



# **Response from the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists to the Committee Inquiry into post special educational need provision for education, employment and training for those with learning disabilities**

## **General comments**

1. The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) is the professional body for speech and language therapists (SLTs), SLT students and support workers working in the UK. We have around 15,000 members (around 700 in Northern Ireland) including 87% of the SLTs practising in the UK. We promote excellence in practice and influence health, education, employment, social care and justice policies.
2. SLTs have a major role in working directly with young people and adults, as well as supporting and training other professionals in working with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). They assess for and prescribe alternative and augmentative communication (AAC) technology for people whose communication is severely impaired. The complexity of some AAC technology (for example, iPads, apps, computer-based systems) is developing rapidly and such technology is becoming more available, leading to increased demand for and expectations of SLT services.
3. Supporting people with moderate and profound learning disability will necessarily require the input of SLTs to ensure that individuals have access to a supportive communication environment and that their mentors, peers and workplace colleagues can interact with them in a meaningful and supportive manner.
4. Young children diagnosed with learning disabilities are much more likely to present with associated speech, language and communication needs. The speech, language and communication difficulty is often the main contributing factor in their risk of developing problems with literacy and numeracy. SLCN also impacts upon their ability to develop social relationships. Evidence shows that a high number of children and young people are wrongly labelled as having a behavioural difficulty, without any recognition of their communication difficulty.

5. The link between SLCN and educational achievement and employment is now well documented.
- A study of unemployed young men in Wales found that up to 88% had some form of language impairment.<sup>1</sup>
  - Young people with learning difficulties and disabilities are twice as likely to be not in education, employment or training (NEET) as those without.<sup>2</sup>
  - More than a third of these individuals have low level qualifications.
  - Young people with low educational qualifications are much more likely to be unable to access further training and ultimately achieve employment.
6. Speech, language and communication needs in people with learning disability are a core barrier to accessing further education, training and employment opportunities. Communication is a core life skill, the means by which we express our choices, form relationships and access education, employment and the rest of society. Poor communication skills have a major impact on people's life chances. Young people with poor communication skills are more likely to leave school with low qualifications and poorer job prospects and are therefore more at risk of remaining unemployed.
7. In 2012 Clegg *et al* carried out a study<sup>3</sup> which found that "All of the parents interviewed reported continuing difficulties in their children's adult life across many domains of communication ability that were a concern to the parents and were perceived by them as a barrier in terms of gaining and managing employment and initiating and maintaining relationships". Clegg *et al* go on to report as follows.
- Parents also found the transition their children made away from the specialist educational provision challenging but perceived different concerns to the ex-pupils. For parents, the transition marked a time to focus on their adult children gaining qualifications, with a view to finding employment to be financially viable and therefore to support themselves.
8. Clegg *et al* end the paper by stating: "in conclusion, children and adults with pervasive and complex developmental communication impairments require extensive support through childhood and adult life. This support should enable

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<sup>1</sup> Elliott, N. L. (2011) *An investigation into the communication skills of unemployed young men*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Glamorgan.

<http://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.553779>

<sup>2</sup> Department of Communities and Local Government (2008) *Digital exclusion profiling of vulnerable groups: Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET): A profile*.

<http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/603/1/999909.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Clegg, J., Ansorge, L., Stackhouse, J. and Donlan, C. (2012) Developmental communication impairments in adults: outcomes and life experiences of adults and their parents, *Language, speech and hearing services in schools*, 43(4), pp. 521-35.

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22826372>

them to achieve their educational potential and manage the demands of adult life.”

9. The RCSLT is concerned that currently the government does not have an adequate strategy to identify, address and support people with communication needs in higher education, training and career and employment programmes.

## Responses to the terms of reference

### 1. To examine the current range of choice and opportunities available for those with Learning Disabilities on leaving full time schooling.

10. In spite of a real desire to widen opportunities for young people with learning disability and SLCN, the reality can be that the opportunity for further education, training and employment may have become significantly more difficult to access due to employment and equal opportunity legislation.

