

CF 12

Ymchwiliad i dlodi yng Nghymru: Cymunedau yn Gyntaf – yr hyn a ddysgwyd

Inquiry into poverty in Wales: Communities First – lessons learnt

Ymateb gan: Coleg Brenhinol Therapyddion Iath a Lleferydd (RCSLT)

Response from: The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT)

Executive Summary

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) Wales welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee consultation on Poverty in Wales: Communities First – Lessons Learnt. Our response below focusses on one key element within the terms of reference namely;

- how different poverty reduction programmes will change as a result of the end of Communities First.

We will particularly focus on our learning from engagement with the Flying Start programme.

Key recommendations to the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee

- There is a strong correlation between early language delay and social disadvantage. Evidence from the Flying Start programme reveals the positive impact of investment in speech, language and communication in terms of school readiness. We are calling on the committee to consider this learning and recommend the expansion of early language support for children living in poverty outside of Flying Start settings.

About the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists

1. RCSLT is the professional body for speech and language therapists (SLTs), SLT students and support workers working in the UK. The RCSLT has 17,500 members in the UK (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.

2. Speech and Language Therapy manages the risk of harm and reduces functional impact for people with speech, language and communication support needs and/ or swallowing difficulties.
3. Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs) provide life improving treatment, support and care for adults who have difficulties with communication, eating, drinking or swallowing. Using specialist skills, SLTs work directly with clients, carers and other professionals to develop personalised strategies. They also provide training and strategies to the wider workforce; such as nursery staff and teaching assistants so that they can identify the signs of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), improve communication environments and provide effective support.

How different poverty reduction programmes will change as a result of the end of Communities First.

Flying Start and the focus on speech, language and communication

4. The Flying Start programme has prioritised speech, language and communication given the strong evidence of the correlation between early language delay and social disadvantage. Our evidence below provides the rationale for investment in early language development in areas of social disadvantage. It also discusses the evidence of the impact of such investment from the Flying Start programme and opportunities moving forward following the end of Communities First.
5. There is compelling evidence of the relationship between poverty and early language delay.
 - Over 50% of children in socially deprived areas may start school with impoverished speech, language and communication skills¹.
 - Vocabulary at age 5 has been found to be the best predictor (from a range of measures at age 5 and 10) of whether children who experienced social deprivation in childhood were able to 'buck the trend' and escape poverty in later adult life². Researchers have found that, after controlling for a range of other factors that might have played a part (mother's educational level, overcrowding, low birth weight, parent a poor reader, etc), children who had normal non-verbal skills but a poor vocabulary at age 5 were at age 34 one and a half times more likely to be poor readers

¹ 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.

² Blanden, J. (2006) *Bucking the Trend – What enables those who are disadvantaged in childhood to succeed later in life?* London: Department for Work and Pensions.

or have mental health problems and more than twice as likely to be unemployed as children who had normally developing language at age 5.³

6. 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. 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.⁴
- 88% of long-term unemployed young men have speech, language and communication needs.⁵
- 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.⁶

7. In light of the strength of this evidence, the Flying Start programme has prioritised speech, language and communication. To support this key strand of work, a SLT was seconded into Welsh Government for six months to write the programme guidance document on speech, language and communication. In addition, a SLT has been employed at every Flying Start team in Wales. Part of the role of the therapist is both to upskill the early years workforce in these areas and to improve parents' knowledge and skills to support children's early language development. This strategic approach ensures that;

- The 'Learning to Talk' key messages are shared with all parents as part of the Flying Start core health visiting programme and all parents are made aware of the importance of the home environment on long term speech, language and communication outcomes.
- All Flying Start childcare staff have an understanding of speech, language and communication development.
- All Flying Start childcare practitioners provide a rich learning environment that fosters language and communication opportunities for all children.

³ Law, J. et al (2010) Modelling developmental language difficulties from school entry into adulthood. *Journal of speech, language and hearing research*, 52, 1401-1416

⁴ Bryan K, Freer J, Furlong C. Language and communication difficulties in juvenile offenders. *International Journal of Language and Communication Difficulties* 2007; 42, 505-520.

⁵

⁶ 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.

8. The positive outcomes of this model are already becoming clear. In 2015, the Bridgend Flying Start Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs) won an NHS Wales award for their work in reducing language delay in two and three year olds. The SLTs worked with Flying Start nurseries in Bridgend to achieve a significant reduction in the number of children with delayed language skills. Out of over 600 children screened on starting nursery, 73% were assessed as having significant language delay, which would impact on future learning development. After the interventions delivered by nursery staff which were planned and supported by the Flying Start SLTs, 68% of the children with the worst language delay had improved.⁷

9. RCSLT believes that the announcement of the end of the Communities First programme is a real opportunity to consider lessons learnt from other poverty reduction programmes such as Flying Start. As we have described above, evidence from the programme suggests that the prioritisation of speech, language and communication and in particular the involvement of SLTs is having a significant impact. Despite this good practice, our members remain concerned that too many Welsh children are entering school without the speech, language and communication skills needed to fully access the Foundation Phase. We believe that there is significant scope to expand early language support for children living in poverty outside of Flying Start settings and that this area of need should be prioritised under the new funding arrangements for communities. We describe below two key areas for consideration – supporting parents and upskilling staff in early years’ settings.

10. 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 learning environment that enhances language skills in the early years⁸. As a group, children from disadvantaged backgrounds more commonly have reduced developmental opportunities that can limit their learning of language⁹.

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.”*¹⁰ The end of

⁷ Rebecca Jones (2015). Reducing the impact of language delay on two to three year olds in Bridgend. Abertawe BRO Morgannwg University Health Board: Swansea. <http://www.nhswalesawards.wales.nhs.uk/previous-nhs-wales-awards-winners>

⁸ 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>

⁹ APPG on Speech and Language Difficulties (2013), op. cit.

¹⁰ Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Sira j- Blatchford, J., Taggart, B (2004) *Effective*

Communities First funding offers an opportunity to consider the support already in place for parents around this agenda and how this may be strengthened.

11. Beyond the home environment, there is strong evidence of the benefits of high quality early education and childcare from the perspective of vocabulary and literacy development¹¹. 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. There is good learning from the Flying Start programme with regard to how SLTs have supported childcare staff to develop an understanding of speech, language and communication development and provide a rich learning environment that fosters language and communication opportunities for all children. Again, the end of Communities First funding offers an opportunity to reflect on support available for key policy areas such as childcare as an integral part of an approach to address poverty.

Further Information

12. We would be happy to provide any additional information required to support the Committee's decision making and scrutiny. For further information, please contact: