



**The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists
Response to the Buckland Review of Autism Employment, 30 May 2023**

1. About the RCSLT

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, with more than 20,000 members across the UK.

SLTs work with and support people of all ages who have speech, language and communication needs and difficulties with eating, drinking and swallowing (dysphagia). They also work with families and carers, and other professionals. SLTs work across a range of settings – including health, social care, education, and justice.

2. How speech and language therapy supports autistic people

There is no typical autistic person. Each autistic person has their own personality, strengths and differences and there is variation in the impact these have on a person's day to day experiences and life in general.

All autistic people have language and communication differences, the impact of these varies from individual to individual. These communication differences can put a person at increased risk of mental illness, difficulties with learning, reduced employment prospects and reduced social and leisure opportunities.

Speech and language therapists have expertise across the lifespan, covering speech and language, social communication and understanding, and eating and drinking. Speech and language therapists diagnose, assess and support autistic people to maximise engagement, involvement and inclusion.

Speech and language therapists will play a role in the diagnosis, assessment and management of autism, including:

- Forming part of a diagnostic team, contributing to differential diagnosis and to identifying co-occurring conditions relating to speech, language and communication (see NICE guidance CG128, CG142). This is important for accurate diagnosis and identification of needs.
- Maximising opportunities for individuals to develop their receptive and expressive communication skills.
- Supporting the person and/or their family/caregivers to better understand their diagnosis and develop strategies.
- Delivering interventions and/or developing programmes and supporting others to implement them as part of a multi-disciplinary approach.
- Working with the individual, their families, schools, workplaces as well as other professionals and support staff to identify and support the individual's communication preferences.

- Advise on reasonable adjustments including the use of visual supports, managing the sensory environment, making the environment predictable and reliable and ensuring others understand the communication needs of the autistic person including making adjustments to their own use of language and interaction style.

Speech and language therapy supports autistic people to:

- have their communication, language and eating needs identified early.
- express themselves, be understood and understand others to participate in their everyday life.

The number of speech and language therapists in a service is variable but the numbers employed by the NHS typically decrease from early childhood to adulthood.

- Autistic children and young people can access speech and language therapy via the NHS, education authorities or schools.
- If a young person does not have a learning disability, adult services (including speech and language therapy) may only be available if they have mental health needs or if they stammer.
- In adult services currently, there are specialist speech and language therapy services that sit within learning disability services, services in criminal justice liaison and diversion, mental health services and inpatient/acute services.

Autism Review questions

The following information is based on feedback from SLTs who work with autistic people as well as neurodivergent SLTs themselves. We thank our members for their honesty and sharing their insight.

3. How recruitment practices can be adjusted to meet the needs of autistic applicants?

Recruitment and selection processes need to be neuro-inclusive, avoid the risk of conscious and unconscious bias and ensure for a fair and transparent process. Traditional recruitment processes can make it difficult for people to present the best version of themselves. Due to differences in social interactions and communication, job interviews may be challenging for autistic people.

- Job advert – these need to be clear about the MUST elements of a job in comparison to desirable elements of a job.
- Send out interview questions a day in advance. Send these to everybody to reduce risk of unconscious bias by people having to ask for ‘reasonable adjustments’.
- Aptitude testing and interview alone can disadvantage. Within recruitment processes use a combination of indicators to assess the potential of each candidate.
- At an interview minimise waiting times, allow additional time for assessments, consider the physical environment and possible changes including offering a quiet space for candidates to complete the testing.

4. How employers can identify and support people already in their workforce?

These comments are drawn from initial discussions with SLT members who are neurodivergent as part of a project to produce resources to support neurodivergent SLTs.

Many workplace adaptations could benefit all staff and could be normalised by considering whole workplace environmental or procedural adaptations. Examples include:

- Bookable quiet spaces;
- Fixed desks;
- Clear agendas in advance with expectations or reading set out;
- Recording of online meetings with captions/transcription;

- Training for all staff on accessibility features, for example in Word;
- Use colour coding for people to express the level to which they would be able to communicate in meetings;
- Staff training on hidden disabilities.

The following are further examples of the different types of reasonable adjustments that might be considered:

Auditory and language processing:

- Agendas and instructions in writing;
- Allowing breaks for processing time or allowing more interactive approaches to participate in meetings;
- Reducing background noise or provision of a quiet room for specific tasks if possible.

Each person is an individual, with different needs and external factors can impact on everyone differently.

Sensory and communication:

- Ability to focus out external noise such as headphones;
- Consider lighting requirements;
- Clutter free workplace;
- Temperature;
- Complete sensory assessment;
- No automatic expectation of eye contact;
- No expectation of small talk or social events and consider potential social anxiety.

Executive function

- This might include adjustments around emotional control, flexible thinking, task initiation/completion, working memory, time management/self-monitoring, impulse control, organisation, planning and prioritising such as notice around process and environment changes;
- Reading and writing, for example software aids such as Grammarly, dyslexia fonts, colours, editable documents not pdfs, access to work for digital tools.

5. What working practices or initiatives can help to reduce stigma and improve the productivity of autistic employees?

All employers need to be encouraged to be a neuro-inclusive employer, particularly in terms of education, awareness raising and reducing the stigma often associated with neurodiversity. Smaller companies may need support to implement this.

As well as those adaptations and adjustments listed above to identify and support people already in their workforce, SLTs have also highlighted:

- Use 'wellbeing plans' for autistic colleagues with a clear expectation of what is required of the person and what reasonable adjustments are needed to meet those expectations (to avoid unhelpful vagueness).
- Some autistic colleagues require additional or different supervision. Encourage our supervisors to think differently about the style of supervision they offer including the potential to offer increased frequency, but not duration, of supervision.
- Managers and supervisors need support and training beyond a level 1 universal awareness raising course, so they are able to better support autistic people. Communication Access training along with other autism specific training programmes should be offered.

- Introduce reasonable adjustments using the principles from the Five Good Communication Standards. These were designed to remove barriers to communication by highlighting the reasonable adjustments that people with learning disabilities or autistic people could expect.

6. Case studies

Shona's story: supporting adults with autism

- Shona, an autistic adult, was keen to gain work experience but has difficulties interacting and communicating with others. During a work placement at a local florist, she found interacting with customers challenging, and her responses were interpreted as rude and awkward by her work colleagues.
- With support from a local speech and language therapist (SLT), and a workplace coordinator, her employer was able to raise Shona's colleagues' awareness of autism and to 'think differently' about her communication and interaction skills. As a result of SLT intervention, Shona's employer offered her opportunities which played to her strengths, which included working directly with flowers, which was of benefit to them both.

Abigail's story: speech and language therapist

- Abigail is a speech and language therapist in a community learning disability team at Southern Health NHS Foundation Trust. She also helps to run autism assessment clinics for adults.
- 'I am the speech and language therapist for the Autism Assessment Service. With my multidisciplinary colleagues, I run clinics for adults who think they may have undiagnosed autism. As well as helping conduct in-depth diagnostic interviews, I might spend time assessing the person's communication in detail, helping them to identify where their usually very subtle difficulties lie. This knowledge can help them to make sense of a lifetime of emotional struggle, social rejection, and employment breakdown, and begin to find ways of seeing their strengths and celebrating their difference.
- 'It's amazing when you can make a connection with someone who may be very 'hard to reach' because of their severe communication difficulties. To see that moment where they can ask for something they want with a gesture, an object, or a picture, and to feel you had a part in making that happen, is a huge privilege.'

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