

SEND provision and reform

April 2026

SEND provision and reform for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs

- Speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) are the most common primary type of special educational need and disability (SEND).
- Many children with other types of special educational needs also have communication challenges.
- With the right support, including from speech and language therapists, children and young people with SLCN can engage with education and achieve their potential.
- They can also have better physical and mental health, healthier relationships, better employment prospects, and better life chances.
- But too many children and young people with SLCN face barriers to accessing the support they need to thrive – including many who wait too long to see a speech and language therapist.
- This puts them at risk of poorer educational attainment, exclusion from school, poorer physical and mental health, unhealthy relationships, eventual unemployment and, in some cases, involvement with the criminal justice system.
- There are things to welcome in the Government's Schools White Paper and SEND reform consultation, including its 'Experts at Hand' service.
- But if children and young people with SEND, including those with SLCN, are to receive the support they need to flourish, more needs to be done.
- On **workforce**:
 - **Workforce planning for the speech and language therapy profession, including their recruitment, retention, and career development**, must be improved – to make that a reality, the Department of Health and Social Care must acknowledge the increased demand for professionals to support children and young people with SEND in the 10 Year Workforce Plan.
 - As highlighted by the **SEND in The Specialists coalition**, made up of over 130 organisations, workforce planning for the whole specialist workforce across education, health, and social care must also be improved.

- On **access to services**:
 - As highlighted by the **Invest in SLT campaign**, including in a recent letter to the Prime Minister, supported by over 50 organisations, access to speech and language therapy must be improved, including through increased investment.

SEND and speech, language and communication needs

- SLCN are the most common type of SEND - in 2024/25, almost 400,000 children in England had SLCN as their primary need.
- As of January 2026, 65,540 children in England were waiting for speech and language therapy, with nearly 5,000 waiting over a year for support.¹
- These figures underestimate the scale of need - they only capture a child's wait for their first appointment, with many children having to wait again to receive the intervention they need.
- Access to support is inconsistent, and in some areas speech and language therapy services are only commissioned for children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), leaving many without the help they require.
- Without early intervention, children with SLCN risk lower educational attainment, mental health and behavioural challenges, social exclusion, and poorer life outcomes.
- Local joint commissioning of services is essential to ensure children on SEN support as well as those with EHCPs receive timely and effective help.

The case for action

1. The issue

- Over 1.7 million pupils in England have SEND; SLCN is the largest category.
- Autistic children, deaf children, those with learning disabilities, and social, emotional and mental health needs may also benefit from speech and language therapy.
- Delays in support can worsen outcomes, increase school exclusions, and increase pressure on health and social care services.

2. Barriers to inclusion

- Lack of SEND training in initial teacher training and continuing professional development means many staff are not equipped with the skills and knowledge they need to identify and support children with SLCN.

- Behaviour policies in schools often fail to recognise that unidentified SLCN may be an underlying cause of behaviour problems.
- Access to speech and language therapy advice and support in schools is patchy; embedding speech and language therapists within schools can help to improve access and upskill the workforce.

3. Workforce challenges

- Workforce pressures remain severe. The latest RCSLT Workforce and Vacancy Survey (spring 2025) found that 17% of speech and language therapy posts in England were vacant, with vacancy rates reaching 21% in London. Nationally, 14% of posts across both NHS and independent sectors were unfilled, highlighting a shortage of practitioners able to meet demand and reduce waiting lists.ⁱⁱ

The RCSLT view of the Schools White Paper and SEND reform consultation

- The RCSLT welcomes the UK Government's vision for an inclusive education system for all children, and supports plans to increase universal and targeted layers of support, including through introducing mandatory training for education staff on SEND and inclusion.
- The RCSLT particularly welcomes the planned £1.8bn SEND investment over three years in an 'experts at hand' service, to provide early years settings, mainstream schools, and colleges with wraparound support from professionals including speech and language therapists. The funding could help to unlock earlier support for children with speech, language, and communication needs.
- It will be important that the new Experts at Hand service is jointly commissioned and fully integrated with existing local services to provide a joined up offer to families, schools and settings, and not introduced as a standalone service which could introduce more fragmentation and variation to the system.
- It is also important to recognise that some children will continue to require individual assessments and intervention from a qualified therapist; this should be available without requiring a child or young person to qualify for a specialist provision package.
- Questions remain about how the existing workforce pressures in speech and language therapy will be addressed in the next three years, and how the service will be sustained in the longer term.
- The Schools White Paper includes some positive but limited measures to grow the speech and language therapy workforce - these must be accompanied by concrete action in the Department of Health and Social Care's upcoming 10 Year Workforce

Plan to address the recruitment, retention, and career development issues affecting the speech and language therapy profession.

What the RCSLT thinks needs to happen

To ensure that the barriers that too many children and young people with SLCN face are overcome, action is needed in a range of areas.

Joint commissioning

- The Government should introduce a new statutory requirement for local areas (local authorities and ICBs) to jointly commission services for children and young people with SEND across all four layers of support.
- The Department for Education, the Department of Health and Social Care, and NHS England should work with relevant professional bodies to develop quality standards for commissioners which set clear expectations about how health services such as speech and language therapy should be commissioned, including ensuring they reflect current population needs.

Strengthen workforce capacity

- The Department of Health and Social Care's upcoming 10 Year Workforce Plan must take account of the increased demand for health professionals to work with children and young people with SEND, and commit to action to address the recruitment and retention of speech and language therapists.
- The Department of Health and Social Care should work jointly with the Department for Education to develop an action plan for the children's workforce, which spans the workforce across education, health, and care.

The Invest in SLT campaign

- In a [letter to Sir Keir Starmer dated 22 March 2026](#), the Invest in SLT campaign highlighted the need to improve access to speech and language therapy across the entire lifespan: babies, children, young people, and adults.
- The letter was signed by over 50 organisations, as well as by members of the campaign team, and has subsequently been supported by Chris Kamara, the television presenter and former footballer and football manager.
- In relation to children and young people, the letter welcomed many of the recent proposals to reform SEND.

- But it argued that more needs to be done to guarantee that children and young people with the most complex needs who require specialised or intensive speech and language therapy will have access to timely, evidence-based intervention.

The SEND in The Specialists coalition

- The SEND In The Specialists coalition is made up of over 130 organisations, covering early years, schools, and post-16 settings, and professionals working in education, health and social care, justice, and other relevant fields.
- It [welcomes the Government's planned "experts at hand" service](#) – but it calls for more details about how the new service will work in practice, including which professionals will be included, how workforce pressures will be addressed, what plans the Government have for early years and post-16 settings, and how such a model will be funded in the longer-term after three years.

For more information

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ⁱ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/statistical-work-areas/community-health-services-waiting-lists/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.rcslt.org/speech-and-language-therapy/workforce/vacancy-survey/>