

RCSLT NI Response to Draft Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) Strategy

Overall Position

RCSLT NI welcomes the ambition of the draft Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) Strategy to improve affordability, accessibility and quality of provision across Northern Ireland. We support the Executive's commitment to improving outcomes for children and families and recognise the importance of early years as a critical period for development.

While the Strategy includes a strong and welcome evidence base recognising the importance of speech, language and communication (SLC) in early childhood development, this is not consistently reflected in the proposed actions or consultation questions. As a result, the scale and complexity of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) across Northern Ireland, and the requirements for early intervention, parental support and workforce capacity, are not yet sufficiently translated into clear, operational priorities.

Evidence from RCSLT NI reports (We Are the Village, 2024; Language Launchpad, 2025), alongside wider research including Professor Melhuish's work and the SEED study, demonstrates that speech, language and communication is a fundamental determinant of school readiness, educational attainment, mental health and long-term life outcomes. While this importance is recognised within the Strategy, it must be more explicitly embedded as a cross-cutting, operational priority across all themes and actions to ensure it is fully realised in practice.

In addition, there are important structural considerations that require further clarification. The Strategy references geographic "areas" for planning and delivery; however, it is unclear whether these are fit for purpose or based on outdated census data. Clear methodology is required for how these areas will be identified, reviewed and aligned with current population need.

THEME 1: Supporting Children in their Early Years

Objective 1.1 – Pre-school provision expansion

Response: Agree

RCSLT NI supports the expansion of full time pre-school provision. Increasing access is an important step. However, increased hours alone will not improve outcomes unless provision is consistently high quality and underpinned by strong support for children's development, particularly in speech, language and communication.

We have particular concerns regarding the proposal to remove prioritisation for children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. There is clear evidence that children living in

disadvantage are significantly more likely to experience language delay on school entry. Removing targeted access risks exacerbating existing inequalities and widening developmental gaps.

To ensure that this objective delivers meaningful outcomes, the Strategy must embed communication rich practice, early identification of need and high-quality adult-child interaction as core expectations across all settings.

There are also practical implementation concerns. Expansion of provision will require alignment across the Department of Education and Department of Health systems, including workforce planning, commissioning processes and contract extensions. These processes require advance notice, and without sufficient lead-in time, delivery risks being compromised.

Furthermore, feedback from the sector indicates that daycare provision is already becoming more expensive, which may counteract intended benefits of expansion.

Objective 1.2 – Disadvantage and additional needs

Response: Strongly Agree

RCSLT NI strongly supports the expansion of Sure Start, Pathway and Toybox programmes. The evidence base for these programmes is robust. In particular, the ETI evaluation of Sure Start demonstrates clear positive outcomes in communication, social and emotional development, and highlights the effectiveness of play based, language rich approaches.

RCSLT NI evidence also highlights increasing system pressures, with 91% of practitioners reporting increased speech, language and communication needs and 95% reporting increased complexity. At the same time, many children experience delays in accessing specialist support (We are the Village, 2024).

The Sure Start model represents a proven, multidisciplinary approach to early intervention, combining early years provision, family support and specialist input. Annual reporting demonstrates measurable outcomes in speech, language and communication, confirming that this model is effective.

However, it is important to emphasise that Sure Start was designed to close the gap, not to provide universal provision. Expansion without maintaining focus risks diluting its impact and reducing its effectiveness for those most in need. A focus on depth rather than breadth is critical.

In addition:

- Sure Start areas often border one another, and duplication or dilution of services must be avoided
- Category 2 provision as described in the Strategy appears to replicate existing Sure Start functions
- Consultation with Sure Start management teams is essential, as they have direct insight into community need and service delivery realities

The Strategy should therefore focus on scaling and standardising this model regionally, ensuring consistency of delivery and maintaining the key elements that underpin its success, including integrated working with Speech and Language Therapists.

There is also a need to consider the increasing role of digital technology within early years provision. While digital tools, including apps and online platforms, can support communication with parents and access to information, there is a risk that over reliance on screen based approaches may reduce opportunities for high quality adult child interaction, which is fundamental to speech, language and communication development.

