

## Response ID ANON-C6MZ-A7M4-S

Submitted to Draft Programme for Government Consultation 2024-2027

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### About you

Are you responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation?

On behalf of an organisation

### About you - Organisation

Please provide your organisation's contact details below:

Organisation name::

Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists Northern Ireland (RCSLT NI)

Organisation email address:

sue.mcbride@rcslt.org

Which of the following best describes the sector you work in?

Charity

Other (please specify):

Can we contact you to discuss your response to this consultation?

Yes

Can we contact you in future about the draft Programme for Government?

Yes

To support transparency in our decision making process, we will publish a summary of the consultation feedback on the PfG webpage. This will sometimes include the responses themselves and may mention names of the responding organisation (if applicable). However, names of individuals responding on a personal capacity will only be published where consent has been given. Please note we will not publish contact details.

Yes, I consent to my name being published with my response

### Doing What Matters Most Today: 'Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy'

How much do you agree that the priority 'Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy' should be included in the Programme for Government?

Competitive\_Economy - Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy:

Strongly agree

The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority 'Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy'. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?

Grow\_Competitive\_Economy\_Actions - 'Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy' Actions:

Strongly agree

Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the 'Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy' priority:

Please enter any comments in the box below:

The RCSLT NI welcomes the new Apprenticeship Inclusion Challenge Fund and hopes that it can be utilised effectively. Presently employers in Northern Ireland, including the HSCNI, are paying an annual apprenticeship levy, but unlike employers in the rest of the UK they are unable to draw down these funds to support the development of apprenticeships.

We hope that creating the Apprenticeship Inclusion Challenge Fund will extend to the introduction of AHP apprenticeships and enable NI employers to access this funding, allowing for a new and diverse workforce in Speech and Language Therapy. Apprenticeships will be able to help with the following:

1. Identified Workforce pressure

Over six months from June 2023 to January 2024, speech and language therapists (SLT) vacancies across the region have fluctuated within the range of 13.4% to 18.3% (18.3% equates to 103.92 whole time equivalent staffing). Vacancies occur across all bands and services and are not just at entry level.

## 2. Undergraduate Places

There has been no increase in the number of commissioned undergraduate training places for SLT since 2022, despite increasing pressures and demands on the workforce. For the past two academic years, the Department of Health (DOH) in the Republic of Ireland (ROI) has commissioned an additional 10 and 12 SLT undergraduate places for ROI domiciled students respectively. This has placed additional strain on SLT services in providing placement educators for these additional placements with no tie-in for these students to enter the workforce in Northern Ireland once qualified.

"Speech and language therapy is a highly sought-after profession in Northern Ireland. For the 2023/24 intake, there were over 700 applications for the 28 commissioned undergraduate places at Ulster University. The now outdated 2019 SLT Workforce Review recommends 40 commissioned training places by 2024, a target which will not meet the growing demand for services." (RCSLT NI We are the Village, 2024)

## 3. Identified Workforce needs (High existing and future needs)

Recently published strategies demonstrate recognition of the increasing need for more funded speech and language therapy posts across Northern Ireland. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the demand for services, including a new area of need arising from Long COVID and the ever-increasing numbers of children presenting with speech, language and communication needs. The NI Mental Health Strategy 2021 and subsequent Workforce Review 2022 points to the need for 96 funded SLT posts within children and adult MH services. The current funded SLT count regionally is 2.

The Stroke Strategy 2022 called for a review of the workforce and acknowledges that more investment is needed. The last time a comprehensive review of SLTs in stroke services across the UK was completed was in 2019 – Northern Ireland SLT staffing for stroke is well below the national average. Northern Ireland also falls behind the other nations concerning meeting acute stroke targets of assessment.

The Cancer Strategy 2022 – This strategy emphasises the increase in cancers and complex cancers needing more specialist interventions. Ad-hoc AHP workforce planning to date is not sustainable nor equitable and needs investment.

Children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) - Numbers of children with SLCN is increasing significantly, as well as a definite rise in the complexity of need. There was an 85% increase in the number of children waiting for speech and language therapy between 2021 and 2023. This is further discussed in the RCSLT's 2024 report – We are the Village.

Department of Education (2024) data further demonstrates this significant increase in need -

In Mainstream schools -From 2018/19 - 2022/23 there has been a 196% increase in children who hold a statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN) in nursery and P1. The increase of children on the SEN register, identified with speech, language and communication needs: 44% in nursery pupils and 17% in P1 pupils.

In Special schools - From 2018/19- 2022/23 there has been a 140% increase in children who hold a statement of SEN in nursery and a 69% increase in P1 pupils. The increase of children on the SEN register, identified with speech, language and communication needs: 81% in nursery pupils 149% in P1 pupils.

"This rise is consistent with trends across the UK, Ireland and globally. Speech, language and communication needs consistently feature in the top three SEN categories for pre-school and primary school children." (Department of Education, 2024)

"...there is an urgent need to invest in and commission more speech and language therapy services. In Northern Ireland, there are no specific educational speech and language therapists (SLT). We would suggest that there is a widening gap between capacity and demand, with the same number of SLTs supporting growing numbers of learners that require support. SLT interventions for children with SEN are most in demand in the nursery and Key Stage 1 years." (Independent Review of Education, 2023)

## 4. Sustainability

There is a current appetite for apprenticeships within our SLT Assistant workforce for the development of apprenticeships.

RCSLT surveyed SLT support workers June 2023. Out of 71 in attendance, when asked if they would apply for an apprenticeship in NI, 50 responded 'yes' and 11 'maybe'.

Additionally, RCSLT receive regular queries from non-support workers looking for apprenticeship opportunities to enter the SLT profession as commonly they are not able to leave paid employment for 3 years to undertake the full-time undergraduate degree.

## 5. Cross-sectoral-departmental-governmental working

Speech, language and communication is core to all aspects of a person's life and well-being, including their ability to access education and enter the workforce as an adult. Furthermore, eating, drinking and swallowing needs can impact significantly not only on a person's physical health but on their long-term mental well-being.

Speech and Language therapists work across health, education and justice. There are further interfaces with the departments of economy and communities. The literature and evidence on SLCN across health, education and justice is vast and complex. The impact of speech, language and communication and eating, drinking and swallowing needs weaves across many sectors and departments and has significant impact on service users, families and a range of departments.

There is also the future economic benefit of investing in apprenticeships “14% of children aged three were considered at risk of developing language difficulties. The lifetime economic costs of unsupported language skills in these UK children are estimated to be around £330 million. The cost is calculated from reduced lifetime income, the pressure on special education needs, mental health services, and possible related costs due to association with criminal justice services.” (Pro Bono Economics, 2021).

SLTs currently work in:

Health: across acute hospitals, all community settings, day care facilities, nursing and care homes, supporting clients with Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) and eating, drinking and swallowing difficulties (EDS). SLT work in the clinical areas with adults with Stroke, brain injury, progressive neurological, cancers, voice disorders, gender services, mental health, learning disability  
Within the paediatric population, SLT work with, Speech sound disorder, Developmental Language Disorder, autism, genetic conditions, stammering, cleft palate, deafness and language disorder and mental health.

Justice: across 3 prisons with plans to develop into youth justice.

Education: SLTs work extensively into schools, both mainstream and specialist provisions.  
Special schools, Specialist Placements in Mainstream (SPiMs), RISE NI and Sure Start.

To further highlight the multifaceted nature of SLCN and the wide ranging impacts across the life span with a direct impact on the economy we are including the evidence below.

Developmental Language Disorder or DLD (one of the most common types of SLCN) is considered a ‘hidden’ disorder (Kraljevic, 2023) as children can present like their typically developing peers. However, the impact of DLD is significant for individuals, as according to Young et al. (2002) they are 6 times more likely to have reading disabilities, 6 times more likely to have significant spelling issues, and 4 times more likely to struggle with mathematics. They determined that, in fact, individuals with DLD are 12 times more likely to face all these difficulties combined, and these academic concerns continue into adulthood.

In a study completed by Ziegenfusz et al., 2022 which investigated the academic achievement of pupils with DLD, it was found that they achieved lower results across multiple areas of the curriculum. GCSE results highlight this, whereby 9.8% of pupils with SLCN achieve pass grades of 9-5 in English and Mathematics in comparison to 42.4% of their peers (Department for Education (DfE), 2019). It should be noted that in NI, the majority of our GCSE examinations are overseen by the Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and still use a grading system of letters, A\*-U. The same scoring system was formally used in England but changed in 2017 to the numerical scoring for English and Mathematics (Jadhay, 2018). The pass range given above of 9-5 equates to A\*-C.

As well as lower GCSE scores, young people with DLD are less likely to go on to further education than their peers to achieve A levels (18% versus 72%) and less likely to obtain a university degree (10% versus 41%). However, there is a slightly higher rate of young people with DLD who achieve higher level vocational qualifications (Conti-Ramsden et al., 2018). Isoaho et al. (2016) report a range of studies that indicate individual pupils with DLD do develop average achievement scores throughout their educational career, which supports the research completed by Conti-Ramsden et al. (2018). Lower attainments can have a direct impact on children with DLD, who have lower employment rates (Conti-Ramsden et al., 2018).

