

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists Northern Ireland (RCSLT NI)
Consultation Response to:

Behaviour in Schools Review: Call for Evidence

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) is the professional body for speech and language therapists in the UK. As well as providing leadership and setting professional standards, the RCSLT facilitates and promotes research into the field of speech and language therapy, promotes better education and training of speech and language therapists, and provides its members and the public with information about speech and language therapy.

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Note on scope of response

There are a number of questions within this Call for Evidence that fall outside the professional remit and expertise of the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists Northern Ireland (RCSLT NI). We have therefore responded only to those questions where RCSLT NI can provide relevant professional expertise, evidence or experience, particularly in relation to speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), developmental language disorder (DLD), communication accessibility and the participation and inclusion of children and young people with communication needs.

11. Are there particular groups or stages where issues are more pronounced?

Yes. RCSLT NI would particularly highlight children and young people with special educational needs (SEN), including those with SLCN, DLD, autism, learning disability and other neurodevelopmental needs. Consideration should also be given to children and young people whose needs are unidentified or who do not meet thresholds for specialist support.

It is important, however, that particular groups are not characterised as inherently presenting greater behavioural problems. Rather, some children and young people may be at increased risk of behaviours being misunderstood where underlying communication, learning, sensory, emotional or other needs have not been identified or appropriately supported.

There is a well established relationship between language difficulties and social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Research with secondary aged pupils at risk of exclusion has identified significant previously unidentified language difficulties (Clegg et al., 2009). This is important because difficulties understanding spoken language, processing instructions, expressing needs and emotions, explaining events,

understanding social situations and resolving conflict can present as, or contribute to, behaviours interpreted as disengagement, non-compliance or disruption.

Northern Ireland evidence is also important. McBride (2020), in research examining post-primary teachers' preparedness to support pupils with DLD, identified significant gaps in teacher knowledge and understanding of DLD. This is particularly relevant at post-primary level, where pupils encounter increasingly complex language and greater academic, organisational and social demands.

RCSLT NI would particularly highlight transition from primary to post-primary education. Pupils move from a relatively contained environment to multiple teachers and classrooms, more complex instructions, increasingly abstract and subject-specific vocabulary, greater expectations for independent organisation and more complex peer relationships. For pupils with SLCN, these increased demands can expose difficulties which may previously have been less apparent.

There is recognition of the importance of later transition points within Northern Ireland's own education planning. The RAISE South Belfast Strategic Area Plan identifies speech, language and communication support at later educational transition points, including Key Stages 2 and 4, as relevant to improving access to learning, attendance and attainment (Department of Education NI, 2025).

Other groups which may require particular consideration include pupils experiencing disadvantage or adverse experiences; children in care or with care experience; newcomer pupils; pupils experiencing emotionally based school non-attendance; and pupils within specialist provision or EOTAS. These factors may intersect with SEN and communication needs rather than operating independently.

The Review should therefore consider whether behaviour difficulties become more pronounced where the linguistic, academic, organisational, sensory or social demands placed upon a pupil exceed their current capacity or the support available to them.

12. How does behaviour affect classroom teaching and learning, pupil attainment and engagement and staff workload, wellbeing, and retention?

RCSLT NI is best placed to comment on the impact on pupils' access to teaching and learning, attainment and engagement, particularly where SLCN are present. We would defer to teachers, school leaders and their representative organisations regarding staff workload, wellbeing and retention.

Behaviour can significantly affect access to learning and classroom participation. However, the relationship is not one directional. Difficulties accessing teaching, understanding classroom language, following instructions, expressing ideas or needs and managing social interactions can themselves contribute to behaviours of concern.

For pupils with SLCN, classroom learning can place substantial demands on receptive and expressive language, language processing and working memory. A pupil who has not understood an instruction, cannot process information at the pace at which it is presented or does not have the language to request clarification may appear inattentive, disengaged or non-compliant.

This can create a cycle in which an underlying communication difficulty contributes to behaviour; the resulting behaviour leads to reduced participation or removal from learning; and the subsequent loss of teaching further increases difficulties with learning, attainment and engagement.

