



## **The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists response to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee inquiry into education funding**

### **Executive Summary**

- Speech, language and communication skills are fundamental to learning and achievement and are a key indicator of educational success. Oral language development is central to a child's ability to access the school curriculum and develop literacy skills.<sup>i</sup> However in areas of high social deprivation between 40% and 56% of children start school with limited language<sup>ii iii</sup>.
- Early intervention is crucial to ensuring that children develop good early language skills and is an important tool to improving educational outcomes, especially for our poorest children.
- Speech, language and communication is one of the most prevalent types of SEN amongst all pupils in Northern Ireland. Census figures available from the Department of Education since 2012/13<sup>iv</sup> show a 25% increase in the numbers of primary school children and a 35% increase in the numbers of post primary school children, whose principal special educational need is speech, language and communication.
- There is a need to improve the skills of both the early years workforce in the pre-school years and education staff in mainstream primary and post primary settings in Northern Ireland.
- Funded training on supporting early language development in the early years workforce is vital to ensure that all children have a firm foundation in language and literacy.
- More training and professional development on speech, language and communication needs should be funded to help mainstream school staff identify and support children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) and close the gap where there is no mainstream provision, for example in the post primary sector.
- The number of children enrolling in special schools is increasing year on year in Northern Ireland and many of these children who have the most profound and complex needs, have very complex speech, language and communication difficulties which require alternative or augmentative communication interventions.
- Plans to reform both pre-school provision for children with special educational needs and the special school estate should ensure that funding is made available to both increase access and maintain quality of provision for children who have SLCN: every child who requires specialist speech and language therapy support and interventions should receive them to enable them to access the curriculum and realise their full potential.

## **What are the areas of greatest need in the education sector in Northern Ireland?**

### **Speech, language and communication needs**

- Children with SLCN may experience difficulties with understanding verbal language, attention and listening skills, expressive language, vocabulary and word finding, social communication, speech sounds, fluency, and voice.
- More than 10% of children and young people have SLCN which create barriers to communication or learning in everyday life:
  - 7.6% the equivalent of two children in every primary one classroom will experience developmental language disorder<sup>v</sup> - a condition where children have problems understanding and, or, using spoken language. There is no obvious reason for these difficulties – no hearing problem or physical disability explains them.
  - 2.3% have language disorders associated with another condition such as autism or hearing impairment.<sup>vi</sup>
  - Approximately 1% of children have the most severe and complex SLCN<sup>vii</sup>.

### **Links between speech, language and communication (SLC) skills and educational attainment**

- Vocabulary difficulties at age five are associated with poor literacy in adulthood, and children who obtain below the nationally expected level in reading are typically characterised by poor communication, language and literacy scores.<sup>viii</sup>
- A two-year-old's language development can strongly predict their reading skills on entry into school, as well as their later attainment.<sup>ix</sup>
- One in four children who struggled with language at age five did not reach the expected standard in English at the end of primary school compared with one in 25 children who had good language skills at age five.<sup>x</sup>
- One in five children who struggled with language at age five did not reach the expected standard in maths at the end of primary school compared with one in 50 children who had good language skills at age five<sup>xi</sup>.

### **The scale of the problem in Northern Ireland**

- In Northern Ireland, there is no national tool for assessing children's speech, language and communication development therefore population level data is unavailable at the point of school entry. However, local research and evidence gathered as part of specific projects delivered by speech and language therapists (SLTs) and other organisations indicate the scale of the problem. This evidence also reflects the trend that children from deprived background experience the highest levels of speech, language and communication difficulties:
  - In 2010 a study in the Colin area of Belfast found that 41% of children had a language difficulty. A similar study in Downpatrick found that 46% of children were entering primary one with delayed language with 31% of those children requiring speech and language therapy interventions<sup>xii</sup>.
  - A project in the Limavady neighbourhood renewal area entitled 'Communicating Better Together – the Limavady schools project' screened over 300 children entering four nursery and primary schools in 2014 found that 68% had speech and language difficulties in 2014. The project was re-run in 2015 and found 62% of this cohort also had language difficulties.
  - A project called 'Now you're talking Fermanagh' began in 2014 and ongoing found that 57% of nursery school children in the three most deprived areas outside of Sure Start wards (and therefore not in receipt of any early intervention programmes) speech and language difficulties.

