

RCSLT NI consultation response

Leading Together for Excellence: A TransformED NI strategy for teacher professional learning

Question 1: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the overall vision set out in the strategy: “To build an expert, confident teaching profession through high-quality, career-long professional learning that drives system excellence”?

Response: Strongly Agree

RCSLT NI strongly agrees with the overall vision of building an expert, confident teaching profession through high-quality, career-long professional learning that drives system excellence.

We welcome the recognition that teaching quality is one of the most significant factors influencing educational outcomes and support the strategy's commitment to sustained evidence-informed professional learning throughout a teacher's career. The emphasis on professional standards, curriculum alignment, leadership development and system-wide improvement reflects many of the features associated with high-performing education systems internationally.

However, we believe the vision would be strengthened by explicitly recognising the importance of speech, language and communication (SLC). SLC underpins all aspects of teaching, learning, assessment, behaviour, inclusion and curriculum access. Teachers communicate knowledge, learners demonstrate understanding through communication, and relationships within schools are built through communication. It is therefore fundamental to educational excellence.

Around 10% of children and young people experience long-term speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), including approximately 7.58% with Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) and 2.34% with language disorder associated with another condition (Norbury et al., 2016). In practical terms, this means that there are likely to be children with significant communication needs in every classroom.

SLCN is also one of the most prevalent special educational needs in Northern Ireland. Department of Education statistics show significant increases in the

number of children identified with SLCN over recent years, particularly within post primary settings. Between 2019/20 and 2024/25, the number of pupils identified with SLCN increased in primary by 87% with post-primary numbers increasing by over 160%. This reinforces the importance of ensuring that all teachers have a foundational understanding of communication development and communication-supportive practice.

Northern Ireland evidence further highlights the importance of communication within education. Findings from the [RCSLT NI We Are The Village report](#) identified significant demand from parents and practitioners for greater support and training in SLC. More recently, the Department of Education funded [Language Launchpad project](#) has reinforced the importance of early identification, workforce development and communication-supportive environments in improving outcomes for children and young people. Together, these initiatives demonstrate both the scale of need and the importance of ensuring that SLC are embedded within teacher professional learning.

Evidence demonstrates that SLC skills are strongly associated with literacy, educational attainment, wellbeing and future life outcomes. Language development at age two is a strong predictor of later literacy and educational attainment (Snowling et al., 2011). Children with SLCN are more likely to experience literacy difficulties (Dockrell and Howell, 2015), poorer educational outcomes (Law et al., 2009) and social, emotional and mental health difficulties (Yew and O'Kearney, 2013).

Northern Ireland is undergoing significant curriculum reform, implementation of the Graduated Response Framework and increasing inclusion within mainstream education. These developments further strengthen the case for embedding SLC within teacher professional learning.

Question 2: To what extent do you agree or disagree that professional learning should be viewed as a career-long continuum?

Response: Strongly Agree

RCSLT NI strongly agrees that professional learning should be viewed as a career-long continuum.

Teaching is a complex and evolving profession. No initial qualification can fully prepare teachers for the diverse and changing needs of children and young people they will encounter throughout their careers. Professional expertise

develops progressively through reflection, experience, collaboration and engagement with evidence.

A continuum approach is particularly important in supporting inclusion. Teachers increasingly work with learners who have a broad range of strengths and needs, including SLCN, DLD, autism, sensory impairments and social, emotional and mental health needs. The knowledge and skills required to effectively support these learners cannot be acquired through a single training event and must instead be developed over time.

We particularly welcome the recognition that expertise can develop through both leadership and specialist pathways. This creates opportunities for teachers to deepen their understanding of SLC development, inclusion and special educational needs while remaining closely connected to classroom practice.

SLCN training should be embedded throughout the professional learning continuum. Teachers require an understanding of typical communication development during Initial Teacher Education, practical communication-supportive strategies during induction and early career development, and more advanced understanding of identification, intervention and inclusive practice as their careers progress.

This is particularly important given the growing evidence linking SLCN difficulties to educational attainment, wellbeing, school engagement and long-term life outcomes. Professional learning should therefore support teachers to continually develop their knowledge and confidence in identifying and responding to communication needs throughout their careers.

Question 3: Based on your experience, what are the most significant gaps in current professional learning provision?

Selected responses:

- Professional learning is too generic and not sufficiently tailored to classroom practice.
- Limited coherence across career stages.
- Insufficient time and protected space for high-quality professional learning.
- Limited access to high-quality research-informed practice.
- Gaps in SEN-related professional learning.
- Insufficient opportunities for collaborative, school or cluster-based professional learning.

- Limited support for leadership preparation and development.
- Limited clarity about entitlement to professional learning across the system.
- Fragmentation across providers, with no single source of coordination or oversight.

Additional comments:

From an RCSLT NI perspective, one of the most significant gaps in current professional learning provision relates to SLCN.

While many teachers will encounter children and young people with SLCN throughout their careers, training in this area is often limited, inconsistent or embedded within broader SEN provision. This can result in communication difficulties being overlooked or misunderstood despite communication underpinning every aspect of classroom learning.

We would particularly highlight the need for greater professional learning in:

- Typical SLC development.
- DLD.
- Identification of SLCN.
- Communication-supportive classroom practice.
- Vocabulary development and language for learning.
- The relationship between communication, literacy and attainment.
- The relationship between communication, behaviour and emotional wellbeing.

This is particularly important given the evidence linking SLCN to poorer educational outcomes. In England, only 9.8% of pupils identified with SLCN achieved expected GCSE outcomes in English and Mathematics compared with 42.4% of all pupils (Department for Education, 2020). Children with SLCN are also more likely to experience social, emotional and mental health difficulties, with research indicating that children with language difficulties are approximately twice as likely to experience mental health difficulties later in life (Yew and O'Kearney, 2013).

We also believe that SLCN is often absent from wider professional learning relating to behaviour, attendance, inclusion and wellbeing despite strong evidence that communication difficulties frequently underpin challenges in these areas.

Question 4: To what extent do you agree or disagree that implementation of the Initial Teacher Education Curriculum Framework will enhance coherence and consistency across all Initial Teacher Education courses in Northern Ireland?

Response: Agree

RCSLT NI agrees that implementation of the Initial Teacher Education (ITE) Curriculum Framework has the potential to enhance coherence and consistency across teacher education in Northern Ireland.

A shared framework provides an important opportunity to ensure that all newly qualified teachers enter the profession with a common foundation of knowledge, skills and professional values, regardless of where they train. Greater consistency across ITE programmes should strengthen classroom readiness, support the transition into induction and establish a more coherent career-long approach to professional learning.

To maximise this opportunity, we believe the framework should explicitly recognise speech, language and communication as a core component of effective teaching. SLC is fundamental to curriculum access, literacy, learning, participation and inclusion, and all teachers will work with children and young people whose learning is affected by SLCN,

Rather than viewing SLCN as specialist knowledge relevant only to special educational needs, the framework should equip all student teachers with a foundational understanding of typical SLC development, the impact of SLCN, including Developmental Language Disorder (DLD), and practical communication-supportive approaches that can be embedded within everyday classroom practice.

Embedding this knowledge within Initial Teacher Education would provide a strong foundation for induction and subsequent professional learning, ensuring that teachers begin their careers with the confidence and skills to create communication-supportive learning environments that benefit all learners.

Question 5: The strategy proposes modernising the current Teacher Competences. To what extent do you agree or disagree that this is necessary to support professional growth and clarity of expectations?

Response: Strongly Agree

RCSLT NI strongly agrees that modernising the current Teacher Competences is necessary to support professional growth, professional identity and clarity of expectations across the teaching profession.

The role of teachers has evolved significantly over the past decade, reflecting developments in educational research, inclusion, digital technology, curriculum reform and our understanding of the diverse needs of learners. Modernising the competencies provides an important opportunity to ensure that professional expectations remain relevant, evidence-informed and aligned with contemporary educational priorities.

We particularly welcome the intention to create competencies that support a coherent professional learning continuum from Initial Teacher Education through to experienced practice and leadership. Clear competencies can help teachers identify development needs, guide professional learning and strengthen consistency across the education system.

As part of this review, we would encourage explicit recognition of SLC as a core component of effective teaching. Communication is the mechanism through which teaching takes place, learning is demonstrated and relationships are built. It underpins literacy, numeracy, behaviour, emotional wellbeing and participation.

SLC should be recognised as a fundamental teaching competency alongside literacy, numeracy and inclusion. Embedding communication within the revised Teacher Competences would help ensure that all teachers are equipped to support the significant number of children and young people with communication needs in Northern Ireland.

Question 6: The strategy proposes introducing distinct Leadership Standards for Northern Ireland. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this proposal?

Response: Strongly Agree

RCSLT NI strongly agrees with the proposal to introduce distinct Leadership Standards for Northern Ireland.

Educational leadership requires a specific set of knowledge, skills and responsibilities that extend beyond classroom teaching. Clear leadership standards can support leadership development, provide greater consistency

across the system and help ensure that leaders are equipped to create the conditions necessary for high-quality teaching, learning and inclusion.

We welcome the recognition that leadership development should be deliberate, coherent and evidence informed. Strong leadership plays a critical role in shaping school culture, workforce development, school improvement priorities and the effective implementation of inclusive practice.

We would encourage the proposed Leadership Standards to include explicit reference to communication, inclusion and the creation of communication-supportive learning environments.

