**Speech by Irma Donaldson**

**Deputy Chair, RCSLT**

I am honoured to stand before you today not only as the Deputy Chair of Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, but also, like you, as an advocate for people who communicate differently or with difficulty.

I want first to thank Saqib, Chris, and Mikey for working with us on this event. We are very grateful.

As we all know, in a world driven by communication, it is imperative that we shed light on the challenges faced by people who communicate differently or with difficulty - and emphasise the critical role that they themselves, parents and carers, and speech and language therapists play in their journey towards effective communication.

Speech and language difficulties affect the very fabric of our society. It is estimated that over 10% of children in the UK have some form of communication difference of difficulty. These challenges often go unnoticed or underdiagnosed, potentially leading to a lifetime of struggles that impact not only the individual, but also their families, friends, and our entire community.

This event serves as a platform to underscore the importance of collaboration between parents and speech and language therapists. We must recognise and appreciate the essential contributions of both parties.

Parents witness firsthand the daily triumphs and challenges their children face. They provide the much-needed reinforcement, the at-home practice, and the encouragement that keeps the momentum going.

On the other hand, speech and language therapists bring expertise, strategies, and therapies tailored to each individual’s needs, guiding them through the complexities of language and communication.

However, this partnership continues beyond parents and speech and language therapists. It extends to all of us here - educators, policymakers, legislators - to collaborate closely and create an environment where people who communicate differently or with difficulty can thrive.

We must ensure that resources are accessible, that the specialist workforce is funded, and that awareness campaigns reach every corner of our nation. Only then can we hope to create an inclusive society where every voice is valued and heard.

Thank you for your attention, and I look forward to the productive discussions and actions that will emerge from this event. Together, we can make a difference. And on that note, I am delighted to hand over to our event host, Saqib Bhatti.

Thank you.