**Consultation Response – Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum**

1. **In what capacity are you responding? Please briefly explain the nature of your organisation, or your role (parent, teacher, business leader, etc.)**

Policy Advisor for the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists Northern Ireland (RCSLT NI) – Sue McBride.

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) is the professional body for speech and language therapists in the UK. As well as providing leadership and setting professional standards, the RCSLT facilitates and promotes research into the field of speech and language therapy, promotes better education and training of speech and language therapists, and provides its members and the public with information about speech and language therapy.

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| **Background**  ***Speech, language and communication skills are essential building blocks for literacy, numeracy and overall learning, development and emotional wellbeing.***  **Over 10% of children and young people in the UK have some form of long-term communication need which impacts on their daily life (Norbury et al, 2017).**  This does not include children who are not typically developing in the domain of SLCN, but with the correct support will develop in line with their peers.  However, the impact of any SLCN, short or long-term can have detrimental impacts on our children and young people in a range of areas including:  **Education**  • A two-year-old’s language development can strongly predict their reading skills on entry into school, as well as their later attainment (Snowling et al., 2011).  • Children with DLD have poor play skills in comparison with their peers (Short et al., 2020).  • Literacy difficulties are more prevalent in children with SLCN (Drockell and Howell., 2015).  • In English and Maths GCSEs, 9.8% of pupils with SLCN achieve pass grades vs 42.4% of their peers (Department of Education England, 2020).  **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 (Law et al., 2009).  • 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).  **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).  • Males with SLCN are four times more likely to engage in antisocial behaviour with higher rates of arrests and convictions (Brownlie et al., 2004).  **Family Life**  • Children with SLCN have a lower quality of life at age 9, in comparison with their peers (Eadie et al., 2018).  • Caregivers of neurodivergent children (which include some SLCN) are more likely to experience clinically significant levels of stress, poor mental health, financial hardship, and negative relationships (D’Arcy et al., 2023).  **Prospects**  • Vocabulary difficulties at age five are associated with poor literacy in adulthood (Johnson et al., 2010).  • Children with SLCN are at higher risk of expulsion from school, particularly secondary education, and less likely to advance to further education (Clegg et al., 2009).  • Adults with SLCN are twice as likely to go over a year without employment (Law et al., 2009).  **Young Person in Care**  • 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 - at 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 DLD with difficulties in literacy, developmental disorders, and social, emotional, and mental health concerns (Clegg, 2021).  **Economy**  • 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).  **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). |

1. **What are your views on the strengths of the Northern Ireland Curriculum?**

The Northern Ireland Curriculum emphasises the importance of inclusive education that aims to provide a flexible framework to cater for the diverse needs of all learners, ensuring that every child can achieve their potential.

Viewing the curriculum through a speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) lens we acknowledge that the strengths include:

* Inclusivity: It encourages schools to adopt inclusive practices, promoting a learning environment were students with SLCN feel supported. This includes differentiated instruction and tailored learning strategies for the individual.
* Assessment and Support: There are guidelines for assessing the needs of students which help our educators to identify specific challenges and be able to implement specific individual intervention strategies. This is vital for students with SLCN.
* Collaboration: The curriculum promotes collaboration among a wide range of professionals and parents. A multi-disciplinary approach is crucial in developing effective strategies for students with SLCN.
* Focus on Communication Skills: Communication is a key component of the curriculum and has a strong emphasis in developing language skills across all subject areas. This holistic approach will help students to develop their communication skills in a variety of contexts.
* Professional Development: CPD is encouraged to enhance educators understanding of a wide range of topics, including students who have SLCN. This will ensure that educators are equipped with the correct knowledge and skills to support all students’ presentations to the best of their ability.
* Explicit focus on Language and Literacy: It recognises the importance of language and communication skills and is a statutory area of learning.
* An emphasis on Talking and Listening: It highlights the development of talking and listening, which is beneficial for all students.
* Inclusion of vocabulary delivery: It acknowledges the importance of this area for accessing the curriculum.
* Play Based Learning: This is a crucial part of any children’s learning and developmental and is encouraged.