School leaders have a significant influence on:

- How effectively communication needs are identified.
- The extent to which communication-supportive practices are embedded across schools.
- Professional learning priorities.
- Inclusive school cultures.
- School improvement planning.
- Relationships with families and external professionals.

Research consistently demonstrates the links between communication difficulties, educational attainment, behaviour, attendance and wellbeing. Leaders therefore require an understanding of how SLCN impacts learning and how communication barriers can affect participation and achievement.

Leadership standards should support leaders to:

- Create communication-supportive schools.
- Promote inclusive communication practices.
- Recognise communication barriers to learning.
- Ensure communication accessibility is considered in policies and procedures.
- Support professional learning relating to SLCN and DLD.

We strongly support the introduction of distinct Leadership Standards and believe they provide an important opportunity to strengthen inclusive leadership across the education system.

Question 7: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to make induction mandatory for all newly qualified teachers in Northern Ireland?

Response: Strongly Agree

RCSLT NI strongly agrees with the proposal to make induction mandatory for all newly qualified teachers.

The transition from Initial Teacher Education into professional practice is a critical stage in a teacher's career and plays an important role in building confidence, competence and long-term retention. A consistent and universal induction programme will help ensure that all newly qualified teachers receive equitable support regardless of school setting or location.

We particularly welcome the opportunity that a mandatory induction programme presents to establish a common baseline of knowledge in key areas including inclusion, special educational needs and evidence-informed practice.

We would encourage the induction programme to include specific content relating to:

- SLC development.
- Speech, language and communication needs.
- Developmental Language Disorder.
- Communication-supportive teaching approaches.
- Language and literacy development.
- Communication and behaviour.

SLC underpins learning, literacy, behaviour, wellbeing and participation and is therefore relevant to all teachers, regardless of phase or subject specialism.

Embedding communication within induction would help ensure that teachers enter the profession with greater confidence in identifying and supporting communication needs and creating inclusive learning environments.

Question 8: To what extent do you agree or disagree that Early Professional Development beyond induction should be strengthened and more clearly defined as a distinct career phase?

Response: Strongly Agree

RCSLT NI strongly agrees that Early Professional Development (EPD) should be strengthened and recognised as a distinct phase within the professional learning continuum.

While induction establishes a foundation for professional practice, the early years of teaching are when knowledge is consolidated, confidence develops and teachers begin to refine their classroom practice. A structured EPD programme provides an important opportunity to deepen expertise through sustained, evidence-informed professional learning and reflection.

For many teachers, this is also the stage at which they encounter an increasingly diverse range of learners and begin to recognise the complexity of meeting individual needs within inclusive classrooms. Professional learning should therefore move beyond awareness towards practical implementation, enabling teachers to apply inclusive strategies with confidence.

RCSLT NI believes EPD should include opportunities to strengthen understanding of speech, language and communication, including communication-supportive teaching, vocabulary and language for learning, identification of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), including Developmental Language Disorder (DLD), and effective classroom strategies that support participation and attainment for all learners.

Embedding communication within EPD would reinforce the knowledge introduced during Initial Teacher Education and induction while enabling teachers to develop increasingly sophisticated practice as their experience grows. This would strengthen inclusive teaching, improve curriculum access and help ensure that communication is recognised as a fundamental element of effective teaching throughout a teacher's career.

Question 9: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the strategy's proposal to establish a Northern Ireland Centre for Educational Excellence and Improvement as a central agency to work with the education system to improve learning, teaching, curriculum, leadership and professional learning?

Response: Agree

RCSLT NI agrees with the proposal to establish a Northern Ireland Centre for Educational Excellence and Improvement and welcomes the ambition to provide greater coherence, coordination and strategic leadership across curriculum, professional learning, leadership development and school improvement.

The current professional learning landscape can be fragmented, and there is value in establishing a mechanism to promote consistency, quality assurance, evidence-informed practice and alignment with wider educational priorities.

However, for the Centre to successfully support all learners, it will be important that it draws upon expertise from across education, health and wider public services.

We would particularly encourage the inclusion of specialist speech and language therapy expertise within the Centre's governance, advisory arrangements or commissioned work.

Speech, language and communication are fundamental to:

- Learning and teaching.
- Literacy development.
- Curriculum access.
- Behaviour and wellbeing.
- Inclusion.
- Educational attainment.

Given the prevalence of SLCN within the school-age population, specialist expertise should inform curriculum development, professional learning, inclusion strategies and educational policy development.

The Centre also presents an opportunity to strengthen collaboration between education and health services and ensure that communication is recognised as a fundamental component of educational excellence.

Question 10: Is there anything else you would like to share that could strengthen the strategy or its implementation?

Additional Comments

RCSLT NI welcomes the overall direction of the strategy and its commitment to career-long professional learning, leadership development, evidence-informed practice and educational excellence.