## Doing What Matters Most Today: 'Deliver More Affordable Childcare'

How much do you agree that the priority 'Deliver More Affordable Childcare' should be included in the Programme for Government?

Childcare\_Priority - Deliver More Affordable Childcare:  
Strongly agree

The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority 'Deliver More Affordable Childcare'. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?

Childcare\_Actions - 'Deliver More Affordable Childcare' Actions:  
Strongly agree

Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the 'Deliver More Affordable Childcare' priority:

Please enter any comments in the box below:

The RCSLT NI is pleased that support for existing programmes is included i.e. Sure Start. The benefit Sure Start has in progressing speech, language and communication needs in the early years is evident in the published annual OBA Report Cards. Furthermore, a recent BBC news report noted that those living in Sure Start areas did better in their GCSEs than their peers (Institute for Fiscal Studies). SLTs have a vital role in supporting Sure Start to meet a number of their policy outcomes including Improved Language Skills and the Early Identification of a Developmental Delay. The RCSLT NI also advocates for the Executive to consider long-term investment for these programmes, moving away from year-to-year funding will allow recruitment and retention to be stabilised to the benefit of the communities they serve.

The RCSLT NI welcomes the emphasis on good quality childcare and a properly trained and skilled early years workforce. Correct remuneration must be provided to secure recruitment and retention of the team around the child.

The document references a Skills Academy for the early years workforce, and support for children with additional needs. We are pleased that this has been identified as a need, however, we would urge that any training offered is multi-disciplinary including expert clinical input from SLTs. This is vital as:

- \* Early language and vocabulary at 24 months linked to academic school readiness
  - \* Expressive vocabulary at age 16 months predicts academic achievement 10 years later
  - \* At 30 months it predicts achievement in school-leaving exams age 15-16 years
  - \* Early language linked to both 'decoding' and comprehension skills
  - \* Independent of SES and other family effects
- (Morgan et al., 2015, Bleses et al 2016., & Gibson et al., 2021)

The numbers of children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) is increasing significantly, as well as a definite rise in the complexity of need. There was an 85% increase in the number of children waiting for speech and language therapy between 2021 and 2023. This is further discussed in the RCSLT's 2024 report – We are the Village.

Department of Education (2024) data further demonstrates this significant increase in need -

In Mainstream schools -From 2018/19 - 2022/23 there has been a 196% increase in children who hold a statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN) in nursery and P1. The increase of children on the SEN register, identified with speech, language and communication needs: 44% in nursery pupils and 17% in P1 pupils.

In Special schools - From 2018/19- 2022/23 there has been a 140% increase in children who hold a statement of SEN in nursery and a 69% increase in P1 pupils. The increase of children on the SEN register, identified with speech, language and communication needs: 81% in nursery pupils 149% in P1 pupils.

The RCSLT would welcome the introduction of a Speech and Language Therapist (SLT) working within government, across departments to influence the strategic and policy direction in relation to speech, language, communication and swallowing needs. The introduction of 2 SLTs into the Welsh Senedd has seen many positive outcomes, mainly the Talk with Me programme.

## Doing What Matters Most Today: 'Cut Health Waiting Times'

How much do you agree that the priority 'Cut Health Waiting Times' should be included in the Programme for Government?

Health\_Waiting\_Priority - Cut Health Waiting Times:  
Strongly agree

The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority 'Cut Health Waiting Times'. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?

Health\_Wait\_Times\_Actions - 'Cut Health Waiting Times' Actions:  
Strongly agree

Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the 'Cut Health Waiting Times' priority:

Please enter any comments in the box below:

The RCSLT NI Strongly agree with cutting waiting lists. This needs to include both hospital and community waiting lists, we are concerned that the document only mentions adult waiting lists. We would ask the Executive to include children when prioritising waiting lists, as to exclude, would be detrimental to children's development and long-term outcomes.

Proper investment is required and a move away from short-term in-year funding for waiting list initiatives. Priority must be given to prevention, early identification and intervention. It is important to understand that speech, language and communication needs can, at times, be due to reduced developmental opportunities in the child's family and educational environment which can limit the child's learning of language. These reduced developmental opportunities are commonly linked to social disadvantage. In areas of social disadvantage around 50% of children start school with delayed language and other identified communication needs. Indeed, some local studies have found this to be significantly higher in Northern Ireland (Johnson et al., 2010 & the Institute of Health Equity, 2020).

