

STATEMENT from Mikey Akers, Francesca Beard, Samantha Berry, Dave Harford, Georgia Leckie, Karen Massey, Gillian Rudd, Pam Slater, and the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists*

10 June 2024

Following the closure of the Invest in SLT [petition](#), we wanted to say a massive thank to the 13,188 people who signed it, and to all those who over the past three months have promoted it so assiduously. To have secured such a large number of signatures in such a short period of time is hugely impressive. We are very grateful for everyone's dedicated activism.

It is a sign of the importance of the issues that, despite the petition not hitting 100,000 signatures, the House of Commons' Petitions Committee decided it would be debated on 1 July. While the General Election means that that debate will now not happen, we very much hope that the next Petitions Committee will consider the petition for a debate.

The need to increase investment in speech and language therapy is more pressing than ever. Had the debate taken place on 1 July, we would have sought clarification from all parties on various points. These include:

- How would they increase investment in the speech and language therapy services that people of all ages – babies, children, young people, working age adults, and older people – and their families require?
- What would the timescale be for this increased investment?
- How would they improve the planning for the whole speech and language therapy workforce, no matter where speech and language therapists work, or who employs them?
- How would they improve the retention and continuing professional development of the speech and language therapy workforce?

While we await the outcome of the General Election, these are the issues to which we shall return once Parliament returns and the case we will be making to the next Government. We look forward to working with you all on that and thank you again for all you have done on the petition.

** Mikey Akers is an advocate and campaigner. He tabled the petition. Dave Harford, Georgia Leckie, and Pam Slater are parents. Samantha Berry is an adult who has had speech and language therapy. Francesca Beard, Karen Massey, and Gillian Rudd are speech and language therapists. All these people were heavily involved in the petition's promotion and the RCSLT is very grateful to them, and to Sharon Oliphant for all she did.*

Why these issues matter to us

Samantha Berry, a person who has had speech and language therapy, commented:

I'm a former Modern Foreign Languages teacher with a Cognitive Communication Disorder from Covid. It necessitated specialist interventions from speech therapy. I've also participated in international research and helped raise awareness of SLT for Long Covid, which was recognised by RCSLT.

Speech and language therapist, Francesca Beard, commented:

Supporting this petition is deeply personal for me, as I've seen the transformative power of speech and language therapy both professionally and within my family. My brother was diagnosed with verbal dyspraxia (now known as childhood apraxia of speech), and he thrived thanks to speech and language therapy. Speech and language therapy is a lifeline for individuals and their families, offering vital support at any life stage. This petition's purpose is to ensure everyone has access to these critical services, enhancing their quality of life and empowering them to reach their full potential.

Speech and language therapist, Karen Massey, commented:

When children and young people are unable to use their voice to speak and express their thoughts, ideas and emotions, it is access to direct, regular speech and language therapy that gives them this voice and transforms their lives, as well as the lives of their families. Without a significant increase in investment for all speech and language therapy services, these same children and young people are at serious risk of exclusion and mental health problems.

Speech and language therapist, Gillian Rudd, commented:

Too many people are unable to access the speech and language therapy they need. Politicians have recognised the importance of reducing waiting lists and yet there has been little change for those trying to access speech and language therapy services, with the latest figures showing over 90,000 people waiting for support. Waiting is not a neutral, benign experience - children, adults and their families tell us how this experience is filled with anxiety, worry and uncertainty. Many individuals experience immediate and longer-term impacts in relation to their social and civic lives, education, work and mental health and wellbeing. I urge the incoming Government to recognise this as a priority issue and work together with communities and partners to make the changes needed.

Why these issues matter to others

It is not just us who are saying these things. We are very grateful to many other organisations, including charities, professional associations, and other bodies, for their support for and promotion of the petition.

