

RCSLT NI: Perspective on SEN Provision and the Transformation Agenda

RCSLT NI's Submission to the Education Committee – Nov 2025

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists in Northern Ireland (RCSLT NI) submitted evidence to the Assembly's Education Committee call for evidence inquiry that took place in the Long Gallery on Tuesday 11 November 2025, emphasising that speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) are central to the Special Educational Needs (SEN) landscape. SLCN are among the most frequently identified types of SEN in Northern Ireland, and in fact they are one of the most common primary needs for children with a SEN statement [1]. However, those who require specialist input to progress may not receive it under the current system, for example, RISE is only available to KS1 and the LIT teams do not offer 1-1 for statemented children and young people despite this, current service provision has not kept pace with growing demand[2].

RCSLT NI highlighted to the Committee that many children with SLCN are underscoring an urgent need for increased investment in SEN speech and language therapy services[3]. In particular, the gap between capacity and demand was highlighted, for example, Northern Ireland has no dedicated speech and language therapists directly employed within the education system, unlike other UK regions[4]. This structural gap contributes to long waits and unmet needs, even as referrals climb. However, some schools are increasingly utilising school funds to bring in independent SLTs to meet the growing needs.

RCSLT NI draw the Committee's attention to compelling evidence from our recent reports. For instance, the 2024 **"We are the Village"** early-years report revealed an 85% surge in children waiting for speech and language therapy between 2021 and 2023, rising from 2,444 to 4,527 children[5]. RCSLT NI stressed that such delays in the early years are unacceptable, given the critical window for development. They noted that Northern Ireland now has more children waiting for speech therapy per head of population than any other UK region[6], reflecting the scale of the crisis. The RCSLT NI submission also calls attention to the increasing complexity of needs seen among young children, a trend corroborated by frontline professionals – and the strain on a workforce that is already "stretched far beyond capacity"[7]. Overall, our message to the Education Committee is clear: without decisive action to boost capacity and improve how services are delivered across both health and education, children with SLCN will continue to fall through the cracks in the SEN system[8].

RCSLT NI's Key Policy Recommendations

RCSLT NI has outlined several recommendations to address these challenges and improve outcomes for children with SLCN:

- **Expand the Speech and Language Therapy Workforce:** Dramatically increase training and recruitment of speech and language therapists. RCSLT NI is calling for a sustained increase in the number of commissioned undergraduate SLT places at Ulster University. We note the increase in places from 28 to 56 for the 2025/26 intake, however this needs to be secured for future years to ensure a sustainable workforce. Furthermore, introducing alternative training routes (such as apprenticeships or postgraduate courses) are required to grow and diversify the workforce[9]. This expansion is essential to tackle lengthy waiting lists and meet escalating demand[5].
- **Cross-Departmental Leadership and Strategy:** Establish stronger integration between health and education in planning services for children with SLCN. RCSLT NI recommends appointing a dedicated Professional SLT Adviser across the Department of Health and the Department of Education[10]. This senior advisor would provide expert guidance and help support the Department of Education's 5-year SEN Reform Agenda Delivery Plan 2025-2030. The theme 'Speech, Language and Communication' aims to establish and deliver a pilot speech, language and communication intervention toolkit and programme. The RCSLT NI emphasize that this requires SLT oversight from design to implementation to ensure quality and governance around delivering speech and language intervention. Wales has successfully implemented such roles – two specialist SLTs in government – to drive its "Talk With Me" early language initiative[11] with great outcomes. Cross-departmental oversight would ensure that policy and funding decisions consider communication needs safely, effectively and holistically across both sectors. The 5-year SEN Reform Agenda and Plan also set out a commitment to invest in and establish protected posts for Allied Health Professionals including Speech and Language Therapists. The RCSLT NI welcome this commitment and are hopeful that funding will be made available to take this forward within the timeframes set out.
- **Equitable Services in All Educational Settings:** Ensure equal access to speech and language support for children in every educational environment. Currently, children's therapy is delivered almost entirely via the health system; there are no commissioned SLT posts within NI schools or Education Authority teams[4]. RCSLT NI advocates for new models that embed speech and language therapy into educational settings – from early years through post-primary – so that students with SLCN can get support in school as needed. This includes extending provision into post-primary schools, since older pupils with communication needs (for example, those with developmental language disorder or autism) often have limited or no SLT support at present (this varies across NI). Creating school-based or school-linked SLT roles and funding would help close the service gap for school-age children.

