

Written evidence submitted by the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT)

Key points

- There is a clear correlation between pupils who are more likely to have persistent and severe absence, and the prevalence of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). This includes children living in areas of social disadvantage, pupils with SEND, those in alternative provision and those in touch with social care services.
- Speech and language therapists report that they are witnessing increased anxiety and Emotionally-Based School Avoidance (EBSA) since the pandemic, especially in autistic children and young people, those who have social communication difficulties, or those with an anxiety disorder such as selective mutism.
- Given the strong evidence that children and young people who are more likely to have poorer attendance records are also more likely to have SLCN, there is a need to ensure that identification and support for SLCN is considered as part of the solution when considering responses to persistent absence. This should include training for education staff, and improving access to the specialist workforce.

1. The factors causing persistent and severe absence among different groups of pupils

1.1 Recent research and analysis conducted by the Children’s Commissioner for England has found the following factors were associated with absence from school:

- Having an education, health and care plan (EHCP)¹
- Receiving pupil premium²
- History of being excluded from school³
- Children in Need history⁴ (that is children who are, or have been previously, supported by children’s social care, and have safeguarding and welfare needs)

“Among children in The Big Ask, we find there are several factors associated with a higher probability of missing education, including receiving mental health support, being unhappy with educational progress, being unhappy with friendships, having a social worker, and being supported by a youth offending team. Children’s responses indicated that some were missing school because their special educational needs were not being met, they were not able to access mental health support, or they had experienced bullying in school. For some children, there was a combination of these factors” (Children’s Commissioner for England, 2022).⁵

There is significant evidence to suggest all of these identified groups are at higher risk of having speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), as detailed below.

While we cannot say for sure that the link is causal, we can consider what we know about the experience of pupils with unsupported SLCN in school, who can find it hard to make friends, often struggle with schoolwork and find it difficult to understand and follow instructions. Then we can see why children with SLCN may be more likely to be persistently absent from school.

2. Disadvantaged pupils

2.1 Data from the Department for Education shows that 33.6% of pupils who were eligible for free school meals were persistently absent in autumn 2021, compared to 20% of pupils who were not eligible.⁶

2.2 Research shows that there is a strong correlation between socio-economic disadvantage and language difficulties:

- Studies of whole populations reveal a clear social gradient for language development, with children from the most socioeconomically disadvantaged groups twice as likely to experience language delay as their less disadvantaged peers.⁷
- Children who are entitled to free school meals and live in more deprived neighbourhoods are more than twice as likely to have identified SLCN.⁸
- Over 50% of children in socially deprived areas may start school with impoverished speech, language and communication skills.⁹

2.3 Identification and support for SLCN should therefore be considered as part of the solution when developing responses to persistent absence in disadvantaged pupils.

3. Pupils with SEND

3.1 Data from the Department for Education shows that 35.9% of pupils with an EHCP and 30.6% of pupils with SEN support were persistently absent in autumn 2021, compared to 21.5% for pupils with no identified SEN.¹⁰

3.2 Speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) are the most common type of primary need – representing almost a quarter (23%) of all children and young people with SEND. It is the second most common type of need for pupils with EHCPs.¹¹

3.3 Moreover, many of the children with other types of SEND will also have communication needs that require additional support – be that autistic children, those with learning difficulties, deafness, or social, emotional and mental health needs.

3.4 There is significant under-identification of SLCN. This is demonstrated by a comparison of the data on the numbers of children identified as having SLCN as a special educational need in schools with research on the prevalence of the most common condition (Developmental Language Disorder, or DLD):

- 319,757 children and young people in England were identified as having SLCN as their primary type of special educational need in 2022.¹² This represents 3.6% of all

pupils on roll, compared with the 7.6% of children who have DLD according to research.¹³

3.5 We also know that too many children with SEND, including children and young people with SLCN, are not able to access the specialist support they need. NHS England data shows that in October 2022 there were 64,102 children and young people on the waiting list for speech and language therapy – this is the largest waiting list of any paediatric service. The most common reasons preventing reductions in waiting lists reported were workforce availability (24%) and increase in demand/referrals (24%).¹⁴

3.6 It is essential therefore that identification and support for SLCN is prioritised when developing policy responses to persistent absence for pupils with SEND.

3.7 The need to improve provision for pupils with SEND in order to increase attendance is acknowledged by Ofsted in their report, *Securing good attendance and tackling persistent absence*: “The curriculum and overall provision for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) are important so that these pupils – too many of whom often have poor attendance – have a positive experience of school.”¹⁵

4. Pupils in alternative provision or at risk of exclusion

4.1 Data from the Department for Education shows that 75.7% of pupils in pupil referral units were persistently absent in autumn 2021, compared to 23.5% for pupils in state-funded primary, secondary and special schools.¹⁶

4.2 Many children and young people in alternative provision settings have SLCN which were not identified prior to entering the setting. The most common reason for pupils being excluded from mainstream education is disruptive behaviour; research shows that many children and young people who are excluded or at risk of exclusion have behavioural difficulties which co-occur with communication needs that are often unidentified and unsupported:

- Two thirds of pupils at risk of permanent exclusion from a mainstream secondary school have language difficulties.¹⁷
- 81% of children with formally identified emotional and behavioural disorders have significantly below average language abilities.¹⁸
- Sheffield Inclusion Centre supports children and young people who are displaying challenging behaviour and have been excluded from mainstream primary and secondary schools across the city. Between 2014 and 2018 all children on roll were assessed by speech and language therapy; 63% had speech, language and communication needs.

