

Response from the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists to the HEIW Education and Training Plan

Key points

- We are calling for an increase in commissioning number for speech and language therapists (SLTs) in Wales in 2024-25 and better workforce planning for the profession in Wales as part of an AHP workforce plan.
- HEIW have kept commissioning figures for speech and language therapy at 49 for a third consecutive year in the HEIW Education and Training Plan (ETP) despite the commencement of a second undergraduate course at Wrexham Glyndwr University with only ten places. We have significant concerns about the viability of such a small course despite high demand.
- There are fewer SLTs per head of population in Wales than any other part of the UK, as reflected in our membership data. All other parts of the UK are increasing student SLT numbers.
- We understand the importance of IMTP figures from local health boards to the process for determining commissioning numbers but given planning processes and the requirement to work within current budgets, we are concerned that these figures do not fully take account of the future workforce needs for the profession.
- There are a number of important policy developments which we believe need to be considered in deciding commissioning numbers for the profession for 2024-25.
- We would be very keen to meet with HEIW officials to discuss workforce planning for SLTs in Wales and more broadly the need for an AHP workforce plan.

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

RCSLT is the professional body for speech and language therapists (SLTs), speech and language therapy students and support workers working in the UK. The RCSLT has 20,000 members in the UK (650 in Wales) representing approximately 95% of SLTs working in the UK (who are registered with the Health & Care Professions Council). We promote excellence in practice and influence health, education, care and justice policies.

Background

Commissioning places for speech and language therapy have remained at 49 since 2020. A second undergraduate course commenced in September 2022 at Wrexham Glyndwr University with only ten places. At the same time, there was a reduction of the commissioned places at Cardiff Metropolitan University. We have significant concerns

about the viability of such a small course in Wrexham. Also, that we are not training the same number in Cardiff Met as previously, neither course is at capacity for teaching work.

We are aware that other AHPs have seen significant growth in commissioning numbers over recent years.

Profession	Number of commissioned spaces in 2022/23	Number of commissioned spaces in 2023/24	Percentage increase
Dietetics	66	82	24.2%
Occupational therapy	179	197	10%
Physiotherapy	174	180	3.4%
Paramedics	116	120	3.4%
PhD Clinical Psychology	36	40	11.1%

Source: <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/inline-documents/2023-02/Annex%20A.pdf>

We are also aware that student places have increased significantly in other nations. For example, Northern Ireland have announced a 18% increase in commissioned spaces and RCSLT membership records suggest that the number of SLTs qualifying in England has doubled in the last decade. **Our membership data reveals that there are fewer speech and language therapists per head of the population in Wales than any other part of the UK.**

We are uncertain of the rationale for speech and language therapy places remaining static despite the advent of a second course and range of policy developments.

The case for increasing commissioning numbers for speech and language therapy

1. Current recruitment challenges

Speech and language therapy is currently female dominated and part-time working is very common. Locum supply is an issue in a number of areas and there is a pressing need for greater diversity within the workforce to meet the needs of our population. Anecdotal evidence suggests several earlier retirements than expected in recent years and a number of SLTs moving into leadership and wider roles beyond the profession but using all the skills of the profession. Our intelligence suggests that the current newly qualified workforce differs significantly from previous cohorts with a high proportion indicating that they wish to work part-time earlier in their careers than previously seen.

The introduction of the streamlining programme has in a number of areas exacerbated recruitment challenges, especially in North Wales. We will be publishing vacancy data from a survey conducted across the UK later this month but early indications suggest that vacancies in Wales stand at 11% for paediatric services and 15% for adults services but with some services having much higher vacancy rates than others.

Given this intelligence, we believe an AHP workforce plan, as being developed for other professions such as pharmacy and nursing, is required so that we have greater data on the current composition of the workforce and modelling for the future. We believe this will also indicate the need for an increase in commissioning number for our profession

2. Increasing demand for speech and language therapy services and complexity of service users post-COVID

A number of reports highlight the impact of COVID on speech, language and communication skills (ICAN, 2021, Hendry et al, 2022). This has also been highlighted as an area of concern for Estyn in their annual report (2020-21). This has been recognised by Welsh Government with the allocation of additional funding for children's speech and language therapy services from 2020-24.

Waiting lists for speech and language therapy services post COVID are historically high. Local Health Boards report that demand has increased by 30 and in some cases 50% and complexity of presentation has increased significantly.

3. Key policy developments which will influence the demand for speech and language therapy

Expansion of Flying Start and the Early Years Integration Transformation programme (EYITP)

Early speech and language is one of the four pillars within the Flying Start programme. Modelling is currently being undertaken by Welsh Government on SLT capacity to support the rollout. Welsh Government have not yet been in a position to share this data but it should be available shortly.

