



RCSLT Wales submission to the Welsh Conservatives health roundtable

Dear Russell,

Thank you for the opportunity to be part of the Welsh Conservatives health roundtable in January. Please find attached a short paper with key points which we believe it may be helpful to consider. We are particularly interested in the themes around workforce retention, training and career progression and recruitment. We also endorse the paper produced by the Royal College of Occupational Therapists in Wales.

About the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (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 22,000 members in the UK (circa 650 in Wales) representing approximately 95% of SLTs working in the UK (who are registered with the Health & Care Professions Council). We support speech and language therapists by providing leadership, setting professional standards, facilitating research, promoting better education, and training.

Workforce retention, training, and career progression

Retention

There are fewer SLTs per head of population in Wales than any other part of the UK, as reflected in our membership data. Speech and language therapy is currently female dominated and part-time working is very common. Our latest member data suggests that over 40% of members work less than full-time. 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. 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 (the two year tie-in for students in receipt of the NHS Wales bursary) has in a number of areas exacerbated recruitment challenges, especially in North Wales. We have recently published vacancy data from a survey conducted across the UK earlier this year which reveals that vacancies in Wales stand at 11% for paediatric services and 15% for adults services but with some services, particularly in more rural areas, facing much higher

vacancy rates. Of the managers who responded to the survey, **96%** of children services managers and **90%** of adult services managers said recruitment is more or much more challenging than at any time in the last three years.

We are concerned that the current paucity of data on Allied Health Professionals (AHPs) in terms of where they are based, specifics around their roles and Welsh language skills negatively affects the ability to effectively utilise professions, ensure vacancies are filled, and provide insight for future workforce planning.

Recommendation: an AHP workforce plan, as being developed for other professions such as pharmacy and nursing, is urgently 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.

Training

We have been calling for an increase in commissioning number for speech and language therapists (SLTs) and better workforce planning for the profession in Wales for a number of years.

Commissioning places for speech and language therapy have remained stagnant 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. It is also a concern that we are not training the same number in Cardiff Met as previously, neither course is at capacity for teaching work despite high demand for both courses.

We are aware that student places have increased significantly in other nations. For example, RCSLT membership records suggest that the number of SLTs qualifying in England has doubled in the last decade.

We query the rationale for speech and language therapy places remaining static over a number of years despite the advent of a second course and range of policy developments including the expansion of Flying Start, recommendations from the Youth Justice inquiry by the Equalities and Social Justice Committee and changes to stroke reporting arrangements.

Recommendation: Commit to increase the number of speech and language therapists training in Wales.

Workforce planning

We believe our workforce challenges and those of other AHPs are significantly affected by the lack of long-term workforce planning by HEIW (at least 5-10 years). We understand the importance of Integrated Medium Term Plan (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 of smaller professions. We also question the extent to which horizon scanning includes discussions with education and social care.

Recommendation: Introduce a long-term workforce plan based on an independent assessment of how many health and social care staff we need now and in the future. This should include the need for local health boards to plan the workforce across NHS boundaries covering all sectors, so professions do not fall through gaps of definition. The national workforce plan must be accompanied by sufficient funding.

Career progression

In response to recruitment challenges, especially in more rural areas, we believe strongly that HEIW should prioritise developing alternative routes into professions. There is good learning from developments in England with regards to apprenticeship models. Such an approach would also require a change in thinking from Welsh Government with regards the apprenticeship levy.

It is extremely important that the skills mix is right in order to deliver safe and effective outcomes for patients. We are supportive of the support workers level 4 apprentice currently under development and are keen to see further detail on how the support workforce needs to grow, a career development framework put in place, and investment made in the development of this workforce. As professional bodies, this is a key area of focus for us and we are keen to support developments in this area.

At the other end of the spectrum, we need to do more to retain speech and language therapists and to support their continuing professional development. This includes removing barriers preventing AHPs being able to develop their skills – for example, pressing on the UK Government to start the process of extending independent prescribing responsibilities to AHPs so they can deliver better care for their patients and investing in more advanced roles, particularly within the community. We also need to see investment in advanced practice and consultant roles to enable AHPs to work at the top of their licence.

Recommendations: Press for apprenticeships to be available across AHPs to widen access routes.
Sustained investment in the support worker workforce.
Focus on Continuous Professional Development as a retention tool.
Increase availability of advanced AHP roles.

Further information

We hope this briefing is of interest. Please do not hesitate to contact us should you require further information.

Yours sincerely

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