

Supporting people experiencing homelessness: removing barriers facing those who communicate differently or with difficulty October 2024

There are important links between homelessness and speech, language, and communication needs (SLCN). Those needs can act as a barrier to people who communicate differently or with difficulty accessing, engaging with, and benefitting from homelessness services. Equally, if staff working in those services assume communication competence, do not recognise SLCN, and do not make reasonable adjustments (as in the Equality Act (2010) for disabled people), people experiencing homelessness may face additional barriers to services.

To mark World Homeless Day, collectively we are calling for:

1. greater awareness of the links between homelessness and SLCN;
2. recognition of the role of speech and language therapy in supporting people experiencing homelessness and those working with them; and
3. improved identification and support for people experiencing homelessness who communicate differently or with difficulty.

Homelessness and communication difference or difficulty

The first step in improving support for people experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness is increasing awareness of the links between homelessness and SLCN.

What is the issue?

There is a high prevalence of SLCN amongst people experiencing homelessness.

- [They are 17% more likely to have communication needs than the general population where SLCN data is available.](#)
- Due to a lack of access to assessment and identification of SLCN in people experiencing homelessness, the incidence level is likely to be higher than 17%.
- There is also a prevalent issue of poor literacy among the homeless population.

Homelessness can affect people of any age, both adults and children and young people.

- Only 5% of the homeless population is made up of rough sleepers - [a far greater number of people are living in unsuitable or unsafe accommodation or are at](#)

[imminent risk of homelessness](#).

- This includes over [a quarter of a million children](#) who were estimated to be without a home in 2023.
- Children experiencing homelessness are more likely to present with mental health and behavioural issues due to anxiety and stress they have experienced.
- SLCN is known to intersect with factors relevant to the rough sleeping population, such as mental ill-health, trauma, brain injury, histories of imprisonment or care, autism, learning disabilities, and substance abuse.
- The prevalence of SLCN among other groups of people, for example, those in inpatient mental health settings, and the prison population and its association with juvenile offending, further highlights the relevance of SLCN to vulnerable groups, including those experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

In its 2022 guideline on [Integrated health and social care for people experiencing homelessness](#), NICE recognised all this, stating that there may be ‘a wide range of possible speech, language and communication difficulties’ in the homeless population. It also highlighted that health and social care staff working with people experiencing homelessness should take into account each person’s communication and information needs and preferences, and their circumstances. This includes the need to provide extra support for people with low literacy levels or with speech, language and communication difficulties.

NHS England has supported the practical implementation of this guidance in, for example, [urgent and emergency care settings](#).

Why does this matter?

This matters because left unidentified and unsupported SLCN can act as a barrier to accessing healthcare and social services, with communication difficulties leading to significant health inequalities. In addition, speech, language and communication skills are important for mental wellbeing, emotional regulation, to express how we are feeling and our views about what would help us. When someone has speech, language and communication needs it may not be immediately obvious. People can often be misidentified as having behavioural ‘problems’ if they have difficulties understanding and remembering what is said to them, explaining and expressing themselves, or following the ‘rules’ of social interaction.

The intersection of homelessness and SLCN can also present unique challenges that exacerbate the vulnerabilities people face. These put them at risk of:

- increased health inequalities;

- inability to access services;
- poor health and potentially multiple health conditions;
- social isolation and exclusion;
- mental ill-health;
- vulnerability to exploitation and abuse;
- barriers to education and employment;
- interactions with the criminal justice system;
- advocacy and self-representation challenges; and
- a poorer quality of life.

Removing the barriers people with SLCN face does not just benefit them. It benefits everyone. It helps to foster a more inclusive, equitable, and cohesive society. By supporting people with SLCN, we can help ensure that everyone can participate fully in society, access essential services, and live a life free from undue hardship. This, in turn, strengthens community bonds, reduces inequalities, and promotes a more just and healthy society for all.

Homelessness and speech and language therapy: recognising the role

The second step in improving support for people experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness is recognising the role of speech and language therapy. Speech and language therapists working in homelessness services can:

- support the identification of SLCN;
- support people with SLCN to access, engage with, and benefit from, services, including through providing direct speech and language therapy where required; and
- support the wider homelessness workforce to recognise SLCN and how to respond to them, including through making adjustments to forms, processes, and procedures so they are accessible to those who communicate differently or with difficulty.

In this way, speech and language therapists can:

- promote better outcomes for people experiencing homelessness; and
- reduce the risks people, services, and the public purse, face from SLCN being unidentified and/or unsupported.

Improving identification and support: everybody's business

The third step in improving support for people experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness is improving the identification of and support for SLCN. That is everybody's business: Government's, commissioners', homelessness services', speech and language therapy

services', and those working with and for people of all ages with SLCN who might be experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, homelessness.

To improve outcomes for people, we are calling for:

1. relevant professionals to advocate for the identification of and support for SLCN;
2. speech and language therapy to be embedded in homelessness services to deliver better identification, support, and training; and
3. funding for further research to understand the full extent of SLCN among the homeless population and the impact of speech and language therapy in supporting them and the other professionals working with them.

If we increase awareness, recognise the role of speech and language therapy, and improve the identification of and support for SLCN, we can deliver the better lives for people experiencing homelessness that we all want to see.

Who is supporting this statement

This statement is supported by the following organisations:

Afasic

Ambitious about Autism

Aneemo

Association of Educational Psychologists

Association of Speech and Language Therapists in Independent Practice (ASLTIP)

Association of YOT Managers

Better Communication CIC

BGPS

British Academy of Childhood Disability (BACD)

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

British Association of Social Workers (BASW)

British Association of Teachers of Deaf Children and Young People (BATOD)

British Psychological Society

Change Communication

Cleft Lip and Palate Association (CLAPA)

Cochlear Implanted Children's Support Group

CommTap CIC

Disabled Children's Partnership

Down's Syndrome Association

Framework

Headlines Craniofacial Support

Include.org

Intermediaries for Justice

N-ABLES

National Association of Special Schools (NASS)

National Development Team for Inclusion (NDTi)

National Sensory Impairment Partnership (NatSIP)
NCFE
Nottingham Recovery Network
pdnet
Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT)
School and Public Health Nurses Association (SAPHNA)
Signalong
SMiRA
Speech & Language Link
Speech and Language UK
Speech Bubbles
STAMMA
Symbol UK
Talking Mats
The National Organisation for FASD
The SENCO Forum
Up The Adult Cerebral Palsy Movement

For more information, see the newly published RCSLT and Homelessness CEN policy statement on speech and language therapists working in homelessness settings.

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