Evidence consistently demonstrates that young children learn language most effectively through responsive, face to face interaction, play and shared attention. The Strategy should therefore emphasise the importance of limiting screen use within early years settings and prioritising interaction led practice.

In addition, consideration should be given to the format of resources provided to families. Physical, play based resources such as books, toys and activity materials can support shared interaction and may be more accessible for some families, including those experiencing digital poverty. A blended approach, combining high-quality practitioner support with both digital and non digital resources, is likely to be most effective.

Objective 1.3 – Provision for children aged 2–3

Response: Strongly Agree

RCSLT NI strongly supports the extension of developmental provision for children aged 2–3. This is a critical period for speech and language development, and early identification and intervention at this stage are significantly more effective than later intervention.

The proposed integrated, family-centred approach is particularly welcome. However, it is essential that this expansion is supported by an adequate specialist workforce

capacity, particularly within Speech and Language Therapy services. Without this, there is a risk that increased demand will lead to delays in intervention.

Currently there has been no uplift for Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs), who are already absorbing additional work. SLTs cannot continue to absorb additional demand without additional funding. Workforce pressures are compounded by fragmentation of roles, with expectations spanning clinical work, training and supervision without adequate resourcing.

This is especially important for groups such as newcomer families, who may be harder to reach and require targeted outreach and culturally responsive services.

Consideration should also be given to existing systems such as the Balance System currently used within Trust SLT services. Training and supervision must be embedded within teams rather than added as additional responsibilities.

To ensure successful implementation, the Strategy must include a commitment to fund additional Speech and Language Therapy posts and ensure that SLTs are fully integrated into early years services.

Objective 1.4 – Quality of provision

Response: Agree

RCSLT NI welcomes the focus on promoting high quality provision, including play based learning and parent engagement. However, further strengthening is required, particularly in relation to how parental support is delivered and how speech and language development is prioritised.

While the Strategy includes a strong evidence base on speech, language and communication, this is not consistently reflected across the proposed actions or consultation questions, and there is a risk that this priority will not be fully embedded in implementation.

Speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) are not explicitly referenced within this objective, nor is the significance of rapid brain development in the early years sufficiently reflected.

The inclusion of bite sized videos and universally accessible resources is a positive step. However, the NSPCC evaluation of *Look, Say, Sing, Play* indicates that such resources are most effective when supported by practitioner engagement. While parents responded positively to the materials, the evaluation found variation in how they were used and highlighted the need for practitioners to explain, model and support parents' use of the resources in one-to-one or group settings. It also found that more

integrated local delivery approaches increased opportunities for parents to engage with and reinforce these messages.

On this basis, bite sized videos should not be viewed as a standalone solution. They should be embedded within a broader, relationship-based model of support that includes practitioner input, opportunities for modelling and discussion, and coordinated local delivery.

It is also unclear what services will be responsible for delivering parental support, and this lack of clarity risks undermining implementation.

The definition of “access” also requires further clarity, and more detail is needed on how this will be operationalised at a regional level, particularly given variation across Trust areas.

In addition, existing infrastructure, such as the Childcare Partnership, provides free training across a range of areas. This should be expanded and integrated into a broader system of support.

The Strategy should prioritise scaling evidence based, relationship focused approaches to parental support, alongside

THEME 2: Supporting Families

Objective 2.1 – Affordability

Response: Strongly Agree

RCSLT NI supports measures to improve the affordability of childcare. However, it is essential that increased affordability is not achieved at the expense of quality or workforce sustainability. Investment must ensure that providers are equipped to meet increasingly complex developmental needs.

Feedback from the sector indicates that the cost of childcare is increasing, which may offset intended affordability gains.

Objective 2.2 – Information for parents

Response: Agree

While improving information for parents is important, it is not sufficient in isolation.

Parents frequently report difficulty navigating services and understanding how to access support, particularly in relation to children with additional needs. Parents require not only information but also clear guidance, navigation support and an understanding of pathways, processes and relevant legislation, including Special Educational Needs processes.

