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University Health Board



Service Improvement Project

Identifying ways to Enhance Equity in Access to Early Years Speech and Language Therapy Services in Cardiff and the Vale

Exploring the experiences of families and communities who face challenges accessing support, with the aim to co-develop more inclusive and accessible Early Years SLT services

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June 2025-March 2026

Acknowledgements

Thanks to additional funding provided through the Welsh Government's Talk with Me programme, the children's Early Years SLT team in CAV had the valuable opportunity to gain deeper insight into potential barriers that may make our services difficult to access.

Introduction

Cardiff and Vale (CAV) University Health Board (UHB) serves a diverse population across Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan. It is recognised that accessing services can be challenging for some individuals. This project sought to support and advance the Health Board's vision by identifying what can be done to enhance inclusivity and improve accessibility within its Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) service.

Under-represented communities face disproportionate challenges in accessing health care services across Cardiff and the Vale and beyond.

By understanding the experiences of families and communities facing difficulties in accessing support, we can collaboratively identify ways to make the CAV Early years SLT service accessible for all.

'Children from deprived areas and those with additional needs are disproportionately affected' (RCSLT 'state of the nation report', 2025)

Objective

This project aims to answer the following questions:

- **Who** are the communities who find it difficult to access early years Children's SLT in CAV?
- **Why** might this service be difficult to access? What are the barriers?
- **What** can be done to reduce the barriers?

Literature Review



Though UK based research is limited in this area, international research and research in other fields show that barriers in access to health services are multifactorial, shaped by family pressures, previous experiences of services, and the quality of relationships with professionals. Across settings and disciplines, parents emphasise the importance of clear pathways, responsive communication, and empathetic, trusting therapeutic relationships.

Stories from Lived Experiences

Data was gathered from families and under-represented communities to ensure that outcomes accurately reflected the experiences of those who access or wish to access the service.

A total of 85 participants contributed to the project. The majority were parents and carers (66 in total). Professional contributions came from 10 health professionals, 4 education professionals, and 7 third-sector professionals, ensuring representation from key services supporting families.

Findings and Themes: Understanding Barriers to Access

Thematic analysis was used to identify 10 key themes:

1. Lack of Awareness of SLT & How to Access It
2. Practical Access Barriers & Service Design Factors
3. Language & Cultural Barriers
4. Social Stigma & Fear of Judgement
5. Trust & Relationship Building
6. How the SLT service works
7. Timing, Readiness & Capacity to Engage
8. Increasing Need for SLT Presence in the Community
9. Accessible Information
10. Digital Communication, Online Presence & Digital Inclusion

MOST FREQUENT THEME: Lack of Awareness of SLT & How to Access It

Many families (particularly first time parents, those new to the UK, and members of ethnic minority communities) reported not knowing that SLT existed, what SLTs do, or how referrals work. Participants also highlighted gaps in signposting and early recognition of needs, underscoring the importance of accessible information and consistent check-ins during the early years.

Most frequently requested recommendations:

- Launch an SLT awareness campaign
- Raise awareness of SLT referral processes
- Co-produce translated, easy-read, visual information
- Increase SLT presence in community spaces (libraries, hubs, schools, nurseries, health fairs)
- Engage parent representatives as community spokespeople
- Improve digital signposting (Keeping Me Well website, QR codes, GP/hub screens)

"I wasn't aware I could refer myself"

"What exactly is SLT?"

"Something to help us get to know the area -leaflets, pictures of the room so that I can explain to him [child] what the appointment will look like"

"A translation can be taken in several ways"

"More communication between health services"

"Parents don't want to be judged"

"Online referrals would help"

"Location of appointment can make it difficult. As a young parent, it was very difficult to get out of the house in the first year of [child] being born"

Conclusion

This project confirms that under-represented communities experience greater difficulty accessing Early Years SLT in CAV UHB. Based on the families who contributed to this project, these under-represented groups include families living in socio-economically disadvantaged areas, Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities, families with English as an additional language, the Gypsy Traveller community, and those known to children's services. Despite best efforts to ensure that participants reflected the diversity of the communities we work with, it is likely that other groups also experience similar barriers.

Barriers to access include limited awareness of SLT, practical access issues, and cultural or language factors. Findings across literature, families and SLTs consistently highlight the need for a more visible, flexible and community-embedded service. Targeted, culturally responsive approaches are essential to ensure equitable access for all families. Additional steps are required to support the effective implementation of the recommendations.