- The Millennium Cohort Study found that in Northern Ireland 38% of five year olds who had no experience of poverty were below the average vocabulary level, this rose to 49% of children where they had intermittent experience of poverty and 68% of children who experienced persistent levels of poverty in Northern Ireland<sup>xiii</sup>.
- In a 2016 a Save the Children poll reported that 70% of teachers in Northern Ireland saw children arriving in primary one struggling to understand simple sentences and 75% of teachers reported that children were unable to use full sentences<sup>xiv</sup>.

### **SLCN increasing as an area of special educational need (SEN)**

- The number of children who require support for SLCN attending mainstream school has risen significantly in recent years in Northern Ireland. Similarly the numbers of children with the most severe and profound needs who require intensive support from specialised speech and language therapists has also been steadily rising:
  - 23% of all school pupils have a special educational need and speech and language difficulties are among the most frequent types of need reported for pupils<sup>xv</sup>.
  - Between 2012/13 and 2016/17 there has been a 25% increase in the number of primary school children and a 35% increase in the numbers of post primary school children in mainstream school whose primary SEN is speech and language<sup>xvi</sup>.
  - The Department of Education statistical bulletin 2/2018 highlighted that “children with statements are increasingly being educated in mainstream rather than special schools”. In 2003/04 39.6% of statemented pupils attended special schools compared with 30.5% in 2017/18<sup>xvii</sup>.
  - 1.5% (5,173) of the school population is enrolled in special schools with numbers increasing year on year since 2010/11 by approximately an additional 100 pupils per annum<sup>xviii</sup>.
  - There are 11,000 children in Northern Ireland with a learning disability<sup>xix</sup>. Evidence shows that around 89% of people with a learning disability will require SLT interventions<sup>xx</sup>.

### **How can funding be best deployed to ensure value for money in education spending?**

#### **1. Training and staff development opportunities in early language development and SLCN for early years practitioners.**

- It is well documented that early intervention is crucial to ensure that children are school ready and have the required speech, language and communication skills to access the curriculum. This is illustrated in the 2018 RCSLT and I CAN report ‘Bercow: Ten Years On. An independent review of provision for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs in England’:

*“Identifying and supporting children and young people’s speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) accurately and early mean fewer issues later on. Early identification is a well-evidenced, cost-effective approach shown to result in longer term economic benefits<sup>xxi</sup>”*

- Currently there is no regional strategy or commissioned funding to promote universal early language development for children aged 0-4 years and training in early language development is not yet embedded in qualifications for all early years practitioners.
- Across Northern Ireland there are examples of evidenced based programmes that provide training and interventions. These are mainly associated with targeted services, such as Sure Start, or small-scale, locally funded programmes such as ‘Help Kids Talk’ in Down and Lisburn council area or ‘Now you’re talking Fermanagh’. As such their reach is limited and the continuity of the projects is limited because of funding.

**Stoke Speaks Out: The economic value of early intervention**

Stoke Speaks Out is a multi-agency initiative to tackle the high incidence of delayed language identified in children in Stoke-on-Trent. Set up in 2004 and led by a speech and language therapist, Stoke Speaks Out trained and supported parents, carers, practitioners, and anyone in contact with families to make communication ‘everybody’s business’. The initiative focused on the crucial early years (0-3) to ensure all children were supported as early as possible to be school ready. As a result of the project, between 2004 and 2010 the city saw a dramatic improvement in children’s language development – the percentage of 3-4 year-olds starting nursery with delayed language reduced from 64% in 2004 to 39% in 2010.

***Return on investment research commissioned by RCSLT has found that for every £1 invested in the programme’s work on school readiness at age 5, £1.19 is created. In the long-term, it is estimated that every £1 invested in the programme could create £4.26 of savings<sup>xxii</sup>.***

Following the publication of the above report, further data has been captured from the citywide school readiness programme between April 2016-July 2018. Early indications show similar figures to the initial study.

- Locally, Save the Children has also highlighted the need for a focus on SLCN in early years workforce training to help promote school-readiness and improve educational outcomes in Northern Ireland. Their 2016 ‘Ready to Read’ report<sup>xxiii</sup> called for “the introduction of time-bound commitments to raising the standards of the general early years workforce. An explicit focus on early language development needs to be identified and prioritised”.