The Strategy should therefore move beyond information provision to establish a coherent, accessible and supported pathway for parents, ensuring they know where to go, how to access services and what support is available.

There is significant concern regarding the scale of this objective, and without adequate infrastructure it risks failure due to the breadth of expectations placed on services.

Additional considerations include digital admissions systems and the impact of digital poverty. It is unclear who will provide support to parents, and how quality and outcomes will be measured

THEME 3: Supporting the Sector and Workforce

Objective 3.1 – Sector sustainability

Response: Agree

RCSLT NI supports efforts to improve sustainability within the sector. However, sustainability is intrinsically linked to workforce conditions.

While uplift is welcome, this may not translate into meaningful financial improvement due to inflation and rising costs.

Current challenges include low pay, variability in terms and conditions across different parts of the sector and increasing complexity of need. These factors impact recruitment and retention and must be addressed to ensure long term stability.

There are also disparities between voluntary/community sector staff and Trust staff. The profession must be made more attractive, as early years staff are working with highly complex needs but pay does not reflect the required skill level or safeguarding responsibilities.

The Strategy should include a stronger focus on career pathways, workforce parity and improved pay structures, recognising early years as a skilled and essential profession.

Objective 3.2 – Additional needs and inclusion

Response: Strongly Agree

RCSLT NI strongly supports the focus on inclusion. However, meaningful inclusion requires appropriate staffing levels and ratios, particularly for children with complex needs.

However, this objective is extremely broad, and there are concerns regarding how it will be monitored and whether the proposed timeframes are realistic.

Current staffing arrangements may not be sufficient to meet these needs. The Strategy should therefore include a review of staffing ratios and increased investment in both general and specialist support.

Staffing remains very challenging, and inclusion must also consider trauma and long-term pathways, particularly as support often drops significantly after age 18.

Objective 3.3 – Workforce development

Response: Strongly Agree

Workforce development is critical to the success of the Strategy. However, there is currently no clearly defined regional model for workforce training and insufficient recognition of the need for protected time for training.

The workforce is diverse with varying levels of qualifications and experience. Training must therefore be structured and progressive. RCSLT NI recommends the development of a tiered training model, encompassing universal, targeted and specialist levels.

Training, supervision and support must be embedded within teams rather than treated as additional responsibilities.

Existing provision such as that delivered by the Childcare Partnership provides a strong foundation but requires expansion and integration into a coherent regional training pathway. This must include protected time and funding to ensure accessibility.

Additional Comments

RCSLT NI welcomes the inclusion within the Strategy document of a strong and evidence informed section on speech, language and communication, which clearly recognises that communication skills are foundational to children's cognitive, social and emotional development, and to longer-term educational and life outcomes. The Strategy appropriately references a robust evidence base, including the work of Professor Melhuish and the SEED study, which demonstrates that early language development is one of the strongest predictors of later attainment, and that delays by age three are associated with significantly poorer outcomes if not addressed early. The inclusion of RCSLT NI We Are the Village report is also welcome, particularly its recognition of rising prevalence and complexity of need in Northern Ireland.

However, while this section of the Strategy is strong, these commitments are not consistently or explicitly reflected within the consultation questions or proposed actions. In particular, SLC are not sufficiently visible as a cross cutting, operational priority across the objectives. For example, key actions relating to workforce

development, early intervention, parental support and service expansion do not consistently reference SLC, nor do they set out clear mechanisms for delivery, measurement or accountability.

There is therefore a risk that, despite the strong strategic narrative, speech and language development may not be fully embedded in implementation. To address this, RCSLT NI recommends that SLC is explicitly integrated across all themes and objectives, with clear actions, outcomes and performance indicators. This should include embedding communication development within the Early Years Framework, ensuring workforce training at universal, targeted and specialist levels include SLC, strengthening early identification pathways and access to Speech and Language Therapy, and expanding evidence-based parent-child interventions that support communication.