The importance of investing and funding early years programmes will indirectly also reduce waiting lists throughout childhood, promote a safer home environment and has been shown to increase the immune system of children in the early years (Cattan et al., 2023).

The numbers of children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) in the early years and beyond have increased significantly, as well as a definite rise in the complexity of need. There was an 85% increase in the number of children waiting for speech and language therapy between 2021 and 2023. This is further discussed in the RCSLT's 2024 report – We are the Village.

Department of Education (2024) data further demonstrates this significant increase in need -

In Mainstream schools -From 2018/19 - 2022/23 there has been a 196% increase in children who hold a statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN) in nursery and P1. The increase of children on the SEN register, identified with speech, language and communication needs: 44% in nursery pupils and 17% in P1 pupils.

In Special schools - From 2018/19- 2022/23 there has been a 140% increase in children who hold a statement of SEN in nursery and a 69% increase in P1 pupils. The increase of children on the SEN register, identified with speech, language and communication needs: 81% in nursery pupils 149% in P1 pupils.

Additionally there are children and adults who require assessment and intervention regarding eating, drinking and swallowing difficulties (also known as dysphagia) which is time critical. For example, Waters et al (2022) reported that, "new onset dysphagia in adults requires urgent direct access upper

gastrointestinal endoscopy (to be done within two weeks); dysphagia associated with head and neck cancer red flags requires a suspected head and neck cancer pathway referral." SLTs are the main professionals in assessing and treating dysphagia. "Post-stroke dysphagia (PSD) is a common and costly complication of stroke and is associated with increased mortality, morbidity, and hospitalization" (Fang et al, 2022). If patients are waiting too long in community for a swallow assessment, they can end up back in hospital.

There are innovative models which have been piloted and evidenced to have a direct impact on waiting lists. These can be scaled and spread across the region, an example is the SLT-led model in ENT which reduced waiting times and released consultant capacity in SEHCST and BHSCT. Specifically, the SLT led ENT Parallel Clinic in SE trust over a 2 year period was able to release back 60 consultant clinics to ENT.

However, as detailed in the economy section, due consideration of the SLT workforce, increased capacity at undergraduate level and the development of apprenticeships is required to effectively and sustainably reduce waiting times across adult and children services regionally.

## Doing What Matters Most Today: 'Ending Violence Against Women and Girls'

How much do you agree that the priority 'Ending Violence Against Women and Girls' should be included in the Programme for Government?

Ending\_Violence\_Women/Girls\_Priority - Ending Violence Against Women and Girls:  
Strongly agree

The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority 'Ending Violence Against Women and Girls'. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?

Ending\_Violence\_Women/Girls\_Actions - 'Ending Violence Against Women and Girls' Actions:  
Strongly agree

Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the 'Ending Violence Against Women and Girls' priority:

Please enter any comments in the box below:

The RCSLT NI supports this aim.

We would welcome the Executive to consider the impact of SLCN under this strand. Children, young people and adults with communication needs are at elevated risks of becoming a victim, increased difficulty in disclosing violence and abuse and in accessing support.

Communication needs impact a significant proportion of Northern Ireland's population. Up to 90% of people with learning disabilities have communication difficulties, 33% of stroke survivors and more than 20% of people with brain injury will also experience some level of communication difficulties (RCSLT factsheet). They are a hidden disability and are often invisible; potentially impacting the life chances of people significantly while also placing them at increased risk of abuse.

Communication needs are substantial and long-term and therefore fall within the definition of disability within the Disability Discrimination Act NI 1995 and can be considered a protected characteristic under the same legislation.

These needs are wide ranging and may occur with a range of other conditions including cerebral palsy, learning disabilities, down syndrome, autism, hearing impairment, stroke, brain injury, head and neck cancers, Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, motor neurone disease, dementia and mental health conditions.

Communication needs may also occur without the presence of another condition, such as a stammer (an example used in guidance for the definition of disability for the Equality Act 2010).

Numerous pieces of research including findings by Public Health England have concluded that disabled people are twice as likely to experience domestic abuse, for longer periods of time as well as more severe and disabled people in wider contexts and from significant others (Public Health England 2015, Hind et al, 2013).

Public Health England also states that people with disabilities that limit day to day activities, such as communication needs, are at a much higher risk of domestic abuse (Equality Act, 2010).

A literature review of global evidence undertaken at Manchester Metropolitan University reinforced these findings, while also reporting that people with communication needs are considered the 'perfect targets' for gender based sexual abuse (including long-term, multi-form abuse) as they are less able to tell others about their experiences (Marshall & Barrett, 2017).

