



RCSLT Wales response to the Senedd Cymru Equality and Social Justice Committee consultation on the disability employment and payment gap

Executive summary

Thank you for the opportunity to give written evidence as part of the committee's inquiry into the disability employment and payment gap. In our response, we focus primarily on several questions raised within the terms of reference namely;

- What barriers continue to exist throughout society that impact on access to work (i.e. transport, attitudes).
- What further policy measures are needed to support disabled people, young disabled people and employers to increase participation rates and what can be learned from elsewhere.
- What actions would support those who are currently unable to work to access voluntary opportunities (which could lead to future work opportunities).

Key points

- 20% of adults in the UK will experience communication difficulties at some point in their lifetime.
- In addition to speech, language and communication needs that may accompany lifelong physical, sensory and learning disabilities, communication needs can arise as a result of an acquired illness or condition including brain injury or stroke.
- Speech, language and communication needs in people with a communication disability are a core barrier to accessing further education, training and employment opportunities.
- Often a hidden disability, there is frequently a lack of awareness of what a communication disability means to the person concerned, and what adjustments could be undertaken to support and facilitate their entry or return to employment
- RCSLT recommends that all that all services which aim to support people into work, back in to the work place and / or retain people in the workforce should undertake communication access training.
- RCSLT also recommends that speech and language therapists should be part of the core team working with individuals who are long-term unemployed.

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 (750 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.

Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs) are experts in swallowing and communication difficulties. We work across health, education, social services, and justice supporting people at every age and stage of life from neonates to people approaching the end of life.

Inquiry terms of reference

What barriers continue to exist throughout society that impact on access to work (i.e. transport, attitudes)

1. Nearly 20% of the population will experience communication difficulties at some point in their lives.¹ Difficulties with communication can affect people at any age. They can be lifelong, affecting someone from birth, or they can be acquired later in life, through accident or illness. Some people may only have a communication disability whilst others have it as part of a wider disability.
2. Communication disability affects a wide-ranging and diverse group of people of working age. Examples include many autistic people, people with a Learning Disability, Cerebral Palsy, Developmental Language Disorder, Stammer, Deafness as well as acquired chronic conditions such as Stroke, Parkinson's disease, Multiple Sclerosis, Head and neck cancer; and acute conditions such as Voice loss, as the figures below attest:
 - 50%-90% of the learning disabled population have communication difficulties².
 - Around a third of people will have some level of communication difficulties (called aphasia or dysphasia) following a stroke.³
 - 20% of people with head or brain injury have speech difficulties.⁴
3. There is also a very high incidence and prevalence of speech, language and communication problems associated mental illness. 80% of adults with mental health disorders have impairment in language. Over 60% have impairment in communication and discourse⁵. People with mental health conditions may have difficulties concentrating and / or understanding spoken or verbal communication and / or difficulties expressing clearly

¹ Scottish Executive Social Research (2007). Communication support needs a review of the literature. <http://tinyurl.com/qzqzkpp>

² Enderby P and Davies P. Communication Disorders: planning a service to meet the needs. BJDC 1989; 24, 151-166.

³ Stroke Association (2012). Speech and Language Therapy after Stroke. Stroke Association: London

⁴ Enderby, op. cit.

⁵ Walsh, I., Regan, J., Sownman, R., Parsons, B., McKay, A.P. (2007). A needs analysis for the provision of a speech and language therapy service to adults with mental health disorders. Ir J Psych Med 24(3): 89-93

complex thoughts, feelings and information pertaining to past or future events – either verbally or in writing. The impact of common mental health conditions may also include reduced confidence in interacting effectively with others.

4. The link between unmet speech, language and communication needs and educational achievement and employment is now well documented.
 - Children with lower vocabulary scores at age 5 were at age 34 **more than twice** as likely to be unemployed as children who had normally developing language at age 5.⁶
 - **88%** of long-term unemployed young men have speech, language and communication needs.⁷
 - Young adults with DLD (developmental language disorder) have been found to be unemployed **four times** longer than their peers. A higher proportion of people with DLD were in part-time employment and more of their peers were in full-time employment.⁸
5. As the statistics reveal, speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) in people with a communication disability are a core barrier to accessing further education, training and employment opportunities. Communication is a core life skill; the means by which we express our choices, form relationships and access education, employment and the rest of society. Young people with poor communication skills are more likely to leave school with low qualifications and poorer job prospects and are therefore more at risk of remaining unemployed. Evidence also demonstrates that these challenges remain for individuals with SLCN throughout adulthood. In 2012 Clegg et al carried out a study which interviewed parents of adults with communication difficulties and all parents reported “continuing difficulties in their children’s adult life across many domains of communication ability that were a concern to the parents and were perceived by them as a barrier in terms of gaining and managing employment and initiating and maintaining relationships”¹⁰.
6. Whilst often a hidden disability, the impact of communication disability can be significant. People with SLCN may not understand vocabulary at a normal age level, their SLCN affects the ability to understand, express themselves and use social skills. SLCN also affects how people access verbally mediated interventions. Evidence shows that often employment intervention programmes are delivered at too high a level for most people and are verbally mediated. When it comes to applying for jobs, people with SLCN are disadvantaged because they have problems with;

