

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru | National Assembly for Wales  
Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Children, Young People and  
Education Committee

Blaenoriaethau ar gyfer y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg |  
Priorities for the Children, Young People and Education Committee

CYPE 74

Ymateb gan : Coleg Brenhinol y Therapyddion Iaith a Lleferydd  
Response from : Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists

**1. Executive Summary**

1.1 The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) Wales welcomes the opportunity to comment on the future priorities of the Children, Young People and Education Committee. We have only listed one priority area in our response, namely early language development and school readiness with a focus on support for parents, upskilling the early years workforce and equity of support for children in Wales.

1.2 RCSLT Wales believes an inquiry into this issue should be prioritised by the Committee within the Fifth Assembly given the opportunities presented by the upcoming publication of the Ten Year Plan for the Early Years, Childcare and Play Workforce and the expansion of childcare provision and the pupil deprivation grant. In addition, RCSLT Wales are aware that an Assembly Committee has not prioritised a focused inquiry into the area of early years in recent years. It is thus timely that scrutiny is given to this key area of policy.

**2. About the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists**

2.1 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. The RCSLT has 15,000 members (450 in Wales) representing approximately 95% of SLTs working in the UK (who are registered with the Health & Care Professions Council). We promote excellence in practice and influence health, education, care and justice policies.

**3. Question 1 – Within the remit set out by the committee, what do you consider to be the priorities or issues that the Children, Young People and Education Committee should consider during the Fifth Assembly?**

3.1 RCSLT Wales is calling on the Children, Young People and Education Committee to undertake an inquiry into the early years, with particular relevance to early language development and school readiness. There has

been significant progress in Wales in recent years on early language development, predominantly through the expansion of early years education and the focus on this area within the Flying Start programme. However, we remain concerned that too many Welsh children are entering school without the speech, language and communication skills needed to fully access the Foundation Phase.

3.2 Good early language skills are central to children's early years development and school readiness. They play a crucial role in literacy, a child's ability to achieve their educational potential, their social mobility, and their life chances. However, not all children have the speech, language, and communication skills they need to fully engage with their education. It is estimated that 10% of all children in the UK have long-term, persistent speech, language and communication needs - 7% of these children have specific and primary speech and language impairments, while 1% have the most severe and complex SLCN<sup>1</sup>. Research shows that there is a strong correlation between poverty and transient early language delay.

- Over 50% of children in socially deprived areas may start school with impoverished speech, language and communication skills<sup>2</sup>
- On average children from the poorest 20% of the population are over 17 months behind a child in the highest income group in language development at age three.<sup>3</sup>

3.3 In Wales almost one in three children live in poverty<sup>4</sup>. Children living in poverty face a much greater risk of falling behind in terms of language development –UCL Institute of Education analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study data for Wales shows that children who live in persistent poverty are twice as likely to score below average for language development at age 5<sup>5</sup>. Projected increases in the number of children living in poverty will put even more children at risk of experiencing language delays.

3.4 The consequences of not supporting children's early language skills, and not identifying long-term or persistent speech, language and communication needs, can have a profound impact on children's school readiness. Research shows that:

---

<sup>1</sup> ICAN Talk Series – Issue 2. (2009) The Cost of the Nation of Children's Poor Communication. ICAN

<sup>2</sup> Locke A, Ginsborg J, Peers I. (2002) Development and disadvantage: Implications for the early years and beyond, *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 37(1), pp. 3-15.

<sup>3</sup> Save the Children (2014) How reading can help children escape poverty. London: Save the Children

<sup>4</sup>

<sup>5</sup> UCL Institute of Education (2015) Analysis of a Welsh Sample of the Millennium Cohort Study

- A two-year-old's language development can strongly predict their reading skills on entry into school, as well as their later attainment.<sup>6</sup>
- One in four children who struggled with language at age five did not reach the expected standard in English at the end of primary school compared with one in 25 children who had good language skills at age five.<sup>7</sup>
- One in five children who struggled with language at age five did not reach the expected standard in maths at the end of primary school compared with one in 50 children who had good language skills at age five.<sup>8</sup>

3.5 The consequences of not supporting children's early language skills, and not identifying long-term or persistent speech, language and communication needs, can also lead to a range of potentially negative outcomes later in life:

- Up to 60% of young people in the youth justice estate have communication difficulties.<sup>9</sup>
- 88% of long-term unemployed young men have speech, language and communication needs.<sup>10</sup>
- Without effective help, a third of children with speech, language and communication difficulties will need treatment for mental health problems in adult life (Clegg et al, 2005).
- Children with language difficulties have an impoverished quality of life in terms of moods and emotions, and are more at risk in terms of social acceptance and bullying.<sup>11</sup>

**4. From the list of priorities or issues you have identified, what do you consider to be the key areas that should be considered during the next 12 months (please identify up to three areas or issues)? Please outline why these should be considered as key priorities.**

4.1 Within the broader priority issue of early language and school readiness, we believe it may be helpful to focus a potential inquiry on three key areas namely;

- upskilling of the Early Years workforce
- support for parents

---

<sup>6</sup> M Snowling, C Hulme, A Bailey, S Stothrad and G Lindsay (2011) Better Communication Research Programme: Language and literacy attainment of pupils during early years and through KS2: Does teacher assessment at five provide a valid measure of children's current and future educational attainments DfE RR 172a.

