

## **RCSLT NI Response to Draft Five-Year Education Budget Strategy (2025–2030)**

**March 2026**

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists Northern Ireland (RCSLT NI) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the draft Five-Year Education Budget Strategy.

We recognise the significant financial pressures outlined in the Strategy and the Department's focus on financial sustainability, efficiency, and protecting the classroom. However, we are concerned that the Strategy does not sufficiently address the workforce required to deliver these ambitions, particularly in relation to speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).

The Strategy sets out a system under significant financial strain, with Special Educational Needs (SEN) expenditure identified as a primary driver of cost growth. In this context, investment decisions must focus not only on managing demand but on reducing it through effective early and preventative intervention.

SLCN is one of the most prevalent areas of need in childhood. Evidence from the RCSLT and wider research indicates that:

- approximately 10% of children have long-term, persistent SLCN, and roughly 2 in every class of 30 will have Developmental Language Disorder or DLD.
- in areas of social disadvantage, over 50% of children may start school with delayed language (Public Health England, Education Endowment Foundation)
- SLCN is consistently identified in the top 3 needs among pupils with SEN in Northern Ireland

Speech, language and communication underpin access to the curriculum, attainment, behaviour, and wellbeing. Without appropriate support, children face long-term impacts on educational and life outcomes (Bercow Review, 2008; Bercow: Ten Years On, 2018).

### **Protecting the classroom requires protecting access to learning**

The Strategy emphasises the need to protect the classroom. However, this must include protecting the supports that enable children to access learning in the first place.

For children with SLCN, access to education depends on:

- the ability to understand and use language
- communication-supportive teaching environments
- access to specialist expertise

Speech and language therapists (SLTs) play a critical role in enabling this by supporting both individual pupils and the wider school workforce.

Without sufficient SLT capacity, there is a risk that “protecting the classroom” focuses on maintaining structures, rather than ensuring that all children can meaningfully access learning within them.

Furthermore, where communication needs are not met, children are more likely to require higher levels of support, including specialist placements and alternative provision. This not only impacts outcomes but also increases costs across the system. Protecting the classroom must therefore include protecting access to communication support as a core component of financial sustainability.

### **SEN reform and financial sustainability: a workforce gap**

The Strategy highlights the need to reform SEN provision to address rising demand and improve financial sustainability.

RCSLT NI supports the need for reform. However, the Strategy does not set out how the specialist workforce required to deliver a more efficient and effective system will be funded.

SLTs are central to a sustainable SEN system. Evidence shows that SLT input:

- supports earlier and more accurate identification of need
- reduces reliance on high-cost statutory processes
- improves outcomes through targeted and whole-class approaches
- builds capacity within the education workforce (EEF; ICAN; RCSLT evidence)

This aligns directly with the Strategy’s ambition to deliver “the right support, from the right people, at the right time and in the right place.” However, this ambition cannot be realised without sufficient specialist workforce capacity.

There is a clear opportunity to view speech and language therapy provision as a “spend to save” intervention. Early and effective support for SLCN reduces escalation of need, limits demand for statutory processes and mitigates longer-term costs across education and wider public services.

Without investment in SLT capacity, there is a risk that pressures within the SEN system will persist or increase, limiting the impact of reform.

### **Delivering workforce reform and value for money**

The Strategy places strong emphasis on value for money and more efficient use of resources, including changes to workforce models and classroom support.

These approaches are unlikely to deliver improved efficiency without access to specialist input.

SLTs enable more effective use of resources by:

- training and supporting classroom assistants and teaching staff
- embedding communication strategies across whole classes
- reducing inappropriate or inefficient use of one-to-one support

Evidence from the Education Endowment Foundation highlights that teaching assistants are most effective when deployed with appropriate training and specialist support. SLTs are key to providing this in relation to communication needs.

