



10 September 2026

Response from the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists in Wales to the Priorities for Early Years, Children, Young People and Education Committee

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) is the professional body for speech and language therapists (SLTs), SLT students and support workers working in the UK. The RCSLT has 24,000 members (900 in Wales) We promote excellence in practice and influence health, education, care and justice policies.

Speech and language therapy manages the risk of harm and reduces functional impact for people with speech, language and communication support needs and/or swallowing difficulties.

SLTs provide life improving treatment, support and care for children and young people who have difficulties with communication, eating, drinking or swallowing. Using specialist skills, SLTs work directly with children, carers, teachers, and other professionals to develop personalised strategies. They also provide training and strategies to the wider workforce; such as nursery staff and teaching assistants so that they can identify the signs of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), improve communication environments and provide effective support.

Why SLT Services are so vital for children and young people

Communication skills are fundamental and foundational. They enable us to understand and to be understood and underpin social communication. They are central to our development, our ability to understand and manage our emotions, to form relationships, our educational achievement, social interaction, and life chances.

The most common reason for pupils being excluded from mainstream education is disruptive behaviour; research shows that many children



and young people who are excluded or at risk of exclusion have behavioural difficulties which co-occur with communication needs that are often unidentified and unsupported. In a meta-analysis of 22 studies, **81%** of children with emotional and behavioural disorders were found to have communication needs that had not previously been identified (Hollo et al, 2014).

An independent speech and language therapy service commissioned to provide input to a large secondary alternative provision setting found that **90%** of the pupils assessed had communication needs.

As well as being at higher risk of school exclusion, children with unidentified communication needs are at risk of a range of negative outcomes later in life, including impacts on literacy, numeracy and educational attainment, mental health, employment and possible involvement in the criminal justice system.

There is strong international evidence that speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) are much more prevalent in the offending population than in the general population. Up to **60%** of young people in the youth justice estate have speech, language & communication needs (Bryan et al, 2007).

There is a clear correlation between many of the group of pupils who are disproportionately more likely to be excluded, and the groups of children and young people who are more likely to have communication needs, including looked after children, pupils eligible for free school meals, and pupils with additional learning needs.

For example:

60% of care leavers met the criteria for having Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) – a likely lifelong condition where children have problems understanding and/or using spoken language. Children who are eligible for free school meals and live in more deprived neighbourhoods are more than twice as likely to have identified SLCN (Dockrell et al, 2012).



SLCN are the most common type of ALN. **36.9%** of children in Wales with ALN have SCLN. The equivalent figure last year was 36.2%.¹

Additionally in regard to ALN the full implementation of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act in September 2025 has significantly increased the workload for SLTs. NHS services report extra pressures in both clinical work—such as assessing needs and providing support—and administrative tasks, including sharing information and recording data. These additional responsibilities have not been matched with extra funding or resources. Further pressure comes from local authority requests linked to Education Tribunal for Wales cases, including providing information and acting as expert witnesses. Independent SLTs have reported that they are not always included in the ALN process. As a result, their clinical input is sometimes missing from discussions and from Individual Development Plans for children and young people. Despite the evidence presented above of a picture of growing need and a 2024 Senedd Children, Young People and Education Committee recommendation that Welsh Government should review gaps in the number of AHPs (including SLTs) needed to support anticipated future need, we are currently witnessing a significant shortage of jobs for Welsh graduates and a decrease of 31% (from 55 to 38) in the number of training places available.

Children, Young People and Education Committee Sixth Senedd Legacy Report

The Committee Report from the Sixth Senedd recommends continued scrutiny of the impact of school exclusions on children's vulnerability, for example by maintaining close scrutiny of the Welsh Government's progress in delivering the revised exclusions guidance and the wider behaviour guidance framework, and to ensure that their implementation is matched by the practical support schools will need to embed them effectively.

¹ <https://www.gov.wales/schools-census-results-january-2026-html#210046>



The themes also emerging from the sixth Senedd Committee inquiries are interconnected: early years experiences shape lifelong outcomes; access to support determines inclusion; disengagement risks marginalisation; attendance affects attainment; and the pathways available to young people influence their future prospects.

SLT services are essential for breaking this above cycle.

What should the main priorities be for the Children, Young People and Education Committee during the Seventh Senedd?

Given the high prevalence of communication needs in children and young people with behavioural difficulties, we believe that a number of key actions are required;

- Training for new teachers and as continuous professional development for existing staff members on how to support speech, language and communication skills, and how to identify and support SLCN with specific training on Developmental Language Disorder
- A focus on ensuring support staff are able to assist teachers in the provision of universal and targeted services to support language development in schools – a key element of the curriculum.
- Training for Estyn inspectors to evaluate the impact of oracy education in schools, building on positive steps forward taken in relation to training for Childcare Inspectorate Wales and Estyn inspectors in relation to speech, language and communication in early years settings.
- Beyond education, there needs to be a clear focus on identifying and supporting SLCN amongst agencies most in contact with those at risk of exclusion. For example, we recommend that teams supporting looked after children and children known to youth justice services have access to specially commissioned speech and language therapy services.



- We would also like to see the 2024 Senedd Children, Young People and Education Committee recommendation that Welsh Government should review gaps in the number of AHPs (including SLTs) needed to support anticipated future need of ALN referrals. We are currently witnessing a significant shortage of jobs for Welsh graduates and a decrease of 31% (from 55 to 38) in the number of training places available.

Our Speech and Language Therapists are able to brief the Committee further on what this would work on the ground, and what the training should include and look like.

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