

Health, Social Care and Sport Committee
Inquiry into the Health And Wellbeing of Children And Young People
RCSLT response

What are the key issues around health and wellbeing for children and young people in Scotland?

Speech, language and communication (SLC) ability plays a crucial role in health and wellbeing outcomes for children and young people. Throughout life, SLC is the foundation of attachment, relationships, mental health, learning, equality and human rights - including rights of the child. It determines personal safety, social and emotional health and wellbeing, activity, achievement, attainment, responsibility and inclusion.

Yet we have found that speech, language and communication difficulties are the most common developmental challenges in children and young people. It affects 50% of those starting school who live in financial poverty – at least three in every classroom, 60% of young people in contact with the justice system, and 80% of young people not in education, employment or training.

Speech, language and communication is fundamental to a child or young person enjoying Article 12 of the United Convention on the Rights of the Child: “Every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously. This right applies at all times, for example during immigration proceedings, housing decisions or the child’s day-to-day home life.”

What are the current challenges with improving the health and wellbeing of children and young people over the next 5 years?

Evidence shows that the COVID-19 crisis has had a significant impact on children and young people, particularly those in poverty and children with additional support needs. The pandemic has greatly impacted on the quality of children’s environments and their wellbeing.

Data from numerous studies shows that the pandemic has had a significant impact on children's communication abilities.

COVID-19 has exacerbated factors which will negatively impact on children’s communication skills, including

- deterioration of mental health for some parents
- reduced opportunities for interaction
- increased screen time
- loss of play
- increased prevalence of adverse childhood experiences
- significantly reduced access to communication supporting environments (such as school)
- reduced access to SLC support services including speech and language therapy – particularly for families who experience digital exclusion. This could be because of parents’ own communication disadvantages.

To recover, Scotland’s children and young people need a joined up, strategic approach to the development of their communication more than ever. Speech and language therapists are well positioned to identify communication difficulties and are key agents of change in this area, however

there are very significant workforce challenges for the profession in Scotland, particularly related to underfunding for posts and significant lack of graduates.

What offers the best opportunity for improving the health and wellbeing of children and young people over the next 5 years?

A national speech, language and communication strategy would ensure every child and young person develops the best SLC skills they can for a happy and successful life.

This would involve children, young people, families, health, education, justice and social care agencies co-producing and implementing a cohesive and comprehensive national strategy focused on making sure every child develops the very best speech, language and communication skills possible.

Although speech, language and communication needs are one of the most common developmental concerns identified by health visitors and education staff, it is possible, with the right support, to demonstrate significant improvements that will have a lasting impact on children's wellbeing, attainment and future life chances.

We would also advocate for speech and language therapy (SLT) services to be granted access to mental health funding. This would allow for SLT services to prevent and mitigate escalation of mental health concerns, and enable the creation of environments within the home and education settings that support improved communication, mental health and wellbeing.

How does addressing poverty lead to improved health and social care outcomes?

In our experience, health and social care outcomes are inextricably linked with the need to address poverty and the harms associated with inequality in society. The best way to improve outcomes for every child is to address the root causes of speech, language and communication difficulties and the evidence continues to point to the disadvantage of growing up in poverty.

Millions are spent on poor health and well-being outcomes, inequalities, youth crime and unemployment and disengagement from education. Evidence from the Pupil Equity Fund and Attainment Challenge shows a comprehensive strategy such as the one we propose would greatly reduce demand on these budgets.