The provision of support through accessible information and inclusive communication formats will allow people with communication needs to engage and most importantly report instances of domestic abuse.

We feel that actions should include expanding trauma-informed training for all healthcare professionals to equip them to recognise, respond to and refer women and girls who have experienced violence. Survivors should be provided with access to timely support from a range of appropriate healthcare professionals in a multidisciplinary, holistic approach to help address the long-term physical and psychological impacts.

Speech and language therapists work with other professionals as part of a multidisciplinary team, including in education, social care and mental health settings, to:

- Increase awareness of speech, language and communication needs and how to support them.
- Promote inclusive communication by developing communication-friendly environments that remove barriers to communication.
- Support professionals to consider a child's language skills when they are assessing attachment, using language-based assessments and interventions.
- Identify interventions which are accessible, or help make existing resources accessible.
- Develop responses to behaviour which focus on developing positive communication, language for emotions and avoid exacerbating trauma.
- Provide training to parents and carers, helping them access the language used in parenting and other interventions, and the skills needed to help children develop their language and communication. Speech and language therapists have a potential role in the early identification of abuse and neglect, since language development and attachment are both dependent on sensitive interactions.

RCSLT\_Adversity\_Trauma\_A4\_4pp\_FINAL.pdf

## Doing What Matters Most Today: 'Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs'

How much do you agree that the priority 'Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs' should be included in the Programme for Government?

Support\_Children\_SEN\_Priority - Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs:  
Strongly agree

The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority 'Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs'. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?

SEN\_Actions - 'Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs' Actions:  
Strongly agree

Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the 'Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs' priority:

Please enter any comments in the box below:

The RCSLT NI strongly supports this aim.

Collaboration across health and education is key and requires a robust framework to ensure this happens consistently. This framework needs to be developed in consultation with the relevant stakeholders (including AHPs and their professional bodies) across these departments to detail actions, outcomes and accountability.

We are delighted that the impact of speech, language, and communication needs (SLCN) has been recognised along with the vital input SLTs have on favourable outcomes for children and young people across their educational journeys. SLCN consistently features in the top 3 SEN difficulties which is published by the Department of Education. The Independent Review of Education 2023 identifies that early speech and language intervention can potentially help to prevent or resolve problems that could emerge in later life. Further information can be found in RCSLT NI report (We are the Village, 2024).

Children with SEN need access to both health and education services. SLT is central to transformation of service delivery as demonstrated by the high prevalence of SLCN which has substantially increased over the past few years:

Children under 18 waiting for speech and language therapy

2021: 2444

2022: 4574 (an increase of 87%)

2023: 4527(Source: Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, 2022)

The Department of Education (2024) data further demonstrates this significant increase in need -

In Mainstream schools -From 2018/19 - 2022/23 there has been a 196% increase in children who hold a statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN) in nursery and P1. The increase of children on the SEN register, identified with speech, language and communication needs: 44% in nursery pupils and 17% in P1 pupils.

In Special schools - From 2018/19- 2022/23 there has been a 140% increase in children who hold a statement of SEN in nursery and a 69% increase in P1 pupils. The increase of children on the SEN register, identified with speech, language and communication needs: 81% in nursery pupils 149% in P1 pupils. There is a distinct need for further investment in SLT services for 0-3year olds to improve early support and intervention for children and families. We would support the inclusion of the important recognition that these children need multi-agency collaboration at all levels, including planning and operational. As detailed in previous sections, workforce planning from undergraduate level is required. Data is vital to track and monitor trends across the population, therefore access to better systems for collecting data on trends to help predict workforce requirements.

Due to the increase in complexity of need, our members have noted an increase in AAC users. Alternative Augmentative Communication or AAC often involves creating bespoke visual resources for example pictures books, communication charts or more high-tech versions on electronic devices to support a person's communication. Resources required include costs and time for SLT associated with this. Currently, we envisage that we will continue to see an increase in children with SEN who have a complex presentation and therefore more children will require access to AAC.

The evidence shows that often SLCN can go unidentified and therefore unsupported. School supports such as the EA Language and Communication Service and RISE are excellent resources however they are mostly limited to primary aged children. Post primary support for SLCN remains extremely limited across the region and the RCSLT NI continue to lobby for post primary provision of support given the evidence below.

Developmental Language Disorder or DLD (one of the most common types of SLCN) is considered a 'hidden' disorder (Kraljevic, 2023) as children can present like their typically developing peers. However, the impact of DLD is significant for individuals, as according to Young et al. (2002) they are 6 times more likely to have reading disabilities, 6 times more likely to have significant spelling issues, and 4 times more likely to struggle with mathematics. They determined that, in fact, individuals with DLD are 12 times more likely to face all these difficulties combined, and these academic concerns continue into adulthood.

