Inequalities in access to therapy for disabled children
November 2026

Speech and language therapists have a vital role to play in supporting disabled children and young people, but there is a need for increased investment in, and improved workforce planning for, speech and language therapy if inequalities in access to therapy are to be reduced.

Speech, language and communication skills underpin children's ability to learn, develop relationships, participate in education and engage with the world around them. For children with speech, language and communication needs, and/or eating, drinking, and swallowing difficulties, including those with complex needs and disabilities, timely access to specialist support can make a life-changing difference.

However, access to speech and language therapy remains inconsistent, with significant geographical inequalities and long waiting times in some areas. These delays are particularly concerning given the importance of early intervention.

RCSLT annual workforce survey

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists' (RCSLT's) annual workforce survey of speech and language therapy service leads took place in spring 2026, with 132 services responding from England. The survey results show that many services in England report not having enough qualified speech and language therapists (SLTs) to meet the needs of their service, and that freezes and cuts to posts are being reported, particularly in the NHS.

Key results

- 63% of speech and language therapy services said staffing levels were not sufficient to meet demand for their support
- NHS services were worst affected (with 74% reporting insufficient staffing levels). This was followed by 43% of services in education/local authorities, and 23% of independent practices.
- 55% of the services said they experienced the greatest recruitment challenges with Band 6 roles, 31% said these were with Band 7 and 10% said these were with Band 5 roles.

- 24% of SLT services said that posts had been frozen in the last year, which meant they were unable to recruit to the roles. NHS SLT services were worst affected (33%), followed by those in the independent sector (15%), and in education/local authorities (10%).
- 15% of SLT services said that posts had been cut in the last year. NHS SLT services were worst affected (16%), followed by those in education/local authorities (10%), and in the independent sector (8%).

Invest in SLT campaign

The Invest in SLT campaign, led by Mikey Akers and the RCSLT, has been raising these issues for a number of years, leading a coalition of over 50 organisations in writing to Sir Keir Starmer in March 2026, and writing to Andy Burnham shortly after his appointment as Prime Minister in July 2026.

The campaign is calling on the Government to:

- Prioritise investment in speech and language therapy services to ensure everyone who needs support can access it in a timely way.
- Publish the long-awaited Speech and Language Therapy Action Plan, first committed to in March 2025.
- Improve workforce planning and investment to address shortages and ensure services have the capacity to meet growing demand.

Schools White Paper and Experts at Hand service

The Government has already announced commitments through its 2026 Schools White Paper, including over £40 million over three years to grow the educational psychology and speech and language therapy workforce, alongside the £1.8 billion Experts at Hand service. These are welcome steps, but it will be important to ensure that there is capacity and workforce to deliver these commitments.

Conclusion: reducing inequalities in access to therapy for disabled children

Speech and language therapy should be recognised as a fundamental part of early intervention, inclusion, and improving outcomes for disabled children, rather than an optional or supplementary service. To make that a reality and to reduce inequalities in access to therapy for disabled children, investment in speech and language therapy must be improved, as must workforce planning, recruitment, retention, and continuing professional development of speech and language therapists.