

# A profession under pressure:

## speech and language therapy retention and waiting times – key findings

In March 2024 the RCSLT was commissioned by NHS England to undertake a project to explore the workforce implications of waiting lists in children and young people's speech and language therapy services.

As part of the project, the RCSLT conducted a survey of speech and language therapists (SLTs) across the UK, to gather information about the factors that were influencing SLTs to stay in or leave their roles.

## Workforce retention

1,168 speech and language therapists completed the survey between September and October 2024, evidencing both the significant level of interest in this issue and the desire for change. The results provide an overview of the experiences of SLTs across the four UK nations. Key findings include:

### Workload

- 6 in 10 respondents (61%) said their job often or always involved unrealistic time pressures.
- 39% of SLTs working in the NHS report that their workload is rarely or never reasonable, compared to 13% in the independent sector.
- More than a quarter of SLTs (27%) reported that they did not have a good balance between work life and home life.

### Wellbeing and burn out

- More than half of respondents (55%) said they had experienced burnout in the past 12 months.
- Of those who had experienced burnout, the most common contributing factors were workload pressures (86%), caseload size/complexity (70%), insufficient staffing levels (68%) and administrative burden (65%).

### Career progression and professional development

- 4 out of 10 respondents (42%) said that they needed to use their own time to complete the continuing professional development (CPD) required in order to remain clinically safe.
- More than a quarter (28%) of respondents did not agree that there were opportunities to develop their career within their current organisation.

## Pay

- More than a third of respondents (36%) were dissatisfied with their level of pay.

## Job satisfaction

- Almost 9 out of 10 SLTs (87%) feel that their job makes a difference to service users.
- 1 in 6 respondents (17%) said they were dissatisfied with their current job.
- Job satisfaction was lowest amongst Band 6 (or equivalent) SLTs – more than 1 in 5 (22%) were dissatisfied with their job.

## Intentions to leave

- Nearly 4 out of 10 respondents (39%) said they were considering leaving their current role.
- Of those considering leaving their role (430 respondents)
  - Almost 1/3 (31%) said they wanted to move to another role in a different organisation.
  - More than 1 in 5 (21%) said they wanted to leave the speech and language therapy profession.

## Why are SLTs considering leaving their roles?

- **Administrative load:** Nearly half (49%) of all respondents said administrative load was influencing them to leave.
- **Pay:** Nearly two-fifths (38%) of SLTs working in a band 5 role or equivalent said that their pay was influencing them to leave.
- **Work life balance:** A third (33%) of SLTs said that work life balance was influencing them to leave.
- **Lack of development opportunities:** More than a quarter (26%) of SLTs working in the NHS said that (the lack of) professional development opportunities was a factor influencing them to leave.

## Children and young people's speech and language therapy

As part of the same survey, SLTs who work with children and young people were asked some additional questions to explore the workforce implications of waiting times.

- 7 out of 10 (71%) NHS SLTs were concerned about the wait that children, young people and their families experience for a first appointment.
- When asked about waits for further support and intervention after the first appointment, this number increased: 8 out of 10 (81%) NHS SLTs were concerned about the waits in their service.
- SLTs who were concerned about waiting within their services were more likely to report experiencing burnout.
- Only one third (33%) of NHS SLTs reported that their service was always or usually able to provide the speech and language therapy that children and young people need.
- The main barriers that services experience in providing therapy for children and young people were reported as: having enough staff (79%), time constraints (75%) and funding (58%).

## Action is needed

Change is urgently needed to support the speech and language therapy workforce. Governments across the UK need to take action to ensure that stakeholders, commissioners, decision-makers and providers work together with SLTs and service users to design and adequately resource speech and language therapy services that are safe, fit for purpose and clinically effective. As part of this work:

- Service provision, caseload sizes and time pressures should be reviewed by services, and any concerns escalated to those who plan and fund services.
- Workforce planning needs to recognise the importance of the retention and wellbeing of therapists already delivering services, as well as the need for the ongoing development of routes into the profession.
- The importance of access to CPD opportunities for safe and effective practice should be explicitly recognised and time should be built into workloads to accommodate this.