In a study completed by Ziegenfusz et al., 2022 which investigated the academic achievement of pupils with DLD, it was found that they achieved lower results across multiple areas of the curriculum. GCSE results highlight this, whereby 9.8% of pupils with SLCN achieve pass grades of 9-5 in English and Mathematics in comparison to 42.4% of their peers (Department for Education (DfE), 2019). It should be noted that in NI, the majority of our GCSE examinations are overseen by the Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and still use a grading system of letters, A\*-U. The same scoring system was formally used in England but changed in 2017 to the numerical scoring for English and Mathematics (Jadhay, 2018). The pass range given above of 9-5 equates to A\*-C.

As well as lower GCSE scores, young people with DLD are less likely to go on to further education than their peers to achieve A levels (18% versus 72%) and less likely to obtain a university degree (10% versus 41%). However, there is a slightly higher rate of young people with DLD who achieve higher level vocational qualifications (Conti-Ramsden et al., 2018). Isoaho et al. (2016) report a range of studies that indicate individual pupils with DLD do develop average achievement scores throughout their educational career, which supports the research completed by Conti-Ramsden et al. (2018). Lower attainments can have a direct impact on children with DLD, who have lower employment rates (Conti-Ramsden et al., 2018).

Children and young people with SLCN, including DLD do not seem to have consistent educational support as provided to children and young people with other neurodevelopmental conditions. This raises concern that children with SLCN are experiencing inequality in educational support (Dockrell et al., 2019). Dockrell et al. (2019) found that the additional support that some pupils had been receiving dropped significantly during the transition to secondary school. Research into the transition from primary school to post-primary for children with DLD has found that transition planning is critical to assist pupils in their academic and psychosocial well-being (Gough Kenyon et al., 2020).

The RCSLT NI would advocate for the Executive to also consider young people who are transitioning from paediatric services and entering adult services. This continues to be a concern, and something which requires careful consideration to ensure the best for the person moving services and we would welcome acknowledgement of this in the final published document.

The RCSLT would welcome the introduction of a Speech and Language Therapist (SLT) working within government, across departments to influence the strategic and policy direction in relation to speech, language, communication and swallowing needs. The introduction of 2 SLTs into the Welsh Senedd has seen many positive outcomes, mainly the Talk with Me programme.

### Doing What Matters Most Today: 'Provide More Social, Affordable and Sustainable Housing'

How much do you agree that the priority 'Provide More Social, Affordable and Sustainable Housing' should be included in the Programme for Government?

Affordable\_Housing\_Priority - Provide More Social, Affordable and Sustainable Housing:  
Strongly agree

The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority 'Provide More Social, Affordable and Sustainable Housing'. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?

Affordable\_Housing\_Actions - 'Provide More Social, Affordable and Sustainable Housing' Actions:  
Strongly agree

Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the 'Provide More Social, Affordable and Sustainable Housing' priority:

Please enter any comments in the box below:

### Doing What Matters Most Today: 'Safer Communities'

How much do you agree that the priority 'Safer Communities' should be included in the Programme for Government?

Safer Communities\_Priority - Safer Communities:  
Strongly agree

The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority 'Safer Communities'. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?

Safer Communities\_Actions - 'Safer Communities' Actions:  
Strongly agree

Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the 'Safer Communities' priority:

Please enter any comments in the box below:

The RCSLT NI strongly agree with this aim.

We have provided below the brief from February 2024 which we presented for a debate in the Assembly on SLTs role in justice:

- Speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) are more prevalent in the prison population and people in contact with youth justice services, than the general population (RCSLT, 2017).
- Unless communication needs are identified and appropriately supported, they can leave people without the critical support needed to navigate what is a very complex system with its own rules, regimes and demands (Bradley Report, 2010). They also act as a barrier to assessments and verbally mediated treatment programmes.
- Currently, there is variability in access to speech and language therapy across the justice system (RCSLT, 2017). This means that opportunities to identify and support people's needs are missed.
- The impact of SLCN on prison staff and the prison environment is huge (RCSLT, 2023). Where individuals cannot understand others and cannot express themselves, this can manifest as:
  - o Behaviour that challenges
  - o Disruptive, aggressive and violent behaviour
  - o Self-harm
  - o Increased use of physical intervention and restraint
  - o Segregation

Prevalence of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN)