Recent evidence from Speech and Language UK is particularly concerning. Its Support Not Sanctions research found that 78% of teachers surveyed reported that children with speech and language challenges were punished because of those difficulties. Almost half (49%) reported insufficient training to support children's speech and language development and 46% considered that their school's behaviour policy did not sufficiently prioritise speech and language needs (Speech and Language UK, 2025).

Communication is also fundamental to many of the processes used following behavioural incidents. Pupils may be expected to explain what happened, sequence events, understand consequences, reflect upon their actions, identify and describe emotions, infer another person's perspective and participate in restorative conversations. These are linguistically and cognitively demanding activities.

Without appropriate adjustments, pupils with SLCN may therefore be disadvantaged not only in the circumstances leading to a behavioural incident but also in the processes used subsequently to understand and address it.

Particular consideration should be given to approaches involving repeated removal from teaching and learning. For pupils already experiencing barriers to curriculum access, repeated loss of learning time risks compounding existing difficulties with attainment and engagement.

RCSLT NI would therefore encourage the Review to recognise communication as an important component of understanding behaviour, preventing escalation and supporting pupils to remain meaningfully engaged in education.

15. What factors contribute to behaviour challenges in education settings in Northern Ireland?

RCSLT NI would particularly highlight unmet or unidentified SLCN as one factor which may contribute to behaviour challenges.

The potential for SLCN to remain unidentified is particularly important in the context of behaviour. In a meta analysis of 22 studies involving 1,171 children aged 5–13 who had been identified with emotional and behavioural disorders but had no previously

identified language disorder, 81% demonstrated below average language performance, with 47% experiencing moderate to severe difficulties (Hollo, Wehby and Oliver, 2014). The authors concluded that language difficulties are likely to be overlooked in this population and recommended language screening for children with emotional and behavioural disorders.

This reinforces the importance of looking beyond presenting behaviour and considering whether an unidentified communication need may be contributing to a pupil's difficulties.

Behaviour should not be considered in isolation from a child or young person's communication, learning, sensory, emotional and developmental needs or from the demands of their environment. What presents as challenging behaviour may sometimes reflect a mismatch between these demands and a pupil's ability to understand, communicate and participate successfully.

For children and young people with SLCN, relevant difficulties can include understanding spoken instructions and explanations; processing lengthy or complex language; understanding abstract or ambiguous language; expressing needs, emotions and experiences; finding the words to request help; understanding social situations and other people's perspectives; and negotiating and resolving conflict.

Importantly, communication difficulties are not always readily apparent. Research has demonstrated significant unidentified language difficulties among young people experiencing behavioural and educational difficulties (Clegg et al., 2009). A pupil does not therefore need an existing diagnosis or identified SEN for communication difficulties to be relevant.

Environmental factors must also be considered. Language-heavy classrooms, lengthy instructions, rapid presentation of verbal information, unclear or implicit expectations, changes in routine and increasing academic, organisational and social demands may create additional barriers for pupils with communication needs.

Speech and Language UK's Support Not Sanctions research provides contemporary evidence of the consequences when this interaction is not recognised. The organisation reports examples of children being sanctioned for apparent failures to follow instructions or respond appropriately where difficulty understanding or using language may have contributed to the behaviour (Speech and Language UK, 2025).

Communication needs can also intersect with neurodevelopmental needs, mental health and emotional wellbeing, adverse experiences, disadvantage and attendance difficulties. These should not be considered as discrete categories, as individual pupils may experience multiple and interacting barriers.

The Review should therefore encourage consideration not only of "what is the behaviour?" but "what might be contributing to the behaviour?" This should include whether the pupil understands what is expected, can communicate their needs and experiences, and whether adjustments to communication, teaching or the environment could reduce the difficulty.

18. What are the key barriers to effectively managing behaviour?

From an RCSLT NI perspective, a significant barrier is failure to recognise and address underlying or contributing needs, including SLCN.

A further barrier is limited workforce understanding of SLCN and the ways in which communication needs may present within educational settings. Communication difficulties can be mistaken for disengagement, defiance or deliberate non-compliance, particularly where the need has not previously been identified.