#### Case study

Thirty years ago Jimmy (who has learning disability and a sensory communication impairment) was able to get a start in a local supermarket chain without filling in a standardised online application form and attending a formal selection interview. The manager of the supermarket chain was prepared to take Jimmy on for a month and ‘see how he goes’. Jimmy was shown how to check if the shelves in his area needed restocking and was shown how to operate the cling film packing machine. When the month was up the manager offered him a full time position.

Recently, Jimmy found himself out of work again. This time when he approached a local supermarket chain, he was told to apply online. Jimmy finds this difficult and cannot do this by himself. Even though he has help to fill in the standard application form, his lack of GCSE qualifications in Maths and English rule him out of the short listing process for even the most basic posts.

Eventually, with the support of a local charity’s employment support officer, Jimmy gets an interview for a supported employment position in a local university. However, the standard selection process is language mediated and even though he has an interpreter to translate the questions into British Sign Language (BSL), his language and learning difficulties mean that he cannot understand words in the questions like ‘deadlines’, ‘disposal’, ‘stock control’ and ‘health and safety’. If Jimmy had been given a week’s ‘try out’ with someone showing him the on the job tasks, he might have been successful.

11. There is a body of evidence (see Conti-Ramsden and Durkin for references<sup>4</sup>) which reports that after finishing school “young people with specific language

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<sup>4</sup> Conti-Ramsden, G. and Durkin, K. (2012) ‘Postschool educational and employment experiences of young people with specific language impairment’, *Language speech and hearing services in schools*; 43(4), pp. 507-20.

impairment (SLI) do less well in education and employment than their peers. They gain fewer qualifications, their work experiences tend to be at the less skilled end of the spectrum, and they are at greater risk of unemployment.”

12. It is clear that making choices about future career options as early as possible and receiving appropriate intervention and support is critical if future prospects for educational opportunities and employment are to be realised. Conti–Ramsden and Durkin<sup>5</sup> looked at post school educational and employment experiences of young people with specific language impairment (SLI). They state: “Vocationally relevant choices made earlier, while still attending secondary education, and vocationally relevant language intervention (e.g., specific tutoring of vocabulary and technical terms used in the particular area of education and training) for young people with SLI making vocational choices, are two potential routes that deserve further study and policy debate”.
13. There is currently a need for the provision of speech and language support in post school enablement/work schemes to ensure that young people with communication and learning disabilities receive the type of bespoke interventions that will meet their future career needs. Tailored interventions and targeted social communication support would improve their prospects of maintaining successful educational and employment placements.

**2. To seek the views of young people, family carers and groups representing children and young people with learning disabilities about what services they would like to see in place and how the current situation meets their needs.**

14. A recent paper by McLeod and McKinnon focused upon teachers’ perceptions of the types of children and young people requiring support at school. The study asked teachers to identify which students required the most support. They found that “The most important predictive factor for teachers’ recommendation that students required a high level of support in their classroom was presence of a communication disorder. Students with a communication disorder + behavioural/emotional disorder + intellectual disability required the highest level of support (4.48), followed by students with a communication disorder + intellectual disability.”<sup>6</sup>
15. It follows that this group of young people and adults will continue to require high levels of support in further education, training and employment. However, as yet life after school for these people is daunting and often impossible terrain to negotiate.

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<https://www.readbyqxmd.com/read/22826369/postschool-educational-and-employment-experiences-of-young-people-with-specific-language-impairment>

<sup>5</sup> Conti-Ramsden, G. and Durkin, K. (2012) ‘Postschool educational and employment experiences of young people with specific language impairment’.

<sup>6</sup> McLeod, S. and McKinnon, D. H. (2010) ‘Support required for primary and secondary students with communication disorders and/or other learning needs’, *Child language teaching and therapy*, 26(2), pp. 123-43.