SLCN in adults

- A 2023 screening of a sample population at Hydebank Wood College found that 75% of those assessed had underlying speech, language and communication difficulties (SEHSCT, 2023).
- A study conducted in North-West England found that up to 80% of adults had speech, language and communication needs (McNamara, 2012).
- A project in Pontypridd Probation Service identified that all participants had "below average" speech, language and communication ability. It also revealed specific problems with comprehension and expression (Iredale, Pierpoint and Parow, 2010).
- Speech, language and communication needs are associated with a range of conditions including learning difficulties, autism and mental health, as well as conditions associated with ageing, such as dementia. These are all highly prevalent in the offending population (Prison Reform Trust, 2008) which indicates a greater need for access to speech and language therapy.

Eating, drinking and swallowing (dysphagia)

- The prison population is ageing, with people over 60 years the fastest growing age group.
  - Eating, drinking and swallowing difficulties are prevalent difficulties among ageing adults (Sura, et al, 2012). The swallow mechanism also decreases in efficiency with age (Wakabayashi, 2014), which is of relevance with an ageing prison population (Robbins, 2014).
  - Swallowing problems are associated with a range of conditions, prevalent in people in prisons, including learning disability, brain injury, stroke, cancer and progressive neurological conditions including dementia.
- 
- Eating, drinking and swallowing difficulties have potentially life-threatening consequences. Left unsupported they can result in aspiration pneumonia, chest infections and death due to choking (Bryan, 2015).

SLCN in young people (Youth Justice)

- Up to 60% of young people in the youth justice estate have communication difficulties with 46-47% of these in the poor or very poor range. Many of these individuals have experienced poverty and adverse childhood experiences (Bryan et al, 2007).
- As outlined in the 2019 'Improving healthcare in criminal Justice Strategy', the RCSLT and YJA study in the Lisburn area (2012)<sup>1</sup> carried out 147 screening assessments in six months and found 54% of young people had some SLCN (79 clients). Of those, 78% could probably have had their needs met by a suitably trained CJS professional and 22% likely needed a specialist SLT (17 clients).
- The majority (74.4%, 2,792) of young people coming into formal contact with the justice system in 22-23 were male (Dept of Justice, 2023). Gender is associated with the greatest increase in risk for SLCN with boys overrepresented relative to girls 2.5:1 (Dockrell et al, 2012).
- There is also now substantial evidence through the evaluation of the Registered Intermediary scheme in Northern Ireland that significant numbers of individuals, including many children and young people, in the justice system require support with their communication (Dept of Justice, 2015 & RCSLT, 2017).

Children in care

- Children who are looked after have a much higher rate of involvement with the Juvenile Justice Centre than the general population (Dept of Justice, 2020)
- Children in care experience SLCN, although, these are often overlooked and not acted on compared to the emotional difficulties these children face, despite the prevalence rates being similar, 26% and 24% respectively. (Chambers et al, 2010).
- 90% of care leavers were found to have below-average language abilities and over 60% met the criteria for \*Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) with difficulties in literacy, developmental disorders, and social, emotional, and mental health concerns (Clegg, 2021)
- A screening of 39 children in a residential setting in the Western Trust (2020) found 75% of children have speech, language and communication needs – of these, none were open to core services and only 2 of these were previously referred to services.

\*DLD = Developmental Language Disorder is a lifelong condition characterised by significant and persistent impairment in the understanding and use of language, which results in a significant impact on everyday functioning (Bishop et al., 2016).

In a study of 145 young offenders recruited through the youth justice service, three in five were found to have DLD and none had been diagnosed before the study (NIHR, 2021). If young people are unable to participate fully because of DLD, they may be more likely to reoffend.



- 62% of people with DLD reoffended.
- 25% of people without DLD reoffended.

The literature and evidence on SLCN across health, education and justice is vast and complex.

#### Mental Health

- Children with SLCN in the preschool, early and primary years are approximately twice as likely to develop social, emotional, and mental health difficulties as children with typical language development when followed up over time (Yew & O'Kearney, 2013)
- Children with vocabulary difficulties at age five are three times more likely to have mental health problems in adulthood (Botting et al, 2016)
- 81% of children with emotional behavioural disorders have significant language difficulties (Hollo et al, 2014)
- People with SLCN are six times more likely to experience clinical levels of anxiety and three times more likely to have clinical depression (Conti-Ramsden and Botting, 2008)

#### Health inequalities

- It is important to understand that SLCN can, at times, be due to reduced developmental opportunities in the child's family and educational environment which limit the child's learning of language. These reduced developmental opportunities are commonly linked to social disadvantage .
- In areas of social disadvantage around 50% of children start school with delayed language and other identified communication needs, indeed, some local studies have found this to be significantly higher in Northern Ireland. (Johnson et al. 2010 & the Institute of Health Equity, 2020)

We would strongly urge that funding for a SLT in youth justice is given priority. We are aware that monies ringfenced for the Acorn Therapeutic Service (in Lakewood and Woodlands) which recognised SLT as a priority post, remains unfilled. Funding was not enough to include all priority posts and the SLT post was therefore pulled.