This concern is supported by recent UK evidence. Speech and Language UK (2025) found that 49% of teachers surveyed reported that they had not received sufficient training to support children's speech and language development, while 46% said their school's behaviour policy did not sufficiently prioritise speech and language needs.

The accessibility of behaviour policies and processes is another potential barrier. Rules, expectations and consequences must be communicated in ways pupils can understand. Processes requiring pupils to explain incidents, reflect upon their actions, identify emotions or participate in restorative conversations can place significant demands on receptive and expressive language, memory, narrative skills and social communication.

Consistency of approach is important, but consistency should not be interpreted as requiring an identical response for every pupil. Effective behaviour approaches must accommodate reasonable adjustments and individual communication, learning and developmental needs while maintaining clear expectations.

Other barriers include difficulties accessing timely assessment and specialist advice; unclear pathways between education, health and other services; and lack of continuity of information and effective strategies at key transition points.

19. What strategies are the least efficient? Are there approaches we should be doing less of?

RCSLT NI would caution against approaches which focus primarily on the presenting behaviour without adequately considering factors which may be contributing to it.

There is now evidence supporting particular caution where sanctions are applied to behaviour arising from communication difficulties. Speech and Language UK's Support Not Sanctions research found that 78% of teachers surveyed considered that children

with speech and language challenges were being punished because of those difficulties (Speech and Language UK, 2025).

This does not mean that RCSLT NI opposes clear behavioural expectations or appropriate consequences. Rather, there should be less reliance on repeated sanctions where an underlying communication or other additional need has not been considered.

We would also encourage less reliance on communication heavy approaches without appropriate adjustments. Asking a pupil repeatedly to explain why they behaved in a particular way, provide a detailed verbal account, reflect upon their actions, describe emotions or infer another person's perspective can be ineffective where the pupil has difficulties with language processing, expressive language, narrative skills or social communication.

Similarly, repeating an instruction, increasing the amount of verbal explanation or giving repeated verbal warnings will not necessarily improve understanding where language processing or comprehension is the underlying difficulty.

An apparent failure to answer, explain, apologise or engage verbally should not automatically be interpreted as refusal to cooperate. Pupils may require additional processing time, simplified language, visual support, alternative means of communication or support from an adult familiar with their communication needs.

Approaches which repeatedly remove pupils from teaching and learning also require careful consideration, particularly where the behaviour may be associated with an unmet additional need. Lost learning may compound existing difficulties without addressing the factor contributing to the behaviour.

The emphasis should therefore be on reducing one size fits all responses and increasing understanding of the function and context of behaviour and the individual pupil's needs.

20. Where are the gaps in resources, training and professional learning, external support services, and policy or guidance?

RCSLT NI considers there to be an important gap in understanding SLCN within approaches to behaviour, including how unidentified or unsupported communication needs can present as, contribute to, or be mistaken for behavioural difficulties.

There is a need for greater workforce understanding of SLCN and DLD, including their interaction with learning, behaviour, emotional regulation and social participation.

RCSLT NI's 2024 survey of EOTAS staff provides relevant Northern Ireland evidence. Of 92 respondents, 92% reported receiving no training in SLCN; only 15% were able to define SLCN; 22% reported confidence in recognising its impact; and only 12% indicated that they currently had the necessary skills. These findings relate specifically to the EOTAS workforce and should not be extrapolated to the education workforce as a

whole. Nevertheless, they demonstrate a significant training need within a group working with pupils who may have complex and overlapping needs.

This is consistent with wider UK evidence, with 49% of teachers in Speech and Language UK's survey reporting insufficient training in children's speech and language development (Speech and Language UK, 2025).

Professional learning should support staff to recognise possible communication needs, understand their potential impact on behaviour and know what practical adjustments can be made and when specialist advice should be sought.

There are also gaps in accessible resources. Behaviour expectations, policies and pupil facing information should be accessible to pupils with different language, communication and literacy needs. Practical guidance should include clear and concrete language, manageable instructions, processing time, checking understanding, visual support and alternative means of communication, including AAC where required.