<sup>7</sup> Save the Children (2016) Early language development and children's primary school attainment in English and Maths: new research findings, London: Save the Children.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Bryan K, Freer J, Furlong C. Language and communication difficulties in juvenile offenders. *International Journal of Language and Communication Difficulties* 2007; 42, 505-520.

<sup>10</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Lindsay G, Dockrell J, (2012) The relationship between speech, language and communication needs and behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD), Department for Education research report DFE-RR247-BCRP6.

- equity of the early years offer, especially to reach children living in poverty outside Flying Start areas.

Suggestions for key issues to be considered within each of these areas is discussed in more detail below.

## 4.2 Upskilling the early years workforce

4.2.1 There is strong evidence of the benefits of high quality early education and childcare from the perspective of vocabulary and literacy development<sup>12</sup>. Early years practitioners have a crucial role in supporting children's development. They share the early learning and skills that provide the foundation for school readiness and support good future progress through education and later life. The early years workforce is also vital in closing the language gap between children from high and lower income families, which begins in infancy, promoting social mobility and offering children the best start in life. All early years practitioners need to have the requisite skills, knowledge, confidence and attitudes to promote language development, and identify and support children with speech, language and communication needs.

4.2.2 Within its draft consultation document for the early years, childcare and play workforce, Welsh Government proposed a progression route for the sector up to level 6 (degree level equivalent) changing the national minimum standards for regulated childcare to reflect level 3 as the required standard for practitioners<sup>13</sup>. However, despite the importance of this workforce, wide variations in qualification levels continue to exist with evidence from 2012 suggesting that just 4% of staff in full day care nurseries possess degrees<sup>14</sup>.

4.2.3 We believe it would be helpful for the Committee to assess current plans for upskilling the early years workforce and reflect on the potential impact of possible cuts to funding following Brexit, the expansion of childcare provision and the pupil deprivation grant and the upcoming publication of the 10 year Plan for the Early Years, Childcare and Play workforce in Wales.

## 4.3 Support for parents

4.3.1 The strongest influence on the early language skills of young children are their parents and carers. Poverty can strongly reduce parents' ability to respond to their child's early language needs and offer a home

---

<sup>12</sup> Havnes, Tarjei & Mogstad, Magne, 2009. "Money for nothing? Universal childcare and maternal employment," IZA Discussion Papers 4504, Institute for the Study of Labour (IZA)

<sup>13</sup> Welsh Government (2014). Draft 10-year plan for the early years, childcare and play workforce in Wales.

<sup>14</sup> Melyn Consulting on behalf of CCW (2012) *The Early Years and Childcare Workforce in Wales*:

learning environment that enhances language skills in the early years<sup>15</sup>. As a group, children from disadvantaged backgrounds more commonly have reduced developmental opportunities that can limit their learning of language<sup>16</sup>. Supporting parents to foster a communication and language rich home environment is fundamental to improving children's early speech, language and communication development. The Effective Provision of Preschool Education project stated that: "*For all children, the quality of the home learning environment is more important for intellectual and social development than parental occupation, education or income.*"<sup>17</sup>

4.3.2 As part of the Flying Start programme, a speech and language therapist has been employed at every flying start setting in Wales. Part of the role of the therapist is to upskill the early years workforce in these areas and to improve parents' knowledge and skills to support children's early language development.

4.3.3 We believe it would be beneficial for the Committee to scrutinise the support already in place for parents around this agenda, potential gaps and opportunities for future developments, recognising the central role of parents in helping their children learn to listen, speak and communicate clearly and confidently.

#### 4.4 Equity of the early years offer

4.4.1 The Flying Start programme currently enables children and their parents to access speech, language and communication advice and support from birth. Each setting now employs speech and language therapists who provide much-needed expertise and support to teams and upskill the early skills workforce. However, many young children in Wales are unable to access the support offered by Flying Start and do not access formal early education until the age of 3. Given the strong relationship between social disadvantage and early language delay, we are of the view that there is rationale for the committee to assess the need for early language support for children living in poverty outside of Flying Start settings and explore potential models for how this may be achieved.

#### 4.5 Why should this issue be prioritised by the Committee?

4.5.1 We believe that an inquiry by the Committee into the issue of early language development and school readiness would be particularly timely at the start of this Fifth Assembly term for the following reasons;

---

<sup>15</sup> Law, J et al (2015). *Early language delays in the UK*, Save the Children: London.

<http://www.ncl.ac.uk/cflat/news/documents/Lawetal2013EarlyLanguageDelaysintheUK.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> APPG on Speech and Language Difficulties (2013), op. cit.

<sup>17</sup> Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Sira j- Blatchford, I., Taggart, B (2004) *Effective Preschool Provision*: Institute of Education

- opportunities presented by the forthcoming expansion of childcare provision and the pupil deprivation grant
- the impact of Brexit on the upskilling of the early years workforce.
- the upcoming publication of the 10 year Plan for the Early Years, Childcare and Play Workforce in Wales
- the fact that an Assembly Committee hasn't prioritised a focused investigation into the quality and provision of early year's services and support in recent years
- the split of responsibilities for this area within the Welsh Government across three Ministerial portfolios also means there is a clear role for the Committee to play in ensuring coherent policy making and improved outcomes for young children.

## 5. Further Information

5.1 We would be happy to provide any additional information required to support the Committee's decision making and scrutiny.