We are particularly grateful to the following organisations for supporting this statement:

1. Action Cerebral Palsy
2. Action for Stammering Children
3. Afasic
4. Ambitious about Autism
5. ASLTIP (Association of Speech and Language Therapists in Independent Practice)
6. Association of YOT Managers
7. Auditory Verbal UK
8. Austistica
9. BACCH (British Association for Community Child Health)
10. BACD (British Academy of Childhood Disability)
11. BACP (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy)
12. BATOD (British Association of Teachers of Deaf Children and Young People)
13. Better Communication CIC
14. CLAPA (Cleft Lip and Palate Association)
15. Different Strokes
16. Disabled Children's Partnership
17. Down's Syndrome Association
18. Dyscover
19. Embracing Complexity Coalition
20. Headlines
21. Huntington's Disease Association
22. Include.org
23. Intermediaries for Justice
24. NABLES (National Acquired Brain Injury in Learning and Education Syndicate)
25. NAPLIC
26. NASS (The National Association of Special Schools)
27. Natspec
28. Pace
29. pdnet
30. SAPHNA (School and Public Health Nurses Association)
31. Sen.se

32. SMiRA
33. Speech & Language Link
34. Speech and Language UK
35. SPTS (Specialised and Personalised Training Services)
36. STAMMA
37. Stroke Association
38. Symbol
39. The National Organisation for FASD

What others have said

Colleagues from partner organisations have shared why the petition and investing in speech and language therapy matters to them.

Access to qualified speech and language therapists is vital for many children and young people with cerebral palsy. We fully endorse the call for more investment in recruitment and training to improve access to this vital specialist knowledge and expertise.

Pilar Cloud, CEO, Action Cerebral Palsy

The fact that so many signed this petition underscores the vital contribution that speech and language therapy services make to the lives of those with speech, language and communication difficulties. At Action for Stammering Children, we understand the importance of timely access to speech and language therapy for children's social and emotional development, and longer-term mental health and well-being. I look forward to hearing how the next Government plans to increase investment in services to ensure more children who stammer, and their families, receive the specialist support they need.

Dr Ria Bernard, Chief Executive, Action for Stammering Children

The lack of support and then time lost to get referred to SaLT is beyond a joke. Then to have to wait nearly 2 years for my son to be seen has meant my 11 year old son has only just got a diagnosis of DLD amongst other labels. Years we have battled to get seen and at massive cost to my son's mental health too.

Parent supporter of Afasic

We know from both research and front-line experience, that children with speech, language and communication needs are hugely overrepresented within the Youth Justice System, and as victims of criminal exploitation. The access to speech and language therapists, who can accurately identify these children's frequently unrecognised and unmet needs at the earliest opportunity, has proved highly effective in ensuring that all professionals can help and support these children to move away from offending behaviour and to engage with and benefit from education, achieving better long-term outcomes for themselves and society.

Diz Minnitt, SEND and Speech and Language Lead, Association of YOT Managers

The overwhelming support for Mikey's #InvestInSLT petition shows how important this issue is, and why the next UK Government must urgently invest in speech, language and communication support and services needed. For deaf babies and children, early and effective support to develop language and communication is vital, whether they use sign language, spoken language or both. Thank you and well done to Mikey for his commitment and determination to shine a light on the need to #InvestInSLT.

Anita Grover, CEO of Auditory Verbal UK

Deaf children and young people need to be able to access high quality speech and language provision, especially in the early years, provided by therapists who have specialist training in meeting the needs of deaf children and young people, as part of a wider system of support to deaf children that involves Qualified Teachers of Deaf Children and Young People and other staff and services from local authorities and educational settings, working together with staff from health.

BATOD

Our work across the UK to support whole system change through the Balanced System continually identifies the importance of the speech and language therapy workforce as part of a whole system and the challenges to commissioning and recruitment of this specialist workforce. If we are to improve the outcomes for children and young people, investment in the speech and language therapy workforce is crucial and we would welcome the opportunity for this petition to be debated as soon as possible.

Marie Gascoigne, Director, Better Communication CIC

As a specialist, SLT-led aphasia charity, Dyscover supports Mikey Akers' Invest In SLT petition. Aphasia is a debilitating acquired communication disorder which has life changing, long term financial, social, educational and mental health impacts. People with aphasia and their families need specialist long term support and interventions to maximise their independence and their ability to participate in life. Timely and effective NHS funded acute and community rehabilitation for people with aphasia are essential foundations in the collaborative process of providing Dyscover's support services.

Dyscover

Communication is essential to all aspects of life and in achieving your dreams. Politicians know this better than anyone, so we hope the petition will be debated after the election.

Alix Lewer, CEO, Include.org

We ask the next government to join the conversation about investing in speech and language therapy. Let's work together and build a better future for all those with speech, language and communication needs.

Stephen Parsons, Chair, NAPLIC

Access to qualified speech and language therapists is transformational for many children and young people with SEND. We want to see the shortage of therapists addressed to make this a reality and to create professional routes for therapists working in education settings.

Claire Dorer OBE, Chief Executive Officer, NASS (The National Association of Special Schools)

Speech and language therapy is often a critical part of preparation for adulthood for young people with more complex SEND. Unfortunately, the current shortage of SLTs means that some 16–25 year olds are not getting the support they need promptly or frequently enough – and sometimes not at all. We are very much hoping the next government invests in building the specialist workforce to meet need, and that certainly includes SLTs.

Ruth Perry, Senior Policy Manager, Natspec

Competent speech and language skills are the fundamental building blocks for all aspects of life and learning. Whilst most children's speaking and listening skills develop naturally, this is not the case for all. Some children need SLT input from the "get go". To make this happen we need to invest more in Speech and Language services as well as other specialist support providers, e.g. advisory teachers for physical disability. Currently, there is too little investment in specialist support in the SEND system. Getting it right from the start makes a massive difference to enabling a positive life journey.

Di Caesar, Project Manager, pdnet

The School and Public Health Nurses Association remain committed to this ask of any future Government. Investment in our children and young people's health and well-being has never been more important; the current downward trajectory is unacceptable, and it is both our moral and fiscal duty to reinvest in vital services.

Sharon White OBE, CEO School and Public Health Nurses Association

Getting support for children and adults with Selective Mutism is a postcode lottery. There is no national pathway and despite speech and language services often being effective in supporting people with SM, in many areas they are not commissioned to do so, resulting in many people going unsupported or having to pay for private therapy.

Dr Shirley Landrock-White, Chairperson, SMIRA

We are disappointed that the debate on speech and language therapy was not able to take place. We recognise the impact of speech, language and communication needs, especially on educational outcomes and applaud the role that speech and language therapists have in supporting those pupils with the most severe and complex needs.

Peter McLeod, Director, Speech & Language Link

The petitions committee must reschedule this debate after the election. More specialist support for children with speech and language challenges is needed. Without the right support, children struggling with speech and language challenges are more likely to be behind in basic subjects at school, have worse mental health and be out of work as adults.

Jane Harris, Chief Executive, Speech and Language UK

Communication is central to the way we live, work and socialise together. Investment is important because skilled speech and language therapists really can change lives.

Kirsten Howells, Deputy CEO, STAMMA

Nearly two-thirds of stroke survivors experience communication difficulties post-stroke. And far too many are missing out on the crucial speech and language therapy (SLT) that is essential for their recovery. The next government must #InvestInSLT and develop comprehensive workforce plans to address the shortage of therapists, to ensure every stroke survivor receives the SLT they need to improve their quality of life, and as recommended in National Guidelines.

Clare Woodford, Head of Policy & Influencing, Stroke Association

At Symbol, our starting point in life is that anything is possible. With this belief in mind, we work with children and adults with learning disabilities and autism along with their families to secure truly great lives, in spite of the challenges that they frequently face. We know that communication is an important part of this journey and so we are supporting this petition to raise awareness of speech and language therapy and its importance to the children and adults who benefit from its input.

Kate Hopcraft (Operational Manager West) and Debbie Honeysett (Operational Manager East), Symbol

Speech and language therapists are on the frontline of care for some of the country's most vulnerable, including those with neurodevelopmental conditions like FASD. This petition raised hope across our community that Parliament might seriously consider ways to increase funding and support that could lead to better communication and brighter futures for our loved ones.

Sandra Ionno Butcher, Chief Executive, The National Organisation for FASD

For more information, please contact: peter.just@rcslt.org and elissa.cregan@rcslt.org