**2. Upscale the current training and professional development opportunities for teachers and educational staff on supporting children with SLCN and provide more specialised training to support the SLCN of children with more complex needs who are increasingly attending mainstream school.**

- The Northern Ireland Audit Office 2017 report highlighted concerns around the ability of mainstream schools to meet the needs of pupils with SEN within existing budgets and the ability of the Education Authority and Department of Education to demonstrate value for money<sup>xxiv</sup>. One of the report’s recommendations was on improved training: “the EA and schools should ensure that all teachers, including those studying for their teaching qualification, receive appropriate training so they are able to identify children with SEN and take the necessary action to provide support to them”.
- Training as part of initial qualifications and ongoing professional development in supporting pupils with SLCN, should draw from the best available evidenced based practice. SLTs are key experts in this field and already provide some very limited input into undergraduate teacher

training in Northern Ireland. SLTs are core members of the Regional Integrated Support for Education Service (RISE) NI which has some capacity to offer post graduate training on SLCN to mainstream school teachers, SENCOs and other educational support staff at foundation and key stage 1 levels. However, this service is also responsible for directly supporting hundreds of children with one or more areas of difficulty. The increasing numbers of pupil referrals for this service from mainstream schools is indicative of a rising need within mainstream schools for specialist SLCN support.

- The RCSLT welcomes and is greatly encouraged to learn of the recent creation of a Language and Communication pupil support service by the NI Education Authority to provide advice, support and interventions for pupils with SLCN, their parents and schools. We understand that this service will also have a capacity-building remit for schools and education staff. However, the amount of funding being made available and the reach of this service is as yet unknown and we are therefore unclear if this service will also extend to the early years or post primary settings and workforce.

### **How can funding be used to support the different school sectors in Northern Ireland, including schools for children with special educational needs and disabilities?**

#### **1. Ensure adequate funding is available to meet the SLCN of children with SEN under plans to reform the future provision of SEN support for children in the early years.**

- The RCSLT fully support the Department of Education's (DE) commitment to extend access to pre-school education for children with SEN in Northern Ireland. However it is important that the funding is available to ensure that quality of provision is maintained.
- The recent DE consultation on the future provision of support for children with SEN in the early years outlined plans to extend the continuum of mainstream pre-school provision, in part through the creation of early years SEN centres attached to mainstream nursery schools to cater for children with more significant SEN.
- The RCSLT are supportive of measures to improve inclusion for pupils with SEN provided that inclusion is meaningful – meeting the communication needs of children is fundamental to enable them to participate, learn and thrive. It is vital that any new model of provision carefully considers the SLCN of children with SEN and that resources are made available to support their communication needs. This should include the commissioning of core SLT services where necessary so that all children can actively participate in their pre-school education no matter what setting they attend.
- The Education Authority (EA) has implemented interim measures to expand access to nursery places for children with SEN in the last two years by moving to dual nursery days in some settings, which has been supported by additional educational resources. However, at present we understand that no corresponding provision has been made available to increase the capacity of speech and language therapists or other allied health professionals (AHPs) who support these children attending dual days. We believe this urgently requires a review and that designated AHP resources will be required to fully support plans for reform in this sector.

## 2. Ensure that necessary speech and language therapy support is funded to meet the needs of children with the most profound and complex SEN as part of the Education Authority's stated intention to reform the special school estate in Belfast.

- Plans by the EA to reform the special school estate in Belfast has created huge uncertainty for children, parents and professionals who work with children with SEN.
- SLTs working with children with the most severe SEN provide direct and indirect therapy interventions to support communication and safe eating and drinking; support children to use alternative and augmented communication strategies and technology; provide training to children, parents, education and supervisory staff on communication and feeding support.
- The RCSLT welcome the recognition of the need to improve the infrastructure of the special schools estate in Belfast and look forward to publication of detailed plans by the Education Authority in due course. However, members are concerned to ensure that the needs of children with the most profound SLCN are properly understood and the corresponding levels of SLT support required is adequately funded to maintain quality of provision in any plans to merge schools or amend the admissions criteria for existing schools.

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<sup>i</sup> Snowling M, C Hulme (2012). Interventions for children's language and literacy difficulties. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 47(1): 27-34.

<sup>ii</sup> Locke A, Ginsborg J, Peers I. Development and disadvantage: Implications for the early years and beyond. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders* 2002; 37(1): 3-15.

<sup>iii</sup> Law J, McBean K, Rush R. Communication skills in a population of primary school-aged children raised in an area of pronounced social disadvantage.

