therapy workforce in Wales is in place to support this wider roll out. Speech and language therapy commissioning numbers have remained stagnant in Wales since 2020. Wales has less speech and language therapists per head of the population than any other UK nation. This urgently needs addressing so we can ensure we have the right support at the right time to meet children's needs.

Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs) and the Flying Start programme

1. Learning to communicate is one of the core skills children need to develop before starting school. Early language skills play a crucial role in literacy, a child's ability to achieve their educational potential, their social mobility, and their life chances.
2. Research shows that children living in poverty suffer disproportionately from delayed language ([Law, 2013](#)). By this we mean, those children whose language skills are developing significantly more slowly than those of other children of the same age but who do not have a specific disorder. Over **50%** of children in socially deprived areas may start school with impoverished speech, language and communication skills ([Locke, 2002](#)). Language skills are a

critical factor in the intergenerational cycles that can perpetuate poverty, as poor communication skills are passed down from parent to child ([Hart and Risley, 2003](#)).

3. Due to the strong evidence on the relationship between disadvantage and early language delay, the Flying Start programme has prioritised speech, language and communication from its inception. Early language development is a core element of the programme. To support this key strand of work, a speech and language therapist (SLT) was seconded into Welsh Government for six months to write the programme guidance document on speech, language and communication which is soon to be updated. In addition, an SLT has been employed at every Flying Start team in Wales. Part of the role of the therapist is both to upskill the early years workforce in these areas and to improve parents' knowledge and skills to support children's early language development. This strategic approach ensures that;
 - The 'Learning to Talk' key messages are shared with all parents as part of the Flying Start Core Health visiting programme and all parents are made aware of the importance of the home environment on long term speech, language and communication outcomes.
 - All Flying Start childcare staff have an understanding of speech, language and communication development
 - All Flying Start childcare practitioners provide a rich learning environment that fosters language and communication opportunities for all children
4. This relatively small investment in terms of the numbers of SLTs employed is having a huge impact on the outcomes of young children in Flying Start areas as the below example shows.

Bridgend Flying Start

In 2015, the Bridgend Flying Start SLTs won an NHS Wales award for their work in reducing language delay in two and three year olds. The SLTs worked with Flying Start nurseries in Bridgend to achieve a significant reduction in the number of children with delayed language skills. Out of over 600 children screened on starting nursery, **73%** were assessed as having significant language delay, which would impact on future learning development. After the interventions delivered by nursery staff which were planned and supported by the Flying Start Speech and Language Therapists, **68%** of the children with the worst language delay had improved. Further evidence from services across Wales has also highlighted the impact of the investment in Speech and Language Therapy in Flying Start.

5. We have been concerned for a number of years that many young children living in poverty in Wales have been unable to access the speech, language and communication support offered by Flying Start given the relationship between social disadvantage and early language delay. Research from Save the Children suggested that 44% of children from disadvantaged backgrounds lived outside of Flying Start areas ([Save the Children, 2017](#)). We believe the expansion of Flying Start is hugely positive in terms of tackling health inequalities. This is particularly important within the post-pandemic climate in which a growing research body highlights concerns about the impact of COVID and the lockdowns it has entailed on children's speaking and understanding ([ICAN,2021](#)).

- We are pleased that discussions are taking place with regards the expansion of the speech and language element of Flying Start. It is vital that the speech and language therapy workforce in Wales is in place to support this wider roll out. We are very concerned that Speech and language therapy student commissioning numbers have remained stagnant in Wales for the last three years. Wales has less speech and language therapists per head of the population than any other UK nation. This urgently needs addressing so we can ensure we have the right support at the right time to meet children's needs.

Further information

We would be happy to provide further information if this would be of benefit. Please see below our contact details.

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