Schools also require clear pathways to specialist advice and support where communication needs may be contributing to persistent difficulties. Effective collaboration between education, speech and language therapy and other relevant services is important, alongside clarity regarding roles and referral pathways.

At policy level, communication should be explicitly embedded within behaviour guidance rather than considered only after difficulties have escalated. Guidance should prompt consideration of whether the pupil understands what is expected, can communicate what they need or what has happened, and whether communication or other additional needs may be contributing to the presenting behaviour.

Guidance should also make clear that consistency does not necessarily mean identical responses. Appropriate reasonable adjustments should be compatible with clear and appropriately high expectations.

21. What changes would most improve behaviour in schools?

From an RCSLT NI perspective, an important change would be strengthening early identification and support for underlying needs, including SLCN, within a preventative and inclusive approach to behaviour.

This should include a communication supportive whole school approach; greater workforce understanding of SLCN; earlier consideration of underlying need when persistent or changing behaviour emerges; accessible behaviour policies and processes; clear pathways to specialist advice; and continuity of effective support at educational transitions.

Behaviour policies should ensure that pupils understand the expectations placed upon them. Communication accessibility should therefore be considered when developing rules, instructions, sanctions, restorative processes and pupil facing information.

Meaningful pupil voice is also essential. Children and young people should be supported to identify what helps them participate, regulate and learn. This requires accessible questions and information and, where necessary, visual support, AAC and alternative ways of expressing their views.

Speech and Language UK (2025) recommend reform of behaviour guidance so that staff are supported to consider the underlying reasons for behaviour, alongside workforce training and access to evidence based communication support.

The overall direction should be towards prevention and early intervention: universal communication supportive practice for all pupils; identification and targeted support where difficulties emerge; and timely access to specialist input where required.

Clear expectations and inclusion should not be regarded as competing objectives. A consistent behaviour framework can maintain appropriate expectations while recognising that individual pupils may require different communication approaches, reasonable adjustments or additional support to understand and meet those expectations.

22. Are there examples of good practice that could be scaled or replicated?

Yes. There are examples elsewhere in the UK from which Northern Ireland could draw learning, particularly approaches which embed communication and identification of need within whole school practice.

Speech and Language UK's Support Not Sanctions work provides an important contemporary example at policy level. Its' recommendations include training teachers to recognise and support speech and language needs, revising behaviour guidance so children are not sanctioned for difficulties associated with communication needs, providing practical communication tools and ensuring targeted support is available across key stages (Speech and Language UK, 2025).

RCSLT NI also notes Speech and Language UK's response to recent debate concerning strict behaviour approaches. Following comments by the Department for Education's Attendance and Behaviour Ambassador, Tom Bennett, Speech and Language UK argued that clear behaviour expectations and inclusion can only operate effectively together where communication needs are recognised and appropriate support and adjustments are available. The transferable principle for Northern Ireland is not opposition to clear expectations, but ensuring that pupils can understand and access the systems designed to support those expectations.

Whole school communication-supportive approaches provide practical examples. Estyn's case study of Malpas Court Primary School in Wales describes a whole school Communication Friendly Schools approach incorporating staff development, identification of SLCN, visual timetables, signing, receptive and expressive language strategies and explicit vocabulary support. Estyn reported improvements in staff knowledge and skills and positive effects on pupil engagement, wellbeing and behaviours for learning. The school subsequently supported other schools to develop similar practice (Estyn, 2017).

There is also useful system level learning from Scotland, where national approaches place relationships and behaviour within a broader framework of inclusion, additional support needs, wellbeing, attendance and engagement rather than treating behaviour as an isolated issue.

For Northern Ireland, this does not necessarily require adoption of a single programme. The opportunity is to identify the core components of effective practice and embed them within existing Northern Ireland structures. These include communication supportive classroom practice; workforce development; early identification; accessible behaviour policies; graduated support; specialist pathways; reasonable adjustments; and meaningful, communication-accessible pupil voice.

Any approach considered for wider implementation should be evaluated specifically for children and young people with SEN and SLCN, including those whose needs remain unidentified. Outcomes should extend beyond recorded behavioural incidents to include engagement, attendance, participation, exclusion, attainment and access to learning.

References

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