



Briefing ahead of the Senedd debate on the Children, Young People and Education Committee report – ‘Do disabled children and young people have equal access to childcare and education’ from the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists in Wales, 13th November 2024

Introduction

As a college, we were pleased to provide both [written](#) and oral evidence for this important inquiry and were grateful to see several mentions of speech and language therapy in the report.

The report findings were stark and concerning concluding that ‘a significant number of children and young peoples’ right to an education is being denied throughout Wales’. It is widely acknowledged that Covid and the lockdowns it has entailed have had a significant impact on the lives of children, particularly with regards their speech, language and communication skills ([ICAN, 2021](#)), ([Estyn 2021](#)).

Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) are the most common type of additional learning need in 4-11 year olds in Wales. **35%** of children in Wales with additional learning needs have SLCN ([Welsh Government, 2024](#)). It is imperative that children and young people receive the right support at the right time to thrive socially and educationally. This requires effective joint working between health, education, local authorities and families. We are keen to work with the committee and all stakeholders to drive improvements to ensure all children and young people with speech, language and communication needs are given the best chance in life.

We have commented on the government response to a number of key recommendations within the report below.

Recommendation 12: The Welsh Government should undertake a comprehensive review into how non-teaching staff both within schools and local authorities can best support inclusive provision across Wales. This should include identifying best practice examples from across Wales. Such work should also consider the funding implications of best practice, and how local authorities and schools can be best supported to deliver.

In recent years we have transformed the way we work as a profession, in particular, in children's services, to a universal, targeted and specialist model where we are increasingly focussed on working with those closest to the person including their family and their setting (for example, school, nursery) in order to make the most difference. We raised in evidence our concerns about reductions in support staff and pressures on teachers. This is impacting on the input and support that speech and language therapists (SLTs) feel they can provide for schools to deliver as part of their teaching activities. For example, members report that they are keen to visit and support/train staff in school, but this is only effective if there is capacity for follow-up and carryover from school staff. This is creating a vicious circle whereby mainstream schools may then feel unsupported/unable/unqualified to support children with significant SLCN, leading to consequences such as further reductions to school timetables and increased pressure on local authorities to offer more specialist placements.

We welcome the commitment from Welsh Government to work with local authorities and schools to understand best practice in respect of supporting inclusive provision and the sub-group focused on Professional Learning for LSWs/Tas. We believe that it is essential that training on SLCN plays a central role within professional learning for the support workforce given the high numbers of children in schools with SLCN to ensure support staff are able to assist teachers in the provision of universal and targeted services to support language development in schools – a key element of the curriculum.

We also believe it may be appropriate to consider ring-fenced funding for the teaching support workforce and how further value could be placed on such roles. There is learning here from initiatives with regards the health care support worker workforce. For example, registration, initiatives around pay, pathways, mandatory training.

Recommendation 17 The Welsh Government should revise the criteria for ITE to strengthen the requirements around disability and additional learning needs. This should ensure that all teachers at the end of their ITE have a basic level of skills and understanding in issues around disability and ALN and have the confidence to be able to support all children and young people they teach. It should also ensure that ITE keeps up with the latest clinical knowledge so that newly qualified teachers have the most up to date information and knowledge to help inform their practice.

Whilst we welcome the decision by Welsh Government to strengthen the requirements for ITE programmes to ensure that all student teachers have an understanding of the needs of learners who have Additional Learning Needs, we believe that a greater focus on SLCN is required within ITE. Given that SLCN are the most common additional learning need and the high prevalence of communication needs in children and young people with behavioural difficulties, we believe that it is essential to provide training for new teachers and as continuous professional development for existing staff members on how to support speech, language and communication skills, and how to identify and support SLCN.

Recommendation 26 The Welsh Government reviews the current numbers of key allied health professionals, identifies where there are current gaps, how these gaps will be addressed and the

numbers needed to support future likely level of need, including the number of training places needed. This should then be supported by a clear delivery plan.

While we welcome scoping by Health Education and Improvement Wales (HEIW) of the current AHP workforce, we continue to have significant concerns about long term workforce planning for AHPs in Wales, including SLTs. HEIW should prioritise long-term workforce planning (5-10 year) and have a far greater focus on children and support for families as part of the preventative agenda. We are concerned that current horizon scanning for workforce planning does not sufficiently include discussions with education and social care. We have only witnessed small increases in speech and language therapy training places in recent years despite significant increases in demand, particularly within children’s services.

Year	Number of speech and language therapy training places
2019/20	44
2020/21	49
2021/22	49
2022/23	49
2023/24	49
2024/25	55

(Source: HEIW education and training plans)

Further information

We would be happy to discuss this briefing further. Please contact Caroline Walters, External Affairs Manager (Wales) on caroline.walters@rcslt.org