⁶ Law, J. et al (2010) Modelling developmental language difficulties from school entry into adulthood. *Journal of speech, language and hearing research*, 52, 1401-1416

⁷ Elliott N (2011) An investigation into the communication skills of unemployed young men. https://pure.southwales.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/1515255/N. L. Elliott_2011_2064879.pdf

⁸ Conti-Ramsden, G., Durkin, K., Toseeb, U., Botting, N. & Pickles, A. (2018). Education and employment outcomes of young adults with a history of developmental language disorders. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 53(2), 237-255.

¹⁰ Clegg, J., Ansorge, L., Stackhouse, J. and Donlan, C. (2012) Developmental communication impairments in adults: outcomes and life experiences of adults and their parents, *Language, speech and hearing services in schools*, 43(4), pp. 521-35. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22826372>

- Understanding the vocabulary to fill in application forms
 - Time concepts, in particular sequencing time and reading the time– which will affect their ability to make an interview on time
 - Difficulties with finding words at an interview so they may not come across as well as other candidates
 - Have difficulties with relationships
 - Difficulties asking for clarification etc so might just let things slide
 - Organisational skills - need support to organise their day/time/tasks.
7. The impact of communication disability may be made even more devastating by a lack of awareness of what a communication disability means to the person concerned, and what adjustments could be undertaken to support and facilitate their entry or return to employment. A failure to make reasonable adjustments to meet communication needs will mean that those with communication disabilities will continue to be at a greater risk of being excluded from employment opportunities than their non-disabled peers.

What further policy measures are needed to support disabled people, young disabled people and employers to increase participation rates and what can be learned from elsewhere.

8. Giving the high prevalence of communication disability, it is crucial that all services which aim to support people into work, back into the workplace and / or retain people in the workforce use mainstream, quality, inclusive communication approaches throughout their procedures. For example, all information on services must be communication accessible to the broadest population and front-line staff should be trained and provided with resources to be able to identify and adapt their own communication to the needs of people with speech, language and communication support needs. We recommend that services undertake [Communication Access UK training](#). Communication Access UK is an initiative developed in partnership by charities and organisations that share a vision to improve the lives of people with communication difficulties. Together, the organisations have developed the Communication Access Symbol, a new disability access symbol underpinned by a completely free training package and standards. RCSLT has recently been successful in gaining funding from the National Lottery to develop a Welsh language version of the training package.
9. There is also a need to rethink employment support to ensure it encompasses a range of health professionals including speech and language therapists given the prevalence of communication disability within this group. Speech and language therapist, Dr Natalie Elliot, completed her doctoral research on Communication Impairment in Long-term Unemployed Young Men in South Wales Valleys in 2011. 88% of the young men within the study were revealed to have SLCN and Elliot argued that whilst there was awareness amongst the professionals working to help these young men into work that their communication and social skills were poor, there was a lack of knowledge about how to help. The study concluded that;
- Speech and language therapists should be part of the core team working with individuals who are long-term unemployed.
 - All long-term unemployed young men should receive a detailed speech and language therapy assessment.
 - People who are long-term unemployed should have access to speech and language therapy intervention if they are identified as communication impaired.

- Professionals working with people who are unemployed should receive training from speech and language therapists on how to recognise and support people with communication impairments.

10. We believe that these recommendations if taken forward would make a significant difference to reducing the barriers to employment faced by disabled people

Further information

We hope this paper will be helpful in supporting the committee's discussions around employment and the disability gap. We would be happy to provide further information if this would be of benefit. Please see below our contact details.

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Confirmation

This response is submitted on behalf of The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists in Wales. We confirm that we are happy for this response to be made public.