

RCSLT NI Consultation Response to the Children's Services Co-operation Act.

(1) Are there any further opportunities for co-operation between children's authorities and other children's service providers that could help to achieve the outcomes set out in the Children and Young People's Strategy?

RCSLT NI feel that there are further opportunities for co-operation to improving outcomes for children and young people in Northern Ireland.

The key legal framework is the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 which details that:

- This act emphasizes the duty of cooperation between "Children's Authorities" and other "children's service providers."
- It enables the pooling of resources, including staff, funding, and services.
- It mandates the development of a Children and Young People's Strategy.

There are considerable opportunities for enhanced co-operation which could include:

- **Improved Information Sharing:**

Streamlining data sharing between different agencies can lead to more holistic and timely interventions. There could be more effective strategies to share information and resources between departments within the same organisations for the benefit of children and young people, an example, would be Text Help, which is free to all children in Northern Ireland. This sits under the EA Literacy service; however, these are extremely useful resources which would be beneficial for children and young people with speech, language and communication and could be shared with the Language and Communication Service.

We also feel that resources, such as Text Help could be shared more widely, as our members had not heard of this resource.

We are aware that this is complex and will requires robust data protection protocols.

- **Joint Training and Development:**

Providing shared training opportunities for professionals across different sectors can foster a more unified approach for the benefit of the children and young people. This should be coproduced with the relevant experts in this field.

This can enhance understanding of each other's roles and responsibilities and allow for a holistic view of the children and young people by considering the children and young people through a multi-disciplinary lens. This is important for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs, as the impacts are felt across education, health, justice, communities and the economy.

- **Integrated Service Delivery:**

Development of a regional platform for training and resources where children, families and professionals can access multiple services and supports in one place, an example of this would be Text Help. This was one of the recommendations in the '[We are the Village Report](#)' (RCSLT NI, 2024).

- **The creation of a speech and language therapist post at departmental level:**

Having a speech and language therapist in a cross departmental post would allow for speech, language and communication to be integrated at the highest level. They would be able to input and advise on policy development and operational planning/strategies. Evidence from Wales shows positive outcomes from having such a post which is well established in the Seneed. Further information can be found [here](#). This can reduce fragmentation between services and improve accessibility.

- **Enhanced Early Intervention:**

Strengthening collaboration between early years providers and schools to identify speech, language and communication needs to enable the difficulties to be assessed and addressed at the earliest opportunity. This can improve long-term outcomes.

- **Increased Involvement of the Voluntary and Community Sector:**

Recognizing the valuable role of community-based organisations in providing support to children and families who have speech, language and communication needs and to enhance their development in these areas. In order to develop stronger partnerships and have access to sustained services, a more robust and long term funding plan must be prioritised.

- **Focus on the voice of the children and young people:**

Ensuring that the children and young people that the services are intended for, have a strong input into the way that services are delivered. Every child, including those who have difficulties with language and communicating should be included. Efforts should be made to ensure that communication is accessible and inclusive for all abilities.

A recently published report from Scotland, available [here](#), shows the importance of speech, language and communication in children and young people as part of their human rights.

- **Factors for Success:**

To facilitate the above there must be effective communication and leadership that extends across all statutory departments and the voluntary and community sector. There must be clear roles and responsibilities, with adequate funding and resources. A framework with ongoing monitoring and evaluation which is published to show transparency between different services would be welcomed.

By exploring these opportunities, Northern Ireland can make significant progress in achieving the outcomes set out in its children and young people's strategy.

(2) Are there any other ways in which the well-being of children and young people could be improved?

- **Workforce planning:**

Children and young people who have speech, language and communication needs are facing significant challenges in accessing speech and language therapy in a timely manner. By increasing the number of commissioned places at undergraduate level for speech and language therapy, we can begin to meet the current and raising demand for our services.

- **Collaboration with professional bodies:**

Evidence shows the long term detrimental outcomes for children and young people who have unidentified and unsupported speech, language and communication needs. These include academics, mental health, social emotional well-being, further education and employment prospects. Allied Health Professionals play a pivotal role in enabling our children and young people, we can add value and insight in our respective areas of expertise.

Therefore, RCSLT NI welcome the opportunity to work collaboratively to advise and support improvements going forward.

- **Strengthened collaboration between departments:**

There are challenges in supporting children and young people in need in education, this is due to an increase in need, complexity and the opening of new SPiMs. Whilst we welcome that the children and young people will be supported, we feel that this support can be strengthened by consulting with what support is required from speech and language therapists. Schools have informed us that their speech and language therapy allocation has reduced due to the increase in additional specialist placements. Our members are stretched thinly across services and are struggling to meet demands, which is reflected in increasing waiting times.

RCSLT NI would also advocate expert training for teaching staff and classroom assistants in speech, language and communication needs for all settings. 10% of our school population will have long term, persistent speech and language difficulties, with the majority of these being in mainstream schools.

There are also strong links between young people and the justice system, students who are often suspended or expelled should be screened for language difficulties. The evidence suggests that 80% of children and young people who present with behaviour that challenges, have unidentified speech, language and communication needs. By intervening at the earliest stages, we can support children and young people's language development.

- **Raising Awareness of speech, language and communication development and needs and how to support:**

Recent engagement with practitioners and parents has identified that neither have a strong knowledge base of the ages and stages of development, how to support these foundational skills and when to be concerned. Play is crucial to the acquisition and development of language, we would welcome a focus on this area.

- **Greater focus on post-primary:**

A lot of support services taper off on transition to post-primary. This is particularly relevant for young people who have speech, language and communication needs. This includes no dedicated speech and language classes, only one dedicated speech and language post-primary school, no formal training on offer for post-primary staff to recognise language difficulties and the appropriate strategies to implement.

(3) Are there any ways in which the Children and Young People's Strategy might be revised in order to contribute to those improvements?

As detailed above, we have listed a number of suggestions and potential opportunities in which the strategy could be revised. Ultimately, we feel that having a dedicated speech and language therapist in post at departmental level will help progress a range of areas. The evidence highlights the importance of speech, language and communication development and the links these have on the whole development of the child or young person.

A robust framework detailing the key partners for collaboration and a published report highlighting the areas which have been addressed and the outcomes would be welcomed for transparency and allow for a progressive framework.

If you require any further information, please contact:

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