However, we believe the strategy would be significantly strengthened by the explicit inclusion of speech, language and communication throughout the professional learning continuum.

SLC underpin learning, literacy, numeracy, behaviour, emotional wellbeing, social participation and educational attainment. Yet SLCN, including DLD, are largely absent from the strategy despite representing one of the most prevalent areas of need within the education system.

Communication is not solely an SEN issue. It is a teaching and learning issue.

Teachers communicate knowledge, pupils demonstrate understanding through communication, curriculum content is delivered through language and relationships within schools are built through communication. Consequently, supporting speech, language and communication should be viewed as a core component of effective teaching rather than a specialist area relevant only to some learners.

The evidence base demonstrates the importance of communication throughout the life course:

- Around 10% of children and young people experience long-term speech, language and communication needs (Norbury et al., 2016).
- Language development at age two is strongly associated with later literacy and educational attainment (Snowling et al., 2011).
- Children with SLCN are more likely to experience literacy difficulties (Dockrell and Howell, 2015).
- Children with language difficulties are approximately twice as likely to experience social, emotional and mental health difficulties (Yew and O'Kearney, 2013).
- Approximately 81% of children with emotional and behavioural disorders have significant language difficulties (Hollo et al., 2014).
- Up to 60% of young people within the youth justice system experience communication difficulties (Bryan et al., 2007).
- Adults with childhood language difficulties experience poorer educational, employment and wellbeing outcomes (Law et al., 2009).

Northern Ireland data also demonstrates a substantial increase in the number of children identified with SLCN over recent years, particularly within post-primary education. This reinforces the need for all teachers to have knowledge and skills relating to communication development and communication-supportive practice.

To strengthen the strategy, we would encourage the Department to:

- Embed speech, language and communication within the revised Teacher Competences.
- Include communication and communication-supportive practice within Leadership Standards.
- Ensure all Initial Teacher Education programmes include core content relating to speech, language and communication development, SLCN and DLD.
- Include communication-focused content within induction and Early Professional Development programmes.
- Ensure speech and language therapy expertise informs the work of the proposed Northern Ireland Centre for Educational Excellence and Improvement.
- Promote communication-supportive classrooms and communication accessibility as universal teaching approaches that benefit all learners.
- Support collaboration between teachers and speech and language therapists through professional learning, mentoring and school improvement activity.
- Recognise the role of communication in attendance, behaviour, inclusion and mental health initiatives.

We believe these additions would strengthen the strategy's ability to improve educational outcomes, reduce inequalities and support the needs of all children and young people.

Question 11: Do you agree with the outcome of the Equality Screening and/or are there any considerations that should be reflected?

Response: Agree, with additional considerations.

RCSLT NI agrees with the overall findings of the Equality Screening. However, we believe additional consideration should be given to the needs of children and young people with SLCN, including DLD.

SLCN can significantly affect access to learning, participation, attainment, social inclusion, emotional wellbeing and future life opportunities. While SLCN may occur alongside disability, many children and young people with communication needs may not be explicitly recognised within broader equality considerations. There is therefore a risk that communication barriers remain overlooked during implementation.

SLCN also intersects with a range of equality and inclusion issues.

Children and young people experiencing social disadvantage are disproportionately affected by language difficulties. Research suggests that

around 50% of children in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage may start school with delayed language development or identified communication needs (Law et al., 2011; Institute of Health Equity, 2020).

Communication difficulties are also more prevalent among groups who may already experience disadvantage or exclusion, including:

- Children in care.
- Care leavers.
- Children with social, emotional and mental health needs.
- Young people involved with youth justice services.
- Children with neurodevelopmental conditions.
- Children experiencing persistent absence or exclusion from school.

Research has identified that approximately 90% of care leavers have below-average language abilities and more than 60% meet the criteria for Developmental Language Disorder (Clegg et al., 2021). Similarly, communication difficulties are highly prevalent among young people involved in youth justice services (Bryan et al., 2007).

We would therefore encourage the Department to consider communication as an important equality and inclusion issue within implementation of the strategy.

Specifically, we would encourage consideration of:

- Communication accessibility within professional learning resources.
- Accessible communication within digital learning platforms.
- Professional learning relating to communication barriers and inclusive communication.
- Recognition of communication needs within wider inclusion and equality work.
- The role of communication in addressing educational disadvantage and improving outcomes for vulnerable groups.

Improving teachers' understanding of speech, language and communication has the potential not only to improve educational outcomes but also to reduce inequalities and improve participation for some of the most vulnerable children and young people in society.

Strengthening the focus on communication would support the strategy's wider aims of equity, inclusion and improved outcomes for all learners and help

ensure that children and young people with speech, language and communication needs are not inadvertently disadvantaged.

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