### Doing What Matters Most Today: 'Protecting Lough Neagh and the Environment'

How much do you agree that the priority 'Protecting Lough Neagh and the Environment' should be included in the Programme for Government?

LoughNeagh\_Env\_Priority - Protecting Lough Neagh and the Environment:

Agree

The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority 'Protecting Lough Neagh and the Environment'. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?

LoughNeagh\_Env\_Actions - 'Protecting Lough Neagh and the Environment' Actions:

Agree

Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the 'Protecting Lough Neagh and the Environment' priority:

Please enter any comments in the box below:

### Doing What Matters Most Today: 'Reform and Transformation of Public Services'

How much do you agree that the priority 'Reform and Transformation of Public Services' should be included in the Programme for Government?

Reform\_Transform\_Priority - Reform and Transformation of Public Services:

Agree

The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority 'Reform and Transformation of Public Services'. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?

Reform\_Transform\_Actions - 'Reform and Transformation of Public Services' Actions:

Agree

Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the 'Reform and Transformation of Public Services' priority:

Please enter any comments in the box below:

### Doing What Matters Most Today: Priorities

Are there any other priorities that should be included in the Programme for Government?

Please enter any comments in the box below:

Given the links between SLCN and social disadvantage, the RCLT NI strongly urge the Executive to consider Anti Poverty a key priority of the Programme for Government.

In areas of social disadvantage around 50% of children start school with delayed language and other identified communication needs, indeed, some local

studies have found this to be significantly higher in Northern Ireland (Johnson et al. 2010 & the Institute of Health Equity, 2020).

## Building New Foundations

How much do you agree that these are the right commitments in relation to the plans for investment in infrastructure?

Agree

Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the plans for investment in infrastructure:

Please enter any comments in the box below:

## Shaping a Better Tomorrow

The Executive have set out a long-term strategy to deliver three Missions, People, Planet and Prosperity, as well as a cross-cutting commitment to Peace. How much do you agree with a Missions-based approach?

Strongly agree

Please enter any comments in the box below:

How much do you agree that these are the right Missions to focus on?

Missions - People:

Strongly agree

Missions - Planet:

Strongly agree

Missions - Prosperity:

Strongly agree

Are there any areas that are not captured under these missions?:

People Mission: A series of actions have been proposed under this Mission. How much do you agree that these are the right actions?

Strongly agree

Is there anything else that should be included under the People Mission?:

Planet Mission: A series of actions have been proposed under this Mission. How much do you agree that these are the right actions?

Not Answered

Is there anything else that should be included under the Planet Mission?:

Prosperity Mission: A series of actions have been proposed under this Mission. How much do you agree that these are the right actions?

Agree

Is there anything else that should be included under the Prosperity Mission?:

A commitment to Peace will underpin the three missions (People, Planet and Prosperity). A series of actions have been proposed under this commitment. How much do you agree that these are the right actions?

Agree

Is there anything else that should be included under the commitment to Peace?:

Peace is framed as a cross-cutting commitment, rather than a mission. How much do you agree that this is the right structure?

Agree

Please enter any comments in the box below:

## Understanding Missions by Tracking Wellbeing

The draft Programme for Government outlines how it will measure progress through a Wellbeing Framework. How much do you agree with the proposed approach?

Strongly agree

Please provide any further comments you may have in relation to your response:

### Additional Information

Do you have any further comments relevant to this consultation?

Please enter any additional comments in the box below:

The RCSLT NI are happy to offer further assistance if required. As detailed, the impact of SLCN weaves and interacts across many of the strands in the draft programme for government. Yet, at the core of our offer and ability to support those with speech, language, communication and swallowing needs is the current workforce crisis and until this is addressed, services will continue to be insufficient to meet the growing needs. Our reach, as evidenced, is cross-departmental and we would urge the Executive to consider other departments funding additional SLT undergraduate spaces at UU. It is only when we see a commitment to increase SLTs that we can begin to build a sustainable workforce that can help in delivering positive outcomes and achieving the targets set out in the draft programme for government.