

**Specialist workforce for children with special educational needs and disabilities**  
**Westminster Hall debate: Wednesday 22nd March 2023**  
**Briefing on access to speech and language therapy**

**Summary**

- There are significant challenges for children and young people who need support from speech and language therapy.
- These challenges have existed for many years, but have been made worse by the pandemic.
- Services are under-resourced, the need for support is increasing, and there are not enough speech and language therapists to meet that need.
- While the Government has made some positive commitments in the SEND and AP Improvement Plan, more action is needed.

**1. Current access to speech and language therapy**

- There are currently long waiting lists to access speech and language therapy in many areas – NHS England figures show that in January 2023, 67,774 children were on a waiting list for speech and language therapy – 35% of these (almost 24,000) have been waiting more than 18 weeks.<sup>1</sup>
- When children reach the front of the waiting list and have their first appointment, they often find there is an additional wait before they receive the specialist support they need. In some areas, the pressure to reduce waiting lists has resulted in the therapy offer being reduced, and children may receive very little speech and language therapy. This does not improve outcomes for children, and is demoralising for speech and language therapists.
- The Ofsted annual report for 2021/22 echoed these points:  
“There are also longer waiting lists for health services such as... speech and language therapy. Even when children and young people have been able to access services, the service has often been interrupted or scaled back.”<sup>2</sup>

**2. The speech and language therapy workforce**

- There are simply not enough speech and language therapists to meet current and future demand. As recognised by the NHS, speech and language therapy is a profession in short supply.<sup>3</sup>
- Managers of speech and language therapy services are telling the RCSLT that staff vacancy rates have risen to levels that they have never seen before.
- The RCSLT has recently conducted a survey of its members on vacancy rates and recruitment issues, and will publish the findings shortly.

### **3. Background to the issue**

- Problems with access to speech and language therapy for children and young people go back many years, due to services being under resourced, while the need for support for children's communication has increased.
- Since 2014/15, the number of children and young people with speech, language and communication needs as an identified special educational need has increased from 225,245 to 319,757 in 2021/22 – that's an additional 94,000 children, and an increase of nearly 42%.<sup>4</sup> Neither funding, nor the number of speech and language therapists, has kept up.
- The situation we see today was also highlighted by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission in their 2017 report<sup>5</sup>:

“Too often, therapy services were too overstretched to deliver what was needed in their local areas...Typically, services were being reduced because of challenges to funding and difficulties in filling vacant posts. This funding did not keep up with the rising number of referrals. This led to unacceptably long waiting times for the children and young people and their families.”
- An independent review of provision for children with speech, language and communication needs conducted by the RCSLT with and the charity Speech and Language UK (formerly I CAN) and published in 2018<sup>6</sup> found that:
  - only 15% of people felt speech and language therapy was available as required in their local area.
  - more than half of parents and carers had to wait longer than six months for their child to get the help they needed, with a third waiting over a year.
- In 2019, the Office of the Children's Commissioner published a report which examined the amount spent on speech and language therapy for children aged 0-17<sup>7</sup>. The report's findings included:
  - Over half (57%) of areas in England had seen a real-terms reduction in spending on speech and language therapy over the last three years.
  - Enormous variation in spending between areas in England, with the top 25% spending at least £16.35 per child, and the bottom 25% spending 58p or less per child.
- The Education Select Committee's report on Special Educational Needs and Disabilities in 2019 highlighted that speech and language therapy “seemed to be a particular challenge” and that “many therapies, including speech and language therapy, were not being provided or difficult to access, even for schools.”<sup>8</sup>

### **4. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these existing problems, creating a perfect storm for children's speech and language therapy services.