4.3 This suggests that identification and support for SLCN should be considered in relation to persistent absence within alternative provision – indeed, it may be possible to learn from the Department for Education’s Alternative Provision Specialist Taskforce project, which has established multi-disciplinary teams of specialists, including speech and language therapists,

to work directly with young people in alternative provision settings to offer intensive support.

5. Pupils in touch with social care services

- 5.1 Research by the Office of the Children’s Commissioner has found that authorised and unauthorised absence was much higher for pupils who have ever been Children in Need (12% overall) than pupils who haven’t (7% overall).¹⁹
- 5.2 This is backed up by local data: for example, a speech and language therapist has told us that in their local authority, attendance for children and young people on child protection plans is 70%, compared to 90% for all pupils. They have also found that more than half of children with a social worker who have SEND are persistently absent.
- 5.3 Research shows that SLCN are particularly prevalent amongst children and young people in touch with social care services:
- 58% of young people screened as part of the No Wrong Door project, which provides an integrated service to young people in care or on the edge of care, were identified as SLCN.²⁰
 - In a recent study, 90% of care leavers had below average language ability, and 60% met criteria for having Developmental Language Disorder – a condition where children have problems understanding and/or using spoken language. None of these young people had previously been diagnosed with SLCN.²¹
 - A similar pattern was found in a study of young people in care in Australia: 92% had oral language skills below the average range, with 62% having significant language difficulties (two or more standard deviations below the mean).²²

6. The impact of the pandemic

- 6.1 Speech and language therapists report that they are witnessing increased anxiety and Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) since the pandemic, especially in autistic children and young people, those who have social communication difficulties, or those with an anxiety disorder such as selective mutism.
- 6.2 Our members have suggested that part of the reason may be that prior to the pandemic the concept of not going to school was not seen as a viable option, but the introduction of the blended learning approach following school closures may have changed this perception.

“We have seen an explosion in Emotionally Based School Avoidance, particularly in those who have social communication difficulties (and Autism - diagnosed or not) since Covid. I think that the rule was to attend school, and that rule changed. This means that children have a different understanding of the need to attend school. They have had the opportunity to learn from home, away from crowds, noise and social interaction and now they don't want to go back to that.”
Consultant speech and language therapist

- 6.3 For Year 6 pupils who were due to transition between primary and secondary education during periods of COVID lockdown, the usual transition support was not in place, leading to further anxiety about attending school, impact on friendships and wellbeing.
- 6.4 There is also increasing evidence to suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on children's development. Children of all ages have had reduced opportunities to interact with others to develop essential skills in speech, language and communication, with the greatest impact on children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- In a survey of 555 professionals and volunteers who work with babies and their families, 92.4% of respondents said that the pandemic has an ongoing negative or very negative impact on the communication, speech and language skills of young children who were growing up during the pandemic.²³
 - National data published by the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities shows that in 2021/22, 13.8% of children were below the expected level in communication skills at their 2 to 2 and a half year review.²⁴ In 2019/20 this figure was 11.1%.²⁵
- 6.5 Given the correlation between SLCN and school absence, it is vital that these children are supported to develop their speech, language and communication skills now, if we are to reduce the risk of them becoming persistently absent from school in the future.

7. How schools and families can be better supported to improve attendance

- 7.1 As highlighted above, children and young people who are more likely to have persistent and severe absence are also more likely to have SLCN. Given this evidence, measures to improve attendance must include support for education staff to equip them with the knowledge and skills to understand how to:
- develop children's language and communication skills,
 - identify children and young people who struggle with their speech, language and communication
 - know what they can do to support them.
- 7.2 This could be delivered through:
- training for early career teachers and continuous professional development for existing teaching staff
 - enhanced training for support staff to enable them to assist teachers in the provision of universal and targeted support for language and communication development in schools.
- 7.3 The RCSLT has developed an e-learning course – Mind Your Words - designed for professionals working with children and young people. The tool aims to improve understanding of children and young people who have both mental health needs and SLCN. The free online training highlights the links between mental health and communication and outlines how professionals can work together to remove communication barriers and help these children and young people achieve their potential. More information is available at <https://www.rcslt.org/learning/mind-your-words/>

- 7.4 In addition, it is vital that pupils who are more likely to have persistent and severe absence are able to get the support they need from specialist professionals, such as speech and language therapists. Ensuring children, young people and their families can access specialist support from expert professionals is essential throughout their school lives. A wide range of professionals provide direct support to children and young people and families, in addition to helping teachers to develop their knowledge and skills. They also play a vital role in keeping more children in school.
- 7.5 Currently we are seeing a variety of concerning issues impacting the specialist workforce, including:
- an insufficient number of specialists being trained to meet demand;
 - an exodus of professionals from the public sector;
 - increased demand for support in general and in the level of complexity children are presenting with; and
 - COVID-19 has exacerbated pre-existing demands on the specialist workforce and increased waiting times to access them.
- 7.6 As part of a coalition of more than 100 organisations, the RCSLT is calling on the Government to address gaps in the specialist workforce and ensure there will be sufficient specialist professionals to help children – now and in the future. More information about the coalition is available at <https://www.rcslt.org/news/rcslt-leads-coalition-calling-for-investment-in-the-specialist-workforce/>

8. About the RCSLT

- 8.1 The RCSLT is the professional body for speech and language therapists (SLTs), speech and language therapy students and support workers, with more than 20,000 members across the UK.
- 8.2 SLTs are an integral part of the children's workforce, working alongside parents/carers and with other professionals across education, health and social care to support children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), and those with eating, drinking and swallowing difficulties.
- 8.3 SLTs' specialist knowledge and skills regarding children's speech, language and communication development mean they also have a key role in enabling universal approaches to supporting speech and language development for all children, and planning targeted interventions for those at increased risk.

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