*International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders* 2011; 46(6): 657-64

<sup>iv</sup> Department of Education Special Educational Needs 2017/18 key Statistics available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Special%20educational%20needs%202017-18.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> Norbury, C.F., Gooch, D., Wray, C., Baird, G., Charman, T., Simonoff, E., Vamvakas, A. and Pickles, A. (2016) The impact of nonverbal ability on prevalence and clinical presentation of language disorder: evidence from a population study. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 57(11): 1247-1257

<sup>vi</sup> Norbury, C.F., Gooch, D., Wray, C., Baird, G., Charman, T., Simonoff, E., Vamvakas, A. and Pickles, A (2016) *ibid*

<sup>vii</sup> Department for Children and Families, England (2008). The Bercow Report: A Review of Services for Children and Young People (0-19) with Speech, Language and Communication Needs. Available at: [http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/8405/7/7771-dcsfbercow\\_Redacted.pdf](http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/8405/7/7771-dcsfbercow_Redacted.pdf)

<sup>viii</sup> Johnson, et al (2010). Twenty-year follow-up of children with and without speech-language impairments: family, educational, occupational, and quality of life outcomes. *Am J Speech Lang Pathol*. 19(1):51-65. doi: 10.1044/1058-0360(2009/08-0083). Epub 2009 Jul 30.

<sup>ix</sup> M Snowling, C Hulme, A Bailey, S Stothrad and G Lindsay (2011) Better Communication Research Programme: Language and literacy attainment of pupils during early years and through KS2: Does teacher assessment at five provide a valid measure of children's current and future educational attainments DfE RR 172a.

<sup>x</sup> Save the Children (2016) Early language development and children's primary school attainment in English and Maths: new research findings, London: Save the Children.

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>xii</sup> Jordan, J., Coulter, L., McKeever, A and Dowling, C. (2013) *Prevalence Of Speech And Language Delay In Primary One Children In The Downpatrick Area*, South Eastern Health And Social Care Trust Speech And Language Therapy Department.

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- <sup>xiii</sup> Save the Children, 2016 'READY TO READ. Closing the gap in early language skills so that every child in Northern Ireland can read well', Pg. 4 Source: Analysis of Millennium Cohort Study waves 1 and 3 by UCL Institute of Education
- <sup>xiv</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-38045420>
- <sup>xv</sup> Department of Education Special Educational Needs 2017/18 key Statistics available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Special%20educational%20needs%202017-18.pdf>
- <sup>xvi</sup> Department of Education NI School Census 2016/17: Figures include funded children in primary (including nursery, reception and year 1-7 classes) and post primary.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Department of Education, Page 12, Statistical Bulletin 2/2018 Annual enrolments at schools and in funded pre-school education in Northern Ireland, 2017/18 available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/17%20July%202018-%20enrolments%20at%20schools%20and%20in%20funded%20pre-school%20education%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%2017-18.pdf>
- <sup>xviii</sup> Education Authority's strategic review of nursery school provision in special schools report,pg 54 (March 2018) available from [www.eani.org](http://www.eani.org).
- <sup>xix</sup> Webb &, Kelly (Jan 2018) Mencap NI Briefing Paper No.1. Creating brighter futures: early intervention for young children with a learning disability.
- <sup>xx</sup> Bradshaw J (2007). Chapter 6: Between You and Me. *Learning Disabilities Today*. Carnaby S (Ed). Pavillion: Brighton.
- <sup>xxi</sup> RCSLT and ICAN (March 2018) 'Bercow: Ten Years On. An independent review of provision for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs in England' available at <https://www.bercow10yearson.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/337644-ICAN-Bercow-Report-WEB.pdf>
- <sup>xxii</sup> [https://www.rcslt.org/news/news/2016\\_news\\_archive/stoke\\_speaks\\_out\\_roi2016](https://www.rcslt.org/news/news/2016_news_archive/stoke_speaks_out_roi2016)
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Save the children (2016), READY TO READ: Closing the gap in early language skills so that every child in Northern Ireland can read well available at <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/content/dam/global/reports/education-and-child-protection/ready-to-read-northern-ireland.pdf>
- <sup>xxiv</sup> NIAO Report (June 2017) Special Educational Needs available at <https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/sites/niao/files/media-files/Special%20Educational%20Needs.pdf>