

## Supporting children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities

December 2024

### Introduction

- The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) welcomes this debate on support for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). It follows similar debates in the House of Commons since the General Election.
- As a member of the SEND In The Specialists coalition, the RCSLT looks forward to working with Government and Parliament to improve investment in and planning for the specialist workforce for children and young people with SEND.
- At the same time, given the high prevalence of speech, language, and communication needs amongst children and young people with SEND, we are calling on the Government to properly resource speech and language therapy services.
- This combination of improving workforce planning and increased investment in services will help to break down the barriers to opportunity faced by children and young people with SEND and their families.
- That is necessary to help break down barriers, but it not sufficient. Fundamentally, the barriers to opportunity will only be broken down if education and health services work together. So, it is essential that nationally the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care work together on these issues, and that education and health services do so locally.
- Added together, all of this will help to deliver the Government's opportunity mission. It will also help to deliver the Government's commitment to improving inclusivity and expertise in mainstream schools.

### SEND In The Specialists coalition

- The SEND In The Specialists coalition was formed in November 2022.
- It is made up of over 130 organisations working across health, education, social care, and justice.
- Our common interest is in the funding of and planning for the specialist workforce working with children and young people with SEND.
- For too long, that workforce has not been properly planned for meaning that while the need for specialists has increased, insufficient numbers have been trained to meet

demand. Many specialists are failing to be retained, and many are leaving the public sector altogether.

- As we argued in a [statement marking the coalition's 2<sup>nd</sup> anniversary in November 2024](#), we were pleased to see the news in the Budget of a £1 billion increase in SEND and alternative provision funding. If some of that funding goes to the specialist workforce, we think it could make a real difference to children and young people's lives.
- **Key question for Government:** This must change so the **key question for the Government is: *how do they propose to improve investment in and planning for the specialist workforce supporting children and young people with SEND?***

### **Speech and language therapy**

- Speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) are the biggest single special educational need; 369,941 pupils had SLCN as their primary need in 2023/24, representing 22% of all children and young people with SEND.
- Pupils with other types of need may also receive speech and language therapy. For example, autistic or deaf children and young people.
- As with the SEND workforce in general, for too long, there has not been sufficient investment in speech and language therapy services. This has resulted in lengthening waiting times for services and an inability in many cases for services to provide the appropriate level of support for children and young people with SEND who have SLCN. In September 2024, more than 64,000 children were on the waiting list for speech and language therapy, with one third of these waiting more than 18 weeks, and more than 4,700 children waiting over a year.
- Some of this was covered in the [Invest In SLT petition](#), signed by over 13,000 people with the need for increased investment in speech and language therapy services backed by [over 40 organisations](#). The petition will be debated by the House of Commons on 27 January 2025.
- At the same time, for too long the speech and language therapy workforce has not been properly planned for. Workforce planning has tended to focus only on the NHS and health settings. It has not covered all the settings in which speech and language therapists (SLTs) work, for example, education, social care, and justice. Nor has it covered all the range of employers of SLTs, for example, schools, third sector organisations, and local authorities.

- This needs to change if children and young people with SEND who have SLCN and their families, and the other professionals working with them, are to be better supported and the barriers to opportunity they face are to be broken down.
- **Key question for Government:** So, the **key question for the Government** is: ***how do they propose to improve retention of, investment in, and the planning of the speech and language therapy workforce?***

### **Breaking down the barriers to opportunity: everybody's business**

- Improving support for children and young people with SEND, including those with SLCN, and their families is everybody's business. So is breaking down the barriers to opportunity that too many of them face.
- But, too often, relevant parts of the system have not worked together in the way that they should. This is particularly the case with education and health.
- For that reason, we were encouraged to hear the Education Secretary, Bridget Phillipson, say during an event for the education workforce on 16 July, 'There is wider pressure when it comes to speech and language services, I know there does need to be progress working with health colleagues on that'.
- It is also encouraging that a minister in the Department of Health and Social Care, Stephen Kinnock, the Minister for Care, has disabilities and SEND in his portfolio.
- We think that that joint working between the relevant parts of the system will make a huge difference to breaking down the barriers to opportunity that children and young people with SEND face and look forward to working with the Government on it.
- **Key questions for the Government:** So, the **key questions for the Government** are:
  1. ***How does the Department for Education propose to work with the Department of Health and Social Care, and other relevant departments, to improve SEND services?***
  2. ***How does the Government propose to ensure that relevant services locally, including education, health, and care, work together?***

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