



Spoken Language and Communication Coalition's Submission to the Labour Policy Forum Commission on "Public services that work from the start"

March 2023

The centrality of spoken language

We hope that a Labour government would recognise the centrality of spoken language and communication to children's attainment and life chances. Any new government must ensure that children and young people's education recovers following the pandemic, while also finally addressing the negative impact of poorer spoken language that has existed for far too long, especially in areas of social disadvantage. We urge the Labour party to seize this opportunity, so all children and young people are able to achieve their potential, both in school and life.

Why this matters

There have been long-term challenges with developing children's spoken language skills and with supporting children and young people with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). These existed before the pandemic but the need has only grown as a result of lockdowns and their effect on children and young people's development.

We know the scale of the challenge from the DfE's own statistics:

- In 2019, 27% of children finished their reception year without the early communication and reading skills that were deemed necessary by DfE to thrive (Expected Level by Early Learning Goal 2019). That's 8 in every classroom.
- 22.5% of pupils with special needs in England have Speech, Language and Communication Needs as their primary need, the largest category of special need within the SEN Support system. This number has been steadily rising (DfE 2021).

In addition:

- **one in ten** children have a long-term speech, language and communication need (SLCN).
- **1.7 million** children and young people struggling with talking and understanding words.¹

¹ <https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/media/4287/1-point-7-million-young-futures.pdf>

- as many as **50% of children in areas of social disadvantage** start school with language difficulties.
- **7% of all children** have a lifelong condition called Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) which reduces their ability to understand and express language.

We also know from polling conducted for a recent report by the Centre for Social Justice that:

- two-thirds of primary school teachers said a lack of support for children with speech, language and communication needs was the biggest barrier to pupils gaining expected levels in foundational skills post-pandemic. This concern was especially prevalent in areas of higher deprivation and in schools rated below Outstanding
- 68% of head teachers use a local NHS or out-of-school speech therapist service for speech and language support in their school, often with a long waiting list, and only 15% of teachers say there is an in-school speech and language therapist for pupils to access
- four-in-five teachers say that demand for speech and language needs support has increased post pandemic. The majority of teachers and headteachers say they cannot meet this demand with current provision, and just 8 per cent of teachers said their school had a clear plan on how to meet this demand².

What needs to change

It is vital that developing children's spoken language and communication forms a key pillar of any future government's efforts to recover children's education following the pandemic, and longer-term strategies to close the attainment gap, including:

- Recognising that spoken language is at the heart of developing and improving literacy and numeracy;
- Building on efforts to address the language gap in the Early Years by a sustained focus on spoken language across all ages stages of education;
- Ensuring children with persistent spoken language and communication difficulties receive the support they need, including identifying those difficulties in the first instance.
- Supporting teachers and schools to develop their students' spoken language and embed the statutory spoken language requirements through high quality guidance, training and resources;
- Better targeting of catch-up support towards speech and language development.

Further information

For more information, please contact

- Rebecca Earnshaw at Voice 21: becky@voice21.org
- Peter Just at RCSLT: peter.just@rcslt.org
- George Carr at Speech and Language UK: George.carr@speechandlanguage.org.uk

² <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/CSJ-Cracks-in-our-Foundations.pdf>