

Interim Report



**Review of services for
Children and Young
People (0–19) with
Speech, Language and
Communication Needs**

Executive Summary

Introduction

1. This interim report presents the evidence contributed to the Review through the many responses to our “call for evidence”, the visits we have made to local areas across the country and the meetings we have held with key stakeholders, including children, young people, parents, frontline professionals, service managers, academics, charities, voluntary organisations and professional associations. The report considers the important themes emerging from the evidence and sets out the more specific issues we will investigate further.

We have identified five key themes:

- **Communication is crucial** – communication is at the core of all social interaction. Communication is a key life skill. Communication is a fundamental human right. For some children and young people, acquiring the ability to communicate is a difficult and ongoing challenge. Just as the nature and severity of their needs will vary, so will the type and extent of the help required to address them.
- **Early identification and intervention are essential in order to avoid poor outcomes for children and young people** – in addressing delay and disorders, the most important facts we know are the value of early intervention and the danger of its absence. If a child receives the right help early on, he or she has a better chance of tackling problems, communicating adequately and making progress. If a child does not benefit from early intervention, there are multiple risks – of lower educational attainment, of behavioural problems, of emotional and psychological difficulties, of poorer employment prospects and, in some cases, of a descent into criminality.
- **A continuum of services, designed around the family, is needed** – universal, targeted and specialist services are required to meet the range of needs and, as the Government envisages in its recent Children’s Plan, children, young people and their families must be at their heart. As demonstrated above, support for speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) is essential in the early years of a child’s life. However, whilst this is often the crucial stage at which to intervene, older children and young people can also require support.
- **Joint working is critical** – in planning, commissioning and delivering universal, targeted and specialist provision, it is critical that health services and children’s services, including schools, work together in support of children and young people with SLCN. No single agency can deliver any one of the five Every Child Matters outcomes for children and young people by working in isolation. Separate silos produce misunderstandings, cause divisions and can be bewildering or infuriating to parents for whose children services are delayed or denied as a result.

- **The current system is characterised by high variability and a lack of equity** – the current system is routinely described by families as a “postcode lottery”, particularly in the context of their access to speech and language therapy (SLT). Despite the hard work and commitment of many professionals in health and children’s services, the SLCN of too many children and young people are still not being met.
2. Over the three main chapters of this report, we explore the five key themes: analysing the evidence, assessing the challenges and setting out our next steps.

Chapter One: Families’ views of services for children and young people with SLCN

3. In this chapter, we hear of families’ experiences of services. Whilst many children and young people have benefited from a range of services, such as those provided through Sure Start Children’s Centres, to meet their SLCN, most parents tell us that information and advice are usually hard to find, needs are not always identified early and accessing services, particularly SLT, all too often involves a “fight”. Parents see themselves as the unwitting victims of an incomprehensible relationship between health and education providers.
4. In order to address these important issues, the Review will consider:
 - What further action is needed to raise the importance of speech, language and communication (SLC) on the national agenda, including the merits of a national campaign comparable in scope and investment to the National Year of Reading.
 - How information and advice can be made more accessible to parents, including how services can be better signposted.
 - What support should be available to families at particular times, for example, when SLCN are first identified and when a child enters primary or secondary school.
 - How best to improve families’ overall experience of “the system”, including its accessibility, quality, continuity and transparency.
 - How the Ofsted Review of SEN in 2009 might contribute to improving arrangements for the provision of services for children and young people with SLCN, including the range of services provided through funding delegated to schools.

Chapter Two: Joint commissioning of services for children and young people with SLCN

5. This chapter considers the important role of commissioners of services in meeting children and young people’s SLCN. In particular, we identify that joint commissioning by health and children’s services is critical. However, the evidence suggests strongly that, although Children’s Trusts and joint commissioning arrangements are being encouraged by the Government, in reality, their establishment is not at all consistent. Moreover, provision for children and young people with SLCN is rarely identified as a priority for development, overall need in local areas is often not assessed and services are commissioned with little thought given to the desired outcomes for children and young people. In addition, we note the lack of services for young people, including vulnerable groups with high levels of need such as young offenders.

6. The Review's next steps are to consider:
- How to give full effect to the purpose of the Children Act 2004 through a comprehensive network of effective Children's Trust arrangements equipped to commission across agencies to deliver for children and young people with SLCN.
 - The value of an audit tool to help with local needs assessment for children and young people with SLCN.
 - The need for guidance for commissioners of universal, targeted and specialist services for children and young people with SLCN aged 0-19, throughout early years, primary, secondary and post-16 provision and the transition into adulthood, using a child-centred pathway model. This should include preventative services for those at risk of offending; services for young offenders and for the transition back into the community. The guidance should also reflect the circumstances in which regional commissioning may be appropriate.
 - What further research needs to be carried out to enhance an evidence based case for cost effective investment in services for children and young people with SLCN.

Chapter Three: The right workforce, leadership and accountability for services for children and young people with SLCN

7. In this chapter, we look at the make-up, functions and skills of the universal, targeted and specialist services for children and young people with SLCN. We analyse how the workforce is led at both national and local levels and we consider accountability, including the role of performance management arrangements. The evidence presented to the Review demonstrates that the universal services workforce clearly has an important role to play, but it does not yet have a complete set of skills to support the full range of children and young people's SLCN. The evidence also suggests that there might be a shortage of speech and language therapists (SLTs) in the workforce and that there are significantly different numbers of SLTs in areas with similar levels of deprivation. Both the total numbers of SLTs and their distribution should therefore be reviewed. That two Government Departments (Department of Health and Department for Children, Schools and Families) and two sets of services (PCTs and local authorities) have leadership and accountability roles is clearly causing some confusion in the system, not least for parents "caught in the crossfire" between services.
8. The Review will therefore consider:
- How to enhance the skills of specialists and to ensure that more of the children's workforce are trained to identify and meet SLCN.
 - Resources:
 - The number of SLTs, their distribution across the country and their deployment through the age range; and
 - Whether there is scope for improvement in the use of staff and facilities by local authorities and PCTs.

- How leaders of children's services and health services work together at present and what steps might be taken, for example through Children's Trust arrangements, to improve collaboration to meet SLCN.
- Accountability at national and local levels, including the role of performance management.
- Whether local authorities' accountability for provision of SLT for statemented pupils should be reviewed.

Conclusion

9. The Review will continue to build on the analysis set out in this interim report, with a particular focus on the specific issues identified for further consideration above. A final report, including firm recommendations on these issues, will be made to the Government in July.