RCSLT NI draws the Department's attention to the Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) research and the Better Communication Research Programme. This evidence base highlights that high-volume, non-specialist classroom assistant support, when not underpinned by specialist input, is unlikely to deliver optimal outcomes for pupils. In contrast, targeted, evidence-based interventions designed and overseen by SLTs and delivered by trained staff have been shown to produce significantly greater gains in language and attainment.

This reinforces the importance of a capacity-building model, where SLTs support and upskill the wider workforce. By shifting towards SLT-led targeted tier interventions, the Department can improve outcomes while making more efficient use of existing classroom support resources, reducing reliance on high levels of one-to-one provision.

This approach supports the Department's shift away from prescriptive one-to-one support towards flexible, team-based delivery, but highlights that such reform is dependent on access to specialist expertise.

The Strategy signals a shift away from reliance on one-to-one classroom support towards more flexible, team-based approaches. RCSLT NI recognises that, when

implemented effectively, such models have the potential to improve inclusion and better utilise resources.

However, this approach is highly dependent on the skills and support available to the wider school workforce.

For children with SLCN classroom assistants play a critical role in supporting access to learning. To be effective, they require:

- a strong understanding of speech, language and communication development
- the ability to implement appropriate strategies within the classroom
- ongoing support and guidance from specialist professionals

SLTs are essential to enabling this. They provide:

- training for classroom assistants and teaching staff
- guidance on communication-supportive practice
- advice on adapting teaching approaches and materials
- targeted support for children with more complex needs

This reflects the intended move towards multidisciplinary and team-based delivery models, including the development of Education Authority's Local Impact Teams. SLTs should be a core component of these models and are essential to their effective implementation, yet are not currently part of the teams.

Without this support, there is a significant risk that:

- classroom assistants are expected to meet complex needs without sufficient expertise
- provision becomes inconsistent across schools
- children do not receive effective support

These risks undermine both outcomes for children and the intended efficiency savings.

To ensure that changes to classroom support deliver value for money and improved outcomes, there must be:

- investment in training and development of classroom assistants in SLCN
- sufficient SLT workforce capacity to provide ongoing support and oversight
- clear recognition that specialist input is integral to effective delivery

Without this, there is a risk that reducing one-to-one support will represent a reduction in provision rather than a more effective model of support.

## **Early intervention and prevention**

The Strategy emphasises the need to manage rising demand and improve sustainability within the education system. A key element of this is reducing the escalation of need through earlier and more effective support.

SLCN frequently emerge in early childhood and are among the most common areas of need identified in the school population. Evidence indicates that a significant proportion of children, particularly in areas of disadvantage, start school with delayed language. Without early identification and support, these needs can escalate, contributing to later SEN demand, lower attainment, and increased long-term costs.

Early intervention for SLCN represents a clear opportunity to support the Strategy's objectives on sustainability and improved outcomes. SLTs have a critical role to play in this through early identification, universal and targeted intervention, and building the capacity of the wider early years and school workforce.

Strengthening access to SLT support at the earliest stages would help reduce demand for more intensive and costly provision later in a child's educational journey, aligning with the Strategy's focus on prevention and value for money.

## **Wider system costs and non-discretionary pressures**

The Strategy highlights increasing non-discretionary pressures, including home-to-school transport, as a significant and growing cost. This is particularly acute for children with SEN who require specialist placements.

There is a clear link between unmet need in mainstream settings and increased reliance on specialist provision. Where children with SLCN cannot be effectively supported locally, they are more likely to be placed in specialist settings, driving additional transport costs.

Investment in SLT capacity to support inclusive, communication-supportive environments within mainstream schools has the potential to reduce reliance on out-of-area placements and associated transport expenditure. This represents a significant opportunity to deliver both improved outcomes and cost savings.

## **Assistive technology and AAC: cross-departmental cost pressures**

Children with more complex SLCN often require Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) systems, including high-cost communication devices and associated software.

These technologies are essential for enabling access to education, participation, and independence. However, they also introduce high and ongoing costs, including:

- initial device purchase
- maintenance, repair and replacement
- software licensing and updates
- training for staff and families
- ongoing specialist support to ensure effective use

Responsibility for AAC provision often sits across both health and education, creating complexity in funding, delays in provision, and inconsistency in access.