In addition, there is currently no clearly defined regional model for workforce training. Training provision must be structured, progressive and accessible, building on existing programmes but expanding them into a coherent pathway that includes universal, targeted and specialist levels. Critically, staff must have protected time to engage in training, and differences in workforce roles must be recognised. This is particularly important given the current fragmentation of Speech and Language Therapy roles, where clinicians are expected to deliver clinical services alongside training and supervision without sufficient resourcing or dedicated capacity. Training and supervision must therefore be embedded within team structures rather than treated as additional responsibilities.

Parental support must move beyond information provision to include modelling, coaching and sustained engagement. Programmes such as Sure Start demonstrate that joint parent and child approaches, such as Stay and Play, delivered by multidisciplinary teams including speech and language therapists, are highly effective and should be expanded. However, it is essential that expansion of such approaches is clearly resourced and that responsibility for delivery is defined, as there is currently a lack of clarity regarding which services will lead on parental support at scale.

The expansion of early years provision must also be matched by investment in specialist services, particularly Speech and Language Therapy. Without this, unmet needs will increase and opportunities for early intervention will be lost. At present, there has been no uplift in Speech and Language Therapy services, despite increasing demand, and SLTs cannot continue to absorb additional workload without additional funding. Failure to address this will place further strain on already stretched services and risks undermining the intended benefits of expansion.

Strong communication and transition processes are essential. Allied Health Professionals (AHPs), which include speech and language therapists, have a statutory role in identifying children who may have Special Educational Needs prior to the pre-

school year. These pathways must be maintained and strengthened, with clear communication between services and the explicit involvement of speech and language therapy in planning and decision-making. This is critical to ensuring that children receive the right support and appropriate placement at the earliest possible stage. In this context, it is also essential that evidence gathered by the Education Authority in nursery settings is effectively transferred into Primary 1 to ensure continuity of support and informed decision-making.

Consideration should also be given to the current inspection landscape. Early years providers are subject to multiple inspection processes, which can create duplication and administrative burden. A more streamlined approach could support consistency and reduce pressure on the sector.

There are also wider system-level considerations that require further attention. Speech and language therapists, as Allied Health Professionals, must be fully included in strategic planning and decision-making processes, as their expertise is critical to delivering early intervention and supporting children with additional needs. In addition, consultation with Sure Start management teams is essential, as they have direct insight into community needs and operational delivery on the ground.

The Strategy must also take account of demographic and structural factors, including the falling birth rate, which has implications for planning and resource allocation, and the current configuration of delivery areas, which may be based on outdated census data and require review to ensure they are fit for purpose.

It is also important to recognise that Sure Start was designed as a targeted intervention to close the gap in outcomes for children in disadvantaged areas. Expansion without maintaining this focus risks diluting its impact. A balance must therefore be struck between extending reach and preserving effectiveness, with a clear emphasis on achieving depth of intervention rather than breadth.

Furthermore, while the Strategy presents education and childcare as a joined system, in practice these operate separately, and greater clarity is needed on how integration will be achieved operationally.

Finally, while investment in infrastructure is welcome, improved outcomes will depend on quality of interaction, workforce capability and access to specialist support, rather than provision alone. Physical expansion without corresponding investment in workforce capacity, particularly within Speech and Language Therapy, risks diluting the quality of services and limiting impact on children's outcomes.

Impact Assessments

EQIA: Disagree

The EQIA does not sufficiently consider the disproportionate impact of speech, language and communication needs, particularly in disadvantaged communities.

Rural Needs: Agree (with caveats)

Further consideration is required regarding access to specialist services and workforce capacity in rural areas.

Child Rights: Agree

Children's rights must include timely access to developmental support, early identification and equitable provision.

Final Statement

RCSLT NI welcomes the ambition of the Strategy but emphasises that its success will depend on embedding speech, language and communication at its core, investing in early intervention and specialist services, strengthening workforce capacity, and providing meaningful, evidence-based support for parents.

SLTs cannot continue to absorb additional demand without investment, and without addressing workforce capacity, there is a significant risk that expansion will dilute service quality rather than improve outcomes.

For further information, please contact:

Sue McBride, Policy Advisor

Sue.mcbride@rcslt.org