

# SEND reform national conversation

## RCSLT submission

14 January 2026

In December 2025 the Department for Education in England launched an online survey as part of its national conversation on SEND reforms. The survey asked a series of questions structured around the UK Government's five key principles for SEND reform.

### Theme 1: Early

#### **How can we identify children's and young people's needs as early as possible?**

Parents/caregivers, the early years workforce and education professionals should be able to quickly access a speech and language therapist for advice and support when they have concerns about a child's speech, language and communication or swallowing. This can be achieved through embedding speech and language therapists in Best Start Family Hubs, early years settings and schools. As well as being available to respond quickly to concerns about individual children, embedded therapists can also provide ongoing training to support setting staff to develop their knowledge and understanding so they are better able to identify when a child may need additional support.

#### **Children and young people's needs change over time. How can we ensure children and young people get support quickly without needing a diagnosis?**

We need a system that offers easy and flexible access to the speech and language therapy workforce, where speech and language therapy services work in partnership with schools and early years settings, and the NHS works in partnership with the local authority. This can be achieved through embedding speech and language therapists in Best Start Family Hubs, early years settings and schools. This approach enables support for children to be provided at the right time and place as children's needs change over time and depending on the context they're in.

While in the school or setting, in addition to providing advice and intervention for individual children, speech and language therapists can also enable the ongoing upskilling of the workforce through training, coaching and modelling, and advise on whole school approaches which are inclusive of children's communication needs. This model enables enhanced universal and targeted support, and as a result children's needs can be met more efficiently, with fewer

children being referred to speech and language therapy – and those children who do need specialist input can receive it more quickly.

### **Do you have any other comments?**

Families also need quick and easy access to speech and language therapists – some parents may simply need information and reassurance, while for other families, advice from a speech and language therapist can empower them to implement strategies which will support their child's development. The speech and language therapist can also advise the family when a more formal assessment of a child's speech and language is indicated. The expansion of Best Start Family Hubs provides a significant opportunity to make speech and language therapists a core part of the offer for families.

## **Theme 2: Local**

### **Thinking about both physical space and the skills staff need, how could mainstream settings be more inclusive?**

Staff in schools and early years settings need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to: support all children to develop language and communication skills; identify when children are struggling with their speech, language and communication; and, put in place the changes to the environment and support strategies which will enable children with SLCN to fulfil their potential.

Where speech and language therapists work in partnership with settings, they can advise on adaptations to the communication environment, and provide ongoing coaching and advice which enables staff to apply and generalise the training they've had. They can also provide timely individual support to those children that need it. With skilled staff, an inclusive communication environment, and improved access to specialist advice and support, many children and young people with SLCN could thrive in mainstream settings.

## **Theme 3: Fair**

### **How can we make sure children and young people get the same high-quality support wherever they live in the country?**

Speech and language therapy provision for children with SEND varies significantly between local areas. A scoping study commissioned by the DHSC and published by King's College London which looked at the demand and supply of therapists working in SEND found that the design of commissioned services was discretionary and highly variable, including in relation to the range of therapy services available, how they are accessed and where and how they are delivered.

To overcome this, the DfE should work jointly with DHSC, NHS England and professional bodies to develop quality standards for commissioners which set clear expectations about how speech and language therapy services should be commissioned, specifying that support must be provided for children and young people on SEN support, through a place-based model which provides a continuum of provision across universal, targeted and specialist tiers.

#### Theme 4: Effective

##### **Do you think mandatory CPD would help achieve high-quality support for children and young people? What CPD topics should it cover for different stages of education?**

To achieve high-quality support for children and young people, staff in schools and early years settings need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to: support all children to develop language and communication skills; identify when children are struggling with their speech, language and communication; and, put in place the environmental changes and support strategies which will enable children with SLCN to fulfil their potential. These competencies should be embedded in initial teacher training, and ongoing CPD requirements.

While mandatory CPD would be a step in the right direction, the Education Endowment Foundation have highlighted the importance of supporting teachers to effectively embed practice. Where SLTs work in partnership with settings they can provide coaching and advice which enables staff to apply the training they've received to the children and young people in front of them, and provide feedback and quality assurance.

#### Theme 5: Shared

##### **What does good join-up across local services look like?**

Good join-up can be achieved when speech and language therapy services work in partnership with schools and settings, with each school or setting having a named/link therapist. The speech and language therapist regularly spends time in their allocated schools and settings, building relationships with children, families and staff, but is employed within a wider therapy service, reducing isolation and enabling them to access the peer support and clinical supervision that is required of health professionals.

Joint commissioning is a key enabler of good join-up across local services, but is currently the exception rather than the rule.

##### **What are the main barriers stopping services from working well together?**

There are several examples of areas where speech and language therapy services are working in partnership with education partners to provide a continuum of universal, targeted and specialist support. In order to make this approach consistently available across local areas, the following barriers should be addressed:

- **Accountability:** The Children and Families Act should be strengthened to place a stronger duty on local areas to jointly commission services for children and young people with SEND, with a clear definition of joint commissioning which includes children and young people on SEN support.
- **Commissioning:** Commissioning guidance should be developed, with accompanying support for speech and language therapy services, to move towards a place-based model which provides a continuum of provision across universal, targeted and specialist tiers.

- **Resourcing:** All partners need to be sufficiently staffed and funded to work collaboratively to deliver an integrated approach to supporting children's speech, language and communication needs.
- **Workforce:** Workforce shortages need to be addressed across the system, including for speech and language therapy. The DfE should work jointly with the DHSC and NHS England to develop a workforce plan for children and young people with SEND which spans the workforce across education, health and care

### **How should we make sure services are held accountable for working together?**

The Children and Families Act should be strengthened to place a stronger duty on local areas to jointly commission services for children and young people with SEND, with a clear definition of joint commissioning which includes children and young people on SEN support.