

SEND and speech, language and communication needs

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Key issues

- Speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) are the most common type of SEND. In 2024/25, almost 400,000 children in England had SLCN as their primary need.
- As of August 2025, 64,417 children in England were waiting for speech and language therapy, with thousands waiting over a year for support.ⁱ
- These figures underestimate the scale of need: as they only capture a child's wait for their first appointment, with many children having to wait again to receive intervention.
- Access to support is inconsistent and often limited to children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), leaving many without the help they require.
- Without early intervention, children with SLCN risk lower educational attainment, mental health and behavioural challenges, social exclusion, and poorer life outcomes.
- Local joint commissioning of services is essential to ensure children on SEN support as well as those with EHCPs receive timely and effective help.

Why this matters

- Supporting children with SLCN is fundamental to educational equity, social mobility, and mental health.
- Failure to act increases long-term costs to education, health, justice, and the economy.
- Evidence-based speech and language therapy support enables children to reach their potential.

The case for action

1. The issue

- Over 1.7 million pupils in England have SEND; SLCN is the largest category.
- Autistic children, deaf children, those with learning disabilities, and social, emotional and mental health needs may also benefit from speech and language therapy.
- Delays in support can worsen outcomes, increase school exclusions, and increase pressure on health and social care services.

2. Barriers to inclusion

- Lack of SEND training in initial teacher training and continuing professional development means many staff are not equipped with the skills and knowledge they need to identify and support children with SLCN.
- Behaviour policies in schools often fail to recognise that unidentified SLCN may be an underlying cause of behaviour problems.
- Access to speech and language therapy advice and support in schools is patchy; embedding speech and language therapists within schools can help to improve access and upskill the workforce.

3. Commissioning failures

- In some areas, speech and language therapy services are commissioned only for children and young people with EHCPs.
- Workforce pressures remain severe. The latest RCSLT Workforce and Vacancy Survey (spring 2025) found that 17% of speech and language therapy posts in England were vacant, with vacancy rates reaching 21% in London. Nationally, 14% of posts across both NHS and independent sectors were unfilled, highlighting a shortage of practitioners able to meet demand and reduce waiting lists.ⁱⁱ

Recommendations

Joint commissioning

- Require local areas to jointly commission SEND services across education, health and care, including for children on SEN support.
- Provide quality standards for commissioners which set clear expectation about how services should be commissioned, including approaches which support prevention and early intervention.

Strengthen workforce capacity

- The Department for Education, the Department of Health and Social Care, and NHS England should jointly develop a workforce plan for children with SEND, covering education, health, and care professionals.
- Address speech and language therapy recruitment and retention challenges.

Improve teacher training and continuing professional development

- Strengthen SEND requirements in the Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework (ITTECF).
- Fund ongoing training for existing staff in schools and early years settings.

Embed communication in the curriculum

- Support for speech, language and communication skills should be embedded across all subjects.

For more information

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ⁱ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/statistical-work-areas/community-health-services-waiting-lists/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.rcslt.org/speech-and-language-therapy/workforce/vacancy-survey/>