

RCSLT response to the Government's Freedom from Violence and Abuse strategy

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) welcomes the Government's Freedom from Violence and Abuse: a cross-government strategy to build a safer society for women and girls and strongly supports its ambition to halve violence against women and girls over the next decade through prevention, the pursuit of perpetrators, and comprehensive support for victims and survivors.

We particularly welcome the strategy's commitment to a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach, its focus on early intervention, and its recognition that victims and survivors are not a homogenous group and require tailored, trauma-informed support.

However, to achieve its stated aims, the strategy must more explicitly address the needs of people with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), who face disproportionate risks of abuse and significant barriers to safety, recovery and justice.

Communication needs and heightened vulnerability

People with communication disability, difficulty or difference are at increased risk of domestic and sexual abuse; and as the [statutory guidance to the Domestic Abuse Act](#) makes clear people with speech, language, and communication needs may be actively targeted by perpetrators or experience abuse for longer periods of time because of difficulties they face in explaining what has happened to them, asking for help, and accessing the support available.

This includes children and adults with learning disability, autism, acquired brain injury, mental health conditions, dementia, and those with developmental language disorder. Communication barriers can make it harder to recognise abuse, disclose harm, be believed, or engage with safeguarding, health, and justice systems.

Children who witness or experience domestic abuse are more likely to have speech, language, and communication needs, with potential long-term consequences for education, mental health, and life chances. Without early, specialist intervention, these impacts can persist into adulthood, increasing vulnerability to further harm.

Perpetrators may also have unidentified communication needs. Where this is the case, domestic abuse perpetrator programmes that are not communication-accessible risk being ineffective, undermining efforts to prevent reoffending.

Barriers to justice and support

The strategy rightly highlights the need for trauma-informed reform of the justice system. However, victims and witnesses with communication disability, difficulty, or difference often face additional, unaddressed barriers, including:

- Inaccessible information and safety planning materials
- Difficulties giving coherent accounts under stress
- Challenges engaging with police interviews, court processes, and safeguarding assessments
- Being wrongly perceived as lacking credibility or capacity

Without specialist communication support, these barriers can result in missed safeguarding opportunities, failed prosecutions, and victims disengaging from support services altogether.

The role of speech and language therapy

Speech and language therapists play a vital role in:

- Supporting safe and effective disclosure of abuse
- Enabling victims and witnesses to participate meaningfully in criminal and family justice processes
- Supporting recovery through targeted communication intervention
- Advising on communication-accessible service design
- Supporting children affected by domestic abuse to develop language, emotional regulation and social communication skills
- Ensuring perpetrator programmes are accessible and effective for individuals with SLCN

Strengthening the strategy's impact

To ensure the strategy delivers for all victims and survivors, RCSLT urges the Government to:

Embed accessibility and communication inclusion

- Ensure all domestic and sexual abuse strategies, action plans and commissioning frameworks include an explicit focus on communication accessibility.

Strengthen the workforce

- Commission speech and language therapy into domestic abuse, safeguarding, CAMHS, youth justice and victim support services.

- Provide training for frontline professionals (including police, social workers, health professionals, educators and justice staff) to recognise and respond to communication needs.

Embed communication in prevention and early intervention

- Ensure children and young people with SEND receive accessible education on consent and healthy relationships.
- Include speech and language therapists in early intervention and prevention programmes, particularly in schools and community services.

Improve access to justice

- Ensure victims and witnesses with communication needs have access to appropriate adaptations and specialist support, including intermediaries, visual supports and alternative communication methods.

The Government's strategy sets out an ambitious and necessary vision for tackling violence against women and girls. To realise that ambition, communication must be recognised as a core safeguarding, prevention and justice issue.

By embedding speech and language therapy within prevention, support and justice pathways, the Government can significantly improve outcomes for victims and survivors, strengthen perpetrator interventions, and reduce long-term costs across health, education, justice and social care.

RCSLT stands ready to support the Government and its partners to ensure communication accessibility is integral to delivering a safer society for all.