1. **What are your views on the weaknesses of the Northern Ireland Curriculum?**

There are several areas of the curriculum that we feel could be improved for the benefit of all students, particularly those presenting with SLCN. These include:

* Resource Availability: Some schools may lack sufficient resources, including access to speech and language therapists (SLT) and knowledge of how to adapt teaching/materials for students with SLCN. Limited resources will impact the delivery of the curriculum and the ability of students with SLCN to access this based on their specific learning profile.
* Training for Educators: While we are pleased that continuing professional development (CPD) is encouraged, we note that there is no statutory requirement to log CPD hours, or even how much CPD should be undertaken each year. This will lead to an inequity in the standard of teaching being offered to students across Northern Ireland as some individuals will actively seek CPD on a range of topics, including SLCN. We recommend that a Teaching CPD framework is developed to ensure that all teachers receive the training that they need to fulfil their roles.
* Awareness and Understanding: There is likely a wide variability in understanding of SLCN. Some SLCN, such as Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) is classed as a ‘hidden disability’. Local research from 2022 indicated that post-primary teachers are overwhelmingly lacking in knowledge and understanding of the most common SLCN which is DLD.
* Individual Education Plans (IEP)/Personal Learning Plan (PLP): It is encouraging that the curriculum encourages tailored approaches, however, the implementation and adaptation may not be consistently applied across all schools for students with SLCN. Each student will be unique in presentation of their SLCN with consideration to other co-occurring difficulties, therefore it is vital that educators and SENcos have a robust understanding of needs and accommodations.
* Parental Involvement: We value that collaboration with parents is recognised, yet we feel that this will differ based on the setting, knowledge and skills of staff. It must also be acknowledged that there is evidence of generational links in SLCN, therefore parents may experience communication differences and difficulties themselves. This may mean that they do not have the resources, knowledge or skills to advocate effectively for their children’s needs, nor to take on board all the information given by the school. Once again, adequate training for teachers can support them to mitigate these risks.
* Evaluation and Feedback: The lack of a robust mechanism for evaluating the effectiveness of SLCN support within the curriculum can hinder continuous improvement. Without proper feedback channels it can be challenging to identify the gaps and make the necessary adjustments.
* Speaking and Listening Assessments: We have concerns that these assessments may not always fully accommodate the diverse needs of students with SLCN. There needs to be clearer guidance on differentiation, assessment criteria, support during the assessment process, preparation and practice, an awareness and understanding of SLCN and alternative/modified assessments.
* Inclusivity: SLCN is diverse, and educators need to be able to recognise success in students who struggle with certain aspects such as talking and listening, vocabulary, language and literacy, for example a young person who is nonspeaking and uses an alternative communication aid.
* Gaps in provision and services: more support is required for early language development and oracy.
* Unidentified Language Difficulties: A significant number of students who present with social, emotional and behavioural challenges have unidentified language needs, highlighting the need for better screening and identification of SLCN earlier in their school journey in order to get the support that will help them succeed.
* Limited Guidance on differentiation: The curriculum could provide more explicit guidance on how to differentiate instruction and assessment for students with SLCN. Furthermore, specific training for educators on SLCN would support this.
* A lack of flexibility on introducing diverse modalities of written language: There is an overemphasis on written language in most assessments. This can disadvantage students with SLCN and we would welcome the consideration of guidance around alternative methods of recording such as digital technology.
* Play Based Learning: Although play based learning is encouraged, it is not a mandatory part of the curriculum. Children’s speech, language and communication development is strongly supported through play and we would argue it should be a mandatory aspect of the curriculum. Additionally, with our increasing neurodiverse population, there is no ‘typical’ play – this should be acknowledged in the review with guidance for educators.

1. **To what extent do you think the Northern Ireland Curriculum has been successfully implemented in schools, and what do you perceive to be the barriers (if any) to its implementation?**

As detailed above the implementation of the curriculum in schools is concerning for students with SLCN. We feel that there are areas of successful implementation which include:

* An Inclusive Framework
* Curriculum Flexibility
* Awareness Initiatives
* Collaboration with Specialists

However, there are barriers for students with SLCN:

* Resource Limitations
* Inconsistent Training
* Variable Implementation of IEPs/PLPs
* Assessment Challenges
* Waiting Times for Services

The consequences of these barriers can lead to:

* Delayed development and progress
* Educational underachievement
* Social and emotional difficulties

We strongly urge the reviewer to consider the implementation of guidance on a detailed breakdown of specific speech, language and communication expectations by age. This is vital for staff to be able to identify children who may be falling behind in their development.

Please note that the RCSLT NI are currently working with the Department of Education on a project called *Language Launchpad*, in this we have surveyed over 1000 stakeholders. Lack of understanding of what the expected developmental milestones are and when to be concerned, alongside how to play with children, according to age and stage have emerged as themes.

1. **Baring in mind this is a review of the curriculum, and not of qualifications or assessment, is there anything else you would like to draw attention to that you think should be a focus of the review?**

Speech, language and communication skills are essential building blocks for literacy, numeracy and overall learning, development and emotional wellbeing. Therefore, the RCSLT would like to see speech, language and communication recognised as a core part of the curriculum, alongside literacy and numeracy. It should ideally be embedded throughout the entirety of the curriculum and indeed at a policy/ strategic level.

