



RCSLT Wales response to the research into ‘good access’ into community pharmacy, NHS dentistry and Allied Health Professional services

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the recently published research on access into allied health professional services.

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 (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.

In our response, we raise several queries about the research methodology and give several examples of improved access to speech and language therapy in Wales which we hope may be helpful for further discussions.

Methodology

Whilst understanding that Allied Health Professions are a broad grouping of 13 professions, we were disappointed that none of the focus group participants had accessed speech and language therapy over the last two years. Access routes to speech and language therapy across Wales may differ significantly from those referenced within the report. Whilst routes for access do include GPs and do often follow the receipt of secondary care, several other common routes exist including health visitors, schools, early years settings. Increasingly speech and language therapy services in Wales offer open access provision and self-referral options.

We also feel that an opportunity may have been lost by the decision not to include allied health professional body representatives in the scoping interviews for the research. We believe as UK-wide bodies with a remit to promote research and provide leadership, we could have provided useful insights at an early stage.

We welcome the report recommendations that further research needs to be undertaken into the different AHP services and that a wider range of access routes to AHPs needs to be provided. We hope the three examples below give an insight into how our profession is seeking to widen access and offer different modes of provision. We would be keen to contribute to any further research in this area.

Examples of direct access to speech and language therapy

The Enhanced Community Services for Care Home Residents by Allied Health Professionals project in Bridgend

As part of this 2022 Advanced Healthcare Award-winning project, a number of care homes in Bridgend have been part of a digital trial. Difficulties with swallowing (dysphagia) are known to precipitate malnutrition and affect compliance with medication which significantly affects the health of residents in care homes. Before this trial, following GP referral, Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs), Dietitians and Pharmacists provided separate home visits, with residents needing to be referred to all three professions, be on three different waitlists, and attend three separate appointments. While waiting for these appointments, residents often continued to deteriorate, resulting in poor experiences and outcomes.

The goals of this pilot project are to improve individual care experiences by reducing waiting times and receiving seamless, integrated care from multiple professionals, and to assess equity of care to elderly residents in care homes with complex and chronic health issues when using digital technology. Under the project, care homes refer directly to the team and residents now join one virtual session with an integrated team who agree on the next phase of care. This new approach, not delivered anywhere else in Wales or the UK, has directly resulted in fewer hospital admissions, and appointment waiting times for residents reduced by 75%. The project team anticipates annual savings of £8.3k, and an increase in capacity in community services by being able to see 100 more patients a year using this digital approach. In turn, this has reduced the number of unwarranted hospital admissions of care home residents in the Bridgend area by 360 bed days.

The project is now being rolled out across other care homes in Bridgend and further afield.

Preschool Speech and Language Therapy Preventative Pathway

Swansea Bay University Health Board won the 2019 Advancing Healthcare Wales award for improving public health outcomes for creating a supportive, tested and accessible service for children.

Evidence suggest that 50% of children living in poverty start school with speech, language and communication needs (Locke, 2002). The preschool Speech and Language Therapy Preventative Pathway was created to promote school readiness by increasing the knowledge of parents and carers as a preventative to ensure earlier identification and treatment of any speech and language communication difficulties. The pathway provides weekly 'talk-in' sessions held in each primary care cluster – here parents or carers have access and can book 15 minute slots with a registered speech and language therapist without the need for a referral. This allows parents to speak to a professional about their concerns for their children and enables the SLT to offer advice for improved child interactions, reassurance or to arrange for a specialist assessment at one of the community clinics if required.

Immediate results showed that parents concerns are validated quickly, rating the service highly and 50% of children seen have not required escalation to more specialist services. The implementation of this new service model has also addressed the time heavy issues of the old service, where the team were experiencing increasing referral numbers and the traditional clinic was inflexible. This new model has seen increased staff satisfaction as well as seeing improved outcomes for the children and families.

The Aneurin Bevan University Health Board adult outpatients request for helpline

The Aneurin Bevan University Health Board adult outpatients service provides an open access via telephone Request for Help Line (RFHL) open at designated times - Monday-Friday. This can be accessed via the patients, a family member/carer, or if that is not possible another healthcare professional. Referral does not need to come from a medic. The RFHL is staffed by a specialist SLT who are able to listen to the concerns of the person requesting help, and subsequently advise on how best SLT can manage the impact of communication and swallowing needs, provide interim advice to manage risk, offer follow up person centred intervention as appropriate and if necessary, signpost to other services.

Further information

We would be happy to be contacted to discuss this submission further.

Yours sincerely,

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