<http://clt.sagepub.com/content/26/2/123.abstract>

16. The current legislation regarding recruitment and selection is making the employment landscape even more difficult for people with SEN and SLCN to overcome. There needs to be more flexibility in the types of recruitment processes. People with communication support needs should have access to a practical rather than a verbal or written selection procedure if the post allows and/or have a communication supporter to explain the questions at a level they understand.
17. In recognition of the particular needs of people with communication difficulties in the justice system, the Department of Justice has recently introduced an 'Intermediary' scheme <http://www.dojni.gov.uk/registered-intermediary-schemes>. The Registered Intermediaries Schemes pilot was launched on 13 May 2013. Registered Intermediaries are communication specialists who assist vulnerable victims, witnesses, suspects and defendants with significant communication deficits to communicate their answers more effectively during police interviews and when giving evidence at trial.
18. Under equality legislation an employer should demonstrate that they make reasonable accommodations to the recruitment process to ensure that it is accessible to those with speech, language and communication support needs (other than those which are due to a sensory hearing impairment). The profoundly deaf and hearing impaired have access to interpreters who translate speech into sign and sign into speech. However, for someone with a learning disability and sensory impairment, this does not make the vocabulary and language used at interview any easier to understand.
19. The challenges of the workplace for someone with learning disability and communication support needs are well described by this case study below.

### **Case study**

Recently, a lady with a severe learning disability and SLCN (employed by a local Health and Social Care Trust) had to attend a mandatory training session. However, there were no attempts to make reasonable adjustments to make this training accessible for her. Her work colleagues reported that it caused her anxiety and distress as she did not understand any of the information or why her work routine was changed.

20. Workplace environments need to make reasonable adjustments for people with communication support needs as they do for others with physical and sensory disabilities. Individuals with learning disabilities are capable of advising on the kinds of reasonable adjustments that could make the work environment more accessible. If supported and skilled, there is no reason why they could not also be consulted when buildings are being designed to make them more accessible for people with SLCN. Accessible signage and accessible information within a work environment are examples of reasonable adjustments. People with learning and communication disabilities can advise

if documents and information are accessible and can also participate in creating accessible information.

**4. To examine if the quantum and quality of post school provision for those with Learning Disabilities is meeting the demand and develop recommendations to address barriers to participation and delivery of high quality provision.**

21. As already stated the main factor acting as a barrier for people with SEN and learning disability in entering higher education and employment is communication deficit. SLTs are currently not core members of transition teams despite the overrepresentation of communication difficulties in this population. There is currently a lack of mandatory training for careers advisors and employment support workers in identifying and supporting those with speech, language and communication needs.
22. Communication difficulties make young people vulnerable in relation to education. SLCN in young people often presents as a behavioural problem as they cannot respond or cope with the world around them. Young people with low educational attainment due to their language or communication needs will find it difficult to enter higher education, employment or training schemes due to their lack of educational qualifications.
23. A further complication for young people with SLCN is that employment and training schemes are not accessible. Evidence shows that employment in the United Kingdom increasingly relies on language and communication skills. A recent study of unemployed young men using standardised measures found that up to 88% were language impaired.<sup>7</sup> These young people do not possess sufficient language skills and will struggle to access jobs therefore making them less employable.
24. Lindsay and Dockrell (2012) also point to the importance of providing appropriate support for young people with communication difficulties: “our study indicates that a significant number of adolescents with a history of language difficulties continue to experience problems in the area of social communication. For practitioners, this highlights the necessity to consider these issues and tailor the support to the pupils’ presenting needs: Many will have difficulties with relationships with peers, and others will experience problems with conduct.”<sup>8</sup>
25. Vulnerable young people need to be equipped with appropriate speech, language and communication skills. Currently in Northern Ireland, speech and language therapy is not commissioned to provide services into post primary or further education facilities. There is also a lack of awareness of and support for young people with SLCN in careers services and training and employment

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<sup>7</sup> Elliott, N. L. (2011) *An investigation into the communication skills of unemployed young men*.

<sup>8</sup> Lindsay, G. and Dockrell, J. (2012) ‘Longitudinal patterns of behavioural, emotional and social difficulties and self-concepts in adolescents with a history of specific language impairment’, *Language, speech and hearing services in schools*, 43, pp. 445-60.  
<http://lshss.pubs.asha.org/article.aspx?articleid=1761502>



initiatives. It is imperative that the development of life and social skills training be brought together with speech, language and communication training to support these young people into higher education, training and employment.

26. Young people with SLCN and learning disability will not be able to access the numerous back to work or employability schemes introduced by government to tackle NEET without extra assistance. The majority of these schemes require good communication skills to access them.
27. Everyone needs to know what good communication support 'looks like' and what reasonable adjustments they can expect. The Youth Justice Agency, NSPCC, Victims Support and Mindwise have all ensured that their staff are upskilled in their knowledge of SLCN by availing of the free RCSLT e-learning tool 'The Box'.  
[http://www.rcslt.org/speech\\_and\\_language\\_therapy/the\\_box\\_training\\_for\\_the\\_criminal\\_justice\\_sector/open](http://www.rcslt.org/speech_and_language_therapy/the_box_training_for_the_criminal_justice_sector/open)
28. The RCSLT considers that all staff with roles in supporting young people and adults with learning disability should have access to mandatory training in identifying and supporting communication needs which is focused upon supporting them into further education and employment. Providing training for the wider workforce is integral to the speech and language therapist's core role. Outcomes for people with SLCN are improved when the whole workforce is able to contribute appropriately to the communication environment as is already demonstrated in the primary and post primary school workforce.
29. There is an opportunity in this inquiry to recommend that a scheme is set up directly to involve people with learning and communication disability to deliver work based training on SLCN. People with SLCN are experts in their own communication difficulties and therefore could be supported and trained to provide mandatory communication training.
30. The RCSLT has recently developed the following 5 communication standards which, if in place, would assist an individual to transition and remain in higher education and employment.

**Standard 1:** There is a detailed description of how best to communicate with individuals.

**Standard 2:** Services demonstrate how they support individuals with communication needs to be involved with decisions about their care and their services.

**Standard 3:** Staff value and use competently the best approaches to communication with each individual they support.

**Standard 4:** Services create opportunities, relationships and environments that make individuals want to communicate.

**Standard 5:** Individuals are supported to understand and express their needs in relation to their health and wellbeing.

**5. Given the complex and interrelated needs of individuals in this group to identify the barriers to co-ordination across departments – regionally and locally – and make recommendations for improvement.**

31. Currently, there is no comprehensive government strategy for meeting the speech, language and communication needs of adults (post 19 years of age) in Northern Ireland. As a result it is difficult to determine the prevalence and scope of the education, employment and social barriers they face. Supporting people with communication and learning disability post school age is everyone's responsibility and cuts across many departments. However, there is still a vacuum in terms of joint commissioning and planning to meet their needs.
32. There is a need for the development of an integrated care pathway which addresses the speech, language and communication support requirements for people in further education and employment. In particular, the pathway should identify how individuals who do not use speech to communicate can be enabled to participate more fully in the opportunities in higher education.

**6. To report the Committee's findings and recommendations to the Assembly.**

33. RCSLT recommendations

1. The Government should commission an audit of services for young people and adults with learning disability and SLCN which would highlight the barriers that they face in getting their needs identified and met in further education and employment.
2. An integrated care pathway is developed to support young people and adults with learning disability and SLCN into further education training and employment.
3. Young people with learning disability and SLCN who are transitioning from school to further education or employment services should be supported by speech and language therapy services as transition itself places extreme demands upon their communication skills.
4. Education, training facilities and workplaces should endeavour to meet the RCSLT 5 Communication Standards.
5. All staff with roles in supporting young people and adults with learning disability into further education training and employment should have access to mandatory training in identifying and supporting communication needs.
6. Government should develop a communication awareness training programme which involves people with learning and communication disability in delivering work based training on SLCN.



7. Government should develop written and visual guidance for employers to demonstrate how to make reasonable accommodations in the selection and recruitment processes to ensure they are equally accessible to people with communication support needs which are not attributable to a sensory impairment.

***This response was submitted by the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists to the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Employment and Learning on 21 March 2014.***

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