There has been a huge increase in the need and complexity of students presenting with SLCN. SLCN is one of the most frequently recorded Special Educational Need categories and increasing annually. SLCN can also present as part of other presentations including Severe Learning Difficulties, Autism and Deafness.

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| **Number of Children on SEN Register under SLCN**  ***NB: Change in 2019 to SEN & Medical Register therefore no date for 2018-2019*** | | | | |
|  | **Mainstream** | | **Special** | |
| Academic Year | Nursery | Primary 1 | Nursery | Primary 1 |
| 2018-2019 |  |  |  |  |
| 2019-2020 | 307 | 1184 | 134 | 183 |
| 2020-2021 | 262 ↓ | 1221 ↑ | 184 ↑ | 285 ↑ |
| 2021-2022 | 386 ↑ | 1291 ↑ | 253 ↑ | 330 ↑ |
| 2022-2023 | 443 ↑ | 1384 ↑ | 243 ↓ | 455 ↑ |
| **% Change** | **44% ↑** | **17% ↑** | **81% ↑** | **149% ↑** |

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| **Number of Children on Stage 1 Code of Practice**  ***NB: Stages changed from 1-5 to 1-3 in 2021*** | | | | |
|  | **Mainstream** | | **Special** | |
| Academic Year | Nursery | Primary 1 | Nursery | Primary 1 |
| 2021-2022 | 235 ↑ | 235 **↓** | n/a | n/a |
| 2022-2023 | 266 ↑ | 749 ↑ | n/a | n/a |
| **% Change** | **13% ↑** | **219% ↑** | n/a | n/a |

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| **Number of Children with Statements of SEN** | | | | |
|  | **Mainstream** | | **Special** | |
| Academic Year | Nursery | Primary 1 | Nursery | Primary 1 |
| 2018-2019 | 68 | 366 | 117 | 301 |
| 2019-2020 | 76 ↑ | 383 ↑ | 129 ↑ | 287 ↑ |
| 2020-2021 | 156 ↑ | 501 ↑ | 189 ↑ | 346 ↑ |
| 2021-2022 | 155 ↓ | 729 ↑ | 298 ↑ | 405 ↑ |
| 2022-2023 | 201 ↑ | 789 ↑ | 281 ↓ | 509 ↑ |
| **% Change** | **196%↑** | **196% ↑** | **140% ↑** | **69% ↑** |

The impact that SLCN has on students is wide reaching and spans across multiple domains. We would like to draw your attention to the following report which was launched last year and details the background and evidence in Northern Ireland. This report was produced in collaboration with a range of stakeholders, you can find their support/concerns of SLCN impact in children and young people here:

[Early-years\_We-are-the-Village-report\_NI\_April-2024.pdf](https://www.rcslt.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Early-years_We-are-the-Village-report_NI_April-2024.pdf)

The Independent Review of Education was clear on the importance of identifying and supporting children and young people with SLCN based on the impact this can have on accessing the curriculum, risk factors and academic success. Below you will find our summary of this review pertaining to SLCN/SLT.

[RCSLT-NI-Briefing-Paper-on-the-Indepent-Review-of-Education-NI-2024.pdf](https://www.rcslt.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/RCSLT-NI-Briefing-Paper-on-the-Indepent-Review-of-Education-NI-2024.pdf)

We have also linked our briefing which was submitted as part of the Independent Review of Education as this details the evidence base, facts and statistics of our population.

[RCSLT-NI-briefing-Independent-Review-of-Education-May-22.pdf](https://www.rcslt.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/RCSLT-NI-briefing-Independent-Review-of-Education-May-22.pdf)

We have added in our response to educational underachievement in conjunction with students who have SLCN.

[Response-to-expert-panel-in-persistent-educational-underachievement-Oct-2020.pdf](https://www.rcslt.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Response-to-expert-panel-in-persistent-educational-underachievement-Oct-2020.pdf)

Finally, the RCSLT believe that the NI Curriculum should provide opportunities for all young people to learn about different forms of communication and support inclusivity and accessibility for peers who communicate differently. This in turn facilitates a safe space for children to learn and play. An example of how this can be delivered is provided by Buddy Chat, a free, children’s communication project designed to raise awareness of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) across primary schools in Northern Ireland.

For more information about Buddy Chat, see <https://www.rcslt.org/northern-ireland/buddy-chat/>

Buddy Chat was launched in August 2024 and has been well received by primary schools so far. We would like to see Buddy Chat become a mandatory part of the curriculum given the far-reaching benefits.

We would welcome the opportunity to further discuss the content of this submission with the reviewer.

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