- Early Identification and Intervention:** Make early communication development a top priority. RCSLT NI urges the Executive to invest in the early years and implement systematic early identification of speech and language difficulties[12]. This could include developing a standard communication screening or monitoring tool for use in nurseries and health visits, so that no child's SLCN goes undetected during the crucial preschool period. The earlier a child's needs are recognized and addressed, the better their chances of overcoming difficulties[13]. RCSLT NI's stance is that "early language intervention should be a priority for the Northern Ireland Executive", to give all children a fair start in life[12]. Investing in universal early intervention not only benefits children's development but also reduces downstream demands on SEN services[14][15].
- Training Education Staff in SLCN:** Improve capacity within schools by equipping teachers and support staff with the knowledge to support communication needs. RCSLT NI recommends that initial teacher training and SENCO (special needs coordinator) training include mandatory content on SLCN[16]. Currently, many NI teachers receive little formal training in speech and language development or impairment, yet they are expected to support children with these needs in the classroom. Speech, Language and Communication skills are foundational to accessing all learning. By embedding understanding of SLCN into teacher education (as has been done with some pilot collaborations[16]), teachers and classroom assistants will be better prepared to identify children who are struggling, adapt their communication strategies, and work effectively with therapists. Ongoing professional development in this area for existing educators is also important, so that the entire workforce is more equipped with skills to support children with SLCN to access the curriculum. The Transform-Ed agenda offers an opportunity to upskill teaching staff with the necessary skills and knowledge.
- Embed Communication in Policy and Practice:** RCSLT NI advocates that speech, language and communication be woven into all relevant children's services policies and initiatives. From the SEN Transformation Programme to wider social and educational strategies, communication needs should be explicitly recognised and addressed. This includes ensuring information and services are communication-accessible for families (e.g. using plain language, interpreters, and augmentative tools as needed) and promoting programs like the free Communication Access training, which helps organizations become more inclusive for people with communication difficulties[17]. By taking a communication-inclusive approach at a policy level, government can drive a culture in which supporting SLCN is "everyone's business" across health, education, and social care.

These recommendations, taken together, form a comprehensive agenda that RCSLT NI continues to push for in order to transform SEN provision. In short, the "calls to action" centre on bolstering the workforce, fostering joined-up working between sectors, prioritising early language, and building capacity in mainstream settings so that every child's communication needs are met[12][4].

Growing Need and Complexity of SLCN in Children

The evidence is unequivocal that demand for support with SLCN has risen sharply in recent years, both in volume and in complexity of cases. RCSLT NI has gathered data from health and education sources highlighting the scale of the challenge. Some key indicators include:

- **Escalating referrals and wait times:** The number of children waiting for speech and language therapy in NI jumped by 85% in two years, from 2,444 children in 2021 to about 4,527 in 2023[5]. Families report waiting 6+ months just for an initial assessment, during the crucial early developmental window[18][19]. Such delays can cause children to fall further behind.
- **Rising prevalence in early years:** Frontline professionals are seeing many more young children with communication difficulties. In a recent survey of Northern Ireland early-years providers, 90% reported an increase in the number of children with SLCN, and 95% of community paediatricians noted that the speech and language cases they see have become more complex in the past few years[20]. Paediatricians also reported a significant uptick in overall referrals – about 70% saw an increase in referrals to their Child Development Clinics for communication and developmental concerns[21]. This corroborates what therapists describe anecdotally: not only are more children coming forward with SLCN, but many have multifaceted needs (e.g. SLCN co-occurring with autism, learning or emotional difficulties) requiring intensive support[22].
- **More SLCN identified at school entry:** Education data shows a dramatic rise in young children identified with speech, language and communication needs when they start school. Between the 2018–19 and 2022–23 school years, the number of Nursery and P1 pupils with SLCN on the SEN register skyrocketed – increasing by +44% in nursery and +17% in Year 1 within mainstream schools, and an astonishing +81% (nursery) and +149% (P1) in special schools[23][24]. These figures (illustrated in Appendix 1) point to a substantial growth in early-years communication difficulties over just five years. Likewise, the number of very young children requiring formal SEN Statements for SLCN nearly tripled in some settings during this period[23][24]. Such increases far outpace general population growth, indicating a genuine surge in prevalence and/or recognition of SLCN in the early childhood cohort.
- **High overall prevalence of SLCN:** It is estimated that at least two children in every classroom have some level of speech, language or communication need[25]. In some areas – particularly those of socio-economic disadvantage, the rates are even higher. Around 50% of children in socially deprived communities start school with delayed language or other communication difficulties[15], a legacy of factors like

poverty and the pandemic. Across Northern Ireland's schools, roughly 23% of pupils are identified as having SEN, and SLCN remains one of the most commonly reported needs on school SEN registers[1]. These statistics underscore that communication needs are widespread and cannot be viewed as a niche issue; a significant minority of learners require support to communicate effectively.

- **Impact on wider outcomes:** Unaddressed SLCN in childhood has far-reaching consequences. Difficulties with understanding or expressing language impede children's ability to learn, socialize and achieve their potential[26]. For example, strong early language skills are linked to better literacy and academic results, so children with delayed language are at higher risk of falling behind in school. There is also often a hidden link between SLCN and other challenges: an estimated 81% of children with emotional or behavioral disorders have underlying language deficits (often previously unrecognized), and studies show about 66% of pupils at risk of exclusion from school have SLCN[27]. Left unidentified, these communication needs can manifest as misbehavior or academic failure. Furthermore, long-term research has found that over 80% of young unemployed men had unaddressed SLCN from childhood[28], demonstrating the lifelong impact if supports aren't provided. In short, supporting children's communication needs early is not only an educational imperative but also key to preventing future social, economic, and health difficulties[29].
- **Workforce capacity strain:** This surge in need has coincided with significant workforce challenges. The Health Service speech and language therapy workforce in NI has dozens of vacancies and struggles to keep up. As of June 2023, around 1 in 5 NHS speech and language therapist posts (18%) were vacant – in some trusts, nearly 30% of therapist positions were unfilled[30]. Recruitment and retention issues (partly due to funding constraints and pay disparities) mean services are often short-staffed and operating at the limits of capacity. Therapists are “operating hand to mouth” to meet urgent cases, but chronic vacancies make it difficult to proactively address all the needs[31]. Without additional therapists, long waiting lists and reduced support for children with SEN will persist[32][5]. This is why RCSLT NI is adamant that workforce expansion and planning must be front and center in the transformation agenda.

In summary, multiple data sources paint the same picture: more children than ever need help with speech, language and communication, and their needs are often more complex, yet services are under-resourced to respond. Any strategic review of SEN provision must therefore grapple with this reality and plan for a service model that can accommodate the “new normal” of higher SLCN prevalence.

Collaborative Initiatives and the Way Forward

Going forward, RCSLT NI would like to stress that improving outcomes for children with SLCN will require collaborative, cross-sector solutions and a commitment to sustained

investment. The good news is that Northern Ireland has already started to pilot innovative approaches that bring health, education, and community partners together. One notable example is the Language Launchpad project, which RCSLT NI launched in 2025 with backing from the Department of Education[33]. This initiative, funded under the transformation agenda, provides universal support for early communication development, including training for parents and early-years practitioners and a suite of accessible resources co-created with community groups. The project was launched at Stormont with both the Education Minister and the Health Minister in attendance, underscoring the high-level recognition of the importance of speech, language and communication needs[34]. Language Launchpad demonstrates what can be achieved when departments and sectors join forces with a shared vision: it delivered practical tools and bite-size training that empower families and educators to support children's language skills from the start[35][36]. RCSLT NI views this kind of early intervention and prevention model as a critical component of the SEN transformation. By equipping the "village" around the child – parents, childcare staff, teachers, health visitors, we can catch issues earlier and create a more communication-friendly environment for all children.