Without sufficient SLT input, there is a risk that:

- devices are underutilised or used ineffectively
- additional training costs are incurred
- educational outcomes are not maximised despite significant investment

A coordinated, cross-departmental approach is required to ensure that investment in AAC delivers value for money. This should include alignment of funding responsibilities, integration of SLT expertise, and recognition that technology alone cannot meet need without specialist support.

## **Structural workforce constraints across departments**

A significant barrier to delivery is the lack of alignment between workforce planning and funding. In recent years, there has been a clear increase in the number of children and young people with SLCN requiring support from SLTs. However, this rising demand has not been matched by sufficient investment in SLT posts. As a result, services are increasingly stretched, with SLTs required to support larger caseloads, impacting their ability to provide timely and effective intervention.

SLT training places are commissioned through the Department of Health. However, the Strategy does not include a corresponding commitment to fund specialist posts such as SLTs within education.

This creates a structural constraint:

- workforce supply and demand are not aligned
- education settings lack consistent access to SLT expertise across NI
- workforce shortages persist despite ongoing training

This lack of alignment also risks undermining the Strategy's emphasis on joint working and cross-departmental efficiency. Without coordinated planning and shared investment, opportunities to deliver better outcomes and value for money will be missed.

As highlighted in the Bercow: Ten Years On report and RCSLT workforce data, insufficient workforce capacity is a key barrier to improving outcomes for children with SLCN.

Increasing training places alone will not address this issue without parallel investment in funded posts within education. We urge the Department of Education to commit to funding SLT posts within schools as per their 5-year SEN reform agenda and plan (2025).

### **Risk to deliverability of reform**

The Strategy sets out necessary and ambitious reforms to address system pressures. However, it does not demonstrate how these reforms will be delivered in practice within existing workforce constraints.

There is a clear risk that:

- SEN reform will not be fully implementable
- workforce pressures will limit access to support
- cost pressures will continue due to unmet need and escalation

Without investment in the specialist workforce required to deliver reform, there is a risk that costs will be displaced rather than reduced, with unmet need continuing to drive demand elsewhere in the system.

International and UK evidence consistently shows that failure to invest in early and appropriate support leads to increased long-term costs across education, health and justice systems (e.g. ICAN; RCSLT; Public Accounts Committee reports).

Without investment in the SLT workforce, the Strategy risks prioritising short-term savings over long-term sustainability.

## **The need for cross-departmental planning**

Delivering the Strategy's ambitions will require a coordinated, cross-departmental approach to workforce planning.

There must be alignment between:

- SLT training commissioned by the Department of Health
- workforce demand within education
- funding for SLT posts within education settings

This should include consideration of joint commissioning or pooled funding models to reduce fragmentation, improve efficiency, and ensure continuity of support for children and young people. This is essential to ensure that children can access the support they need and that public investment delivers maximum impact.

## **Questions**

- How will the Department ensure that “protecting the classroom” includes protecting access to communication support for children with SLCN?
- What plans are in place to ensure sufficient SLT workforce capacity to deliver SEN reform?
- How will the Department ensure that workforce reform measures deliver value for money without access to specialist expertise?
- What steps will be taken to align SLT workforce planning between the Department of Health and the Department of Education?

## **Conclusion**

The Strategy clearly identifies the need to improve efficiency, sustainability and outcomes within the education system.

However, these aims cannot be achieved without investment in the workforce required to deliver them. Speech, language and communication are fundamental to education, and the SLT workforce is essential to supporting children in accessing learning and achieving their potential.

Speech and Language Therapy should be recognised not only as a specialist support, but as a key enabler of the Department's objectives on financial sustainability, early intervention, workforce reform and closing the attainment gap.

Without a clear commitment to SLT workforce development and funded posts within education, there is a significant risk that the ambitions of the Strategy will not be realised.

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