The EYITP (pathfinders) is due to be expanded across Wales. Many stakeholders have recognised speech, language and communication as an important area of priority for the pathfinders as evidenced in the recent [evaluation](#) of the programme.

Mental capacity

The Welsh Government and UK Government consultations on the Liberty Protections Safeguards adds SLTs to the list of designated Approved Mental Capacity Professionals under proposed changes to the law. This is a significant change and is likely to have

workforce implications as we have highlighted in our response to the Welsh Government consultation (which is available [here](#)). We understand that Welsh Government is currently modelling workforce implications for all professions including speech and language therapy.

Mental health

The new HEIW [Strategic Mental Health Workforce plan](#) makes a number of recommendations on new AHP roles and pathfinders. We have made a strong case for SLTs to be included in these new roles given the link between mental health and communication and swallowing difficulties. We will be seeking to influence the HEIW future mental health workforce report which we understand will include service models and demand capacity modelling.

We have also been involved in influencing the draft Mental Health bill at a UK level and have been calling for the responsible/approved clinician role to be extended to SLTs. Both developments have potential workforce implications.

Youth Justice

The Senedd Equality and Social Justice Committee held a spotlight inquiry to help provide a better understanding of the extent of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) amongst young people who have offended or are at risk of offending in Wales. We strongly suggest this will lead to recommendations to increase the numbers of SLTs in youth justice settings as recommended by a Senedd committee a decade ago (Communications and Culture Committee, 2010). Prior to the inquiry, NHS Managers across Wales were also negotiating with Youth Justice Services about SLTs being embedded in their teams and new roles have already been agreed.

Dementia

Following the [Welsh Government Dementia Action Plan](#) reference to the importance of 'ensuring communication support including speech and language therapy' as part of multi-disciplinary teams supporting people with dementia, we have seen a significant increase in the numbers of SLTs working within dementia services. A recent survey of SLTs working in Dementia (2022) stated an ongoing inequality of services to people living with dementia across Wales. We are of the view that this will remain a growth area for the profession.

Cancer

The recent [Royal College of Physicians report, Cancer on the Front Line – the future of Acute Oncology services](#) highlight a number of good practice examples where SLTs have played key roles in multi-disciplinary teams and makes clear recommendations to 'invest in and expand the numbers of specialist allied health professionals (AHPs)

working in Acute Oncology Services. This is echoed in the recent [Welsh Government Cancer Improvement Plan for NHS Wales](#) which has an action to 'provide equal access to Acute Oncology Services teams'. We believe cancer will be a growth area for the profession.

Increased funding for AHPs in the community

In January 2023, the Minister announced £5 million recurrent investment in AHPs in the community. SLTs have a key role to play in supporting people with communication and swallowing difficulties to live well at home. A number of new models of working are being developed across Local Health Boards, such as working at the front door of hospitals to reduce admissions. However, health board IMTP figures were submitted prior to this announcement.

Welsh Language considerations

Speech and language therapy is highlighted as a priority area within the recently revised More than Just Words: The Welsh Government plan for providing health and care services through the medium of Welsh and a key action under the section Welsh language planning and policies includes 'establishing Welsh language care pathways for vulnerable individuals in identified priority groups such as older people, children, mental health, speech therapy, learning difficulties, and stroke services'.

RCSLT guidelines clearly state that speech and language therapy intervention should be provided in the individual's mother tongue and support the family in their use of mother tongue when necessary/appropriate. There is a clear clinical rationale for the availability of Welsh language speech and language therapy and as a college, we are committed to supporting improvements in this area. Ensuring an adequate supply of Welsh speaking newly qualified practitioners is clearly a key priority in ensuring the availability of Welsh language services.

Health Care Support Worker (HCSW) Development – we are keen to understand how the new ETP will address the need to take from clinical time to deliver and assess qualifications by HCSWs, especially in a 'Once for Wales' way. This is very significant for smaller professions such as ours.

Enablers to increasing commissioned spaces

High demand for speech and language therapy courses

Intelligence gathering from higher education institutions in Wales suggests there is a high demand for the speech and language therapy course. Cardiff Metropolitan University received 250 applicants for 39 places. Wrexham Glyndwr University received 70 applicants for 10 places. We do not anticipate that we would struggle to fill an increased number of commissioned spaces.

Placement capacity

We are aware that placement capacity has been a limiting factor for a number of professions over the years including speech and language therapy. We are planning a placement summit in 2023 and have approached Dr. Sarah Elliot, AHP Transformation Lead in HEIW to support us with this event given her background in supporting the sustainability of placement models. The summit will bring together HEIs, NHS managers, private sector colleagues and explore public health opportunities.

Conclusion

We hope this paper has been helpful in setting out the rationale for increasing the commissioning numbers for speech and language therapy. We would be very keen to have the opportunity meet with HEIW to discuss workforce planning for speech and language therapists in Wales and more broadly the need for an AHP workforce plan.

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