To truly transform SEN provision, such efforts need to be scaled up and embedded systematically across all key stages. RCSLT NI supports the Department of Education's stated goal of providing the "Right Support, from the Right People, at the Right Time, in the Right Place" for children with additional needs[37]. Achieving this will require breaking down silos between services. A recurring theme in RCSLT NI's advice is the need for an integrated workforce strategy for supporting children with SEN[38]. This means planning the education workforce and health/AHP workforce in tandem, for example, ensuring there are enough therapists to serve every school cluster, and that teachers and support staff have the training and partnerships to address SLCN collaboratively. It also means aligning efforts in early years (like Sure Start, nurseries, Health Visiting programs) with what happens in primary and post-primary support, so that there is a continuous pathway of support as a child grows[39].

Another priority is ensuring the SEN reform is properly resourced. RCSLT NI echoes the concern that no reform can succeed if it is not matched with adequate funding for implementation[40][41]. This includes funding the expansion of therapy posts, training initiatives, and new support programs as outlined earlier. Short-term or piecemeal funding will not be sufficient given the scale of unmet need, a sustained, multi-year investment plan is needed to truly clear backlogs and build capacity. The transformation agenda must therefore secure commitment from the Executive for the necessary resources (workforce, training, and services) to deliver on their promises.

RCSLT NI advocates that children and families remain at the heart of the transformation agenda. Any changes to SEN provision should be co-designed with the input of parents, young people, and the professionals who work directly with them[42][43]. From a speech and language perspective, this means listening to the experiences of families navigating long waits or struggling to get support in school and using that insight to inform service redesign. It also means maintaining a rights-based focus, every child has a right to

communicate and to receive support for communication if they need it. The end goal of the reforms should be that no child in NI is prevented from reaching their potential due to unaddressed communication needs.

In conclusion, RCSLT NI welcomes the Committee's focus on reviewing SEN provision and is optimistic that, with the right measures, Northern Ireland can support our children and young people with SL|CN. The evidence is clear about what's needed: earlier intervention, better integration between health and education, a larger skilled workforce, and informed, inclusive practice at all levels. Together, these will help create a system where every child with SLCN, whether it's a mild delay or a lifelong condition, gets timely, effective support. RCSLT NI will continue working with policymakers, services, and communities to make speech, language and communication a reality in the transformed SEN framework. By putting communication at the heart of the agenda, Northern Ireland's vision of "the right support, from the right people, at the right time and in the right place" for every child can truly be achieved[37][44].

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Appendix 1

Growing Need and Complexity of SLCN in Children

We are the Village - speech, language and communication in the early years

APPENDIX 2

Number of Children on SEN Register under SLCN				
Academic Year	Mainstream		Special	
	Nursery	Primary 1	Nursery	Primary 1
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% ↑

Number of Children on Stage 1 Code of Practice NB: Stages changed from 1-5 to 1-3 in 2021				
Academic Year	Mainstream		Special	
	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

Number of Children with Statements of SEN				
Academic Year	Mainstream		Special	
	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	44% ↑	17% ↑	81% ↑	149% ↑

Source: Department of Education Northern Ireland, 2023

APPENDIX 3 – STAKEHOLDER LETTERS OF SUPPORT

Figure 1: Rapid increases in the number of young children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) identified in Northern Ireland's education system, 2018–2023. Data from the Department of Education show large percentage jumps in Nursery and Primary 1 pupils with SLCN on the SEN register or with SEN Statements, in both mainstream and special school settings.