#### **4.1 Impact on children receiving speech and language therapy**

- COVID-19 meant less therapy for children and young people who were receiving it prior to the pandemic, as a result of setting closures, COVID restrictions and redeployment of staff.
- Between November 2020 and February 2021, the RCSLT conducted a survey of people's experiences of accessing speech and language therapy during the first UK-wide lockdown (March–June 2020). Of those who responded on behalf of a child or young person, 81% said they received less speech and language therapy during lockdown, with 62% not receiving any.<sup>9</sup>

#### **4.2 Impact on children's development and the need for support**

- There is increasing evidence to suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on children's development. Children of all ages have had reduced opportunities to interact with others to develop essential skills in speech, language and communication, with the greatest impact on children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
  - A survey by the First 1001 Days Movement and the Institute of Health Visiting found that 92.4% of respondents said that the pandemic has had an ongoing negative or very negative impact on the communication, speech and language skills of young children who were growing up during the pandemic.<sup>10</sup>
  - National data published by the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities shows that in 2021/22, 13.8% of children were below the expected level in communication skills at their 2 to 2 and a half year review.<sup>11</sup> In 2019/20 this figure was 11.1%.<sup>12</sup>
  - A survey by the Centre for Social Justice found that 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.<sup>13</sup>

#### **4.3 Impact on services and the profession**

- The RCSLT undertook a survey of its members in October 2021 to provide evidence for the sustained impact of the pandemic on the demand placed upon speech and language therapy services.<sup>14</sup>
  - More than three quarters (77.1%) of speech and language therapists reported that the demand on their service had increased since before the pandemic, with over a quarter of these (28.6%) indicating that the demand 'had at least doubled'.
  - Longer waiting times for service users were identified as the most common consequences of a surge in demand. SLTs also reported a substantial negative impact of this on their own mental wellbeing.
  - The critical factors contributing to the increased levels of demand across the system included addressing the backlog that accrued in the initial pandemic response, and the consequences of the redeployment of speech and language therapists to support that urgent response.

#### **4 Why does it matter?**

- The ability to communicate is a fundamental life skill for children. It directly impacts on their ability to learn, to develop friendships and on their future life chances.<sup>15</sup>
- 10% of all children and young people have a long-term speech, language and communication need. Without support, these young people are at higher risk of mental health problems, exclusion from school and potential involvement in the criminal justice system.<sup>16</sup>
- Speech and language therapy makes a difference – in the survey about people’s experiences of accessing speech and language therapy during lockdown, 76% of respondents’ said speech and language therapy made their child’s life better.<sup>17</sup>

#### **5 What do speech and language therapists do?**

- Speech and language therapists provide life improving care for people of all ages who have speech, language and communication needs and/or have difficulties with eating, drinking and swallowing (dysphagia).
- Speech and language therapists have specialist knowledge and skills regarding children’s speech, language and communication development, which mean they also have a key role in enabling universal approaches to supporting speech and language development for all children, and planning targeted interventions for those at increased risk.

#### **6 What is the government already doing?**

The Department for Education’s SEND and AP Improvement Plan<sup>18</sup> made a number of announcements which are steps towards improving access to speech and language therapy for children and young people with SEND:

- A new commitment has been made for a joint Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care approach to SEND workforce planning, which is due to complete by 2025.
- The Early Language and Support for Every Child (ELSEC) Pathfinders will focus on improving earlier identification and support for children with SLCN. The RCSLT is pleased to have been part of early discussions with NHS England and the Department for Education in the scoping of this project, and look forward to continuing to work in partnership as the Pathfinders are developed.
- The extension of the Alternative Provision Specialist Taskforce (APST) project which increases access to speech and language therapy for pupils in the alternative provision schools which are taking part in the project.

#### **7 What more needs to happen?**

- The SEND Workforce Plan must be accompanied by sufficient funding to ensure the required speech and language therapy workforce is trained, developed, retained, supervised and supported to develop clinical specialisms and leadership roles.
- This includes increasing student numbers, as well as taking action to address the reasons why some speech and language therapists are leaving the NHS and the profession altogether.

- There must be clear expectations and accountability on local systems to jointly commission and resource the appropriate level of speech and language therapy to ensure all children and young people with SEND and speech, language and communication needs and/or swallowing needs get timely access to the speech and language therapy they require. This must include provision for children and young people on SEN Support as well as those with education, health and care plans.

## More information

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