



## I CAN Submission to the Spending Review

### About I CAN

I CAN is the UK's leading children's communication charity. We exist to help the million-plus children in the UK who are struggling with speaking and understanding language right now. Each year we design programmes that support more than 15,000 children and we train over 6,000 people who work with children to develop their speaking and understanding. Our two outstanding schools help children with the biggest communication barriers to overcome them. We support families to develop their child's speaking and understanding, and we campaign for the government to develop policies to improve the life chances for children who struggle with their speaking and understanding.

### Overview and key recommendations

Speaking and understanding language is fundamental for everything we do: making friends, learning, good mental health, getting a job. And the reverse is also true: children with poor skills in speaking and understanding are at much greater risk of poorer life outcomes: they risk increased; rates of exclusion, mental health problems, entry into the justice system, or unemployment<sup>1</sup>.

Children struggle with speaking and understanding language for different reasons. Some children have not had the right early experiences to help them develop – for example, not enough chatting or playing with adults or other children. Hundreds of thousands of children are struggling for this reason; in disadvantaged areas this can be up to half of all children starting school (Locke et al., 2002). Yet we also know that spoken language interventions can be transformative for this group. On average, pupils who take part in spoken language interventions make approximately five additional months' progress over a year, with some studies showing progress of up to six months for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds<sup>2</sup>.

Our latest evidence shows the serious risks to the development of speaking and understanding language skills among the Covid generation, revealing that as many as 1.5 million children are at risk of not being able to speak or understand language at an age-appropriate level<sup>3</sup>. While we welcome the investment that Government has put into the delivery of the Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI) for reception children to start to address some of this, the difficulties faced by children and young people in speaking and understanding language go beyond reception. If

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<sup>1</sup> - Children with poor understanding of vocabulary at age 5 are twice as likely to experience periods of unemployment (amounting to more than a year) as an adult (Law et al., 2009).

- 60-90% of young offenders have poor language skills (Bryan et al., 2007).

- Communication needs are highly prevalent amongst rough sleepers and significantly greater than for the UK general population – recently a prevalence rate amongst homeless people of 17.1% was found compared with 10% in the general population.

- 81% of children with emotional and behavioural disorders have significant language deficits, often unidentified (Hollo et al., 2014).

- One study found that two-thirds of pupils at risk of permanent exclusion from a secondary school had language difficulties (Clegg et al., 2009).

<sup>2</sup> <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit/oral-language-interventions>

<sup>3</sup> <https://ican.org.uk/media/3753/speaking-up-for-the-covid-generation-i-can-report.pdf>

the Government is serious in its ambitions to Build Back Better and levelling up to make sure that outcomes are improved UK-wide where they lag, this spending review must ensure:

- **Investment in funding interventions in schools for children across age groups. Children of all ages have missed out on months of speaking practice and must be supported to catch up. We estimate an additional £20 million over the next 3 years would be needed to do fund additional interventions across key stages 1 and 2, alongside additional training for the school workforce to support children’s speaking and understanding skills in the classroom, which could be delivered online for a relatively low cost.**

In addition, as well as those children and young people, with delayed language skills, who benefit from these types of interventions, there are significant numbers of children and young people with special educational needs or disabilities who need longer term more targeted speech and language support. Research shows that 7.6% of all children have Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) (Norbury et al., 2016): this equates to one million children in the UK with a specific, long-term difficulty with speaking and understanding language. There are also children with another condition, like autism, a learning disability or cerebral palsy that makes speaking and understanding language much harder. Both of these groups have had support disrupted by the pandemic, exacerbating existing challenges in the system in ensuring the right help is in place. **Investment is needed urgently in children’s speech and language therapy services and in SEND support more widely to make sure their needs are being met.**

More broadly, as we move forward after the pandemic and as plans for levelling up become clearer, it is vital that a longer-term strategy is put in place to address the needs of children and young people with difficulties in speaking and understanding language. Given the links between difficulties in speaking and understanding language, disadvantage and poorer outcomes, progress in addressing delayed language would be a clear marker to assess progress in levelling up and should become a central plank of that strategy.

### **The Spending Picture on SLCN – pre-pandemic**

Support for children and young people with difficulties in speaking and understanding language has suffered from long term underfunding. A report by the Children’s Commissioner<sup>4</sup> found a ‘postcode lottery’ in funding for speech and language support and significant real-terms reductions in spending on speech and language therapy over the previous three years as well as immense variation in spending between areas, with the top 25% spending at least £16.35 per child, and the bottom 25% spending 58p or less per child.

For children and young people with difficulties in speaking and understanding, support should come through the SEND system. Speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) are the most common type of need among pupils on special educational needs (SEN) support, with 245,200 recorded as having this type of primary need in the Department for Education’s most recent figures (figs. up to Jan 2021<sup>5</sup>); (approx. 25% of pupils on SEN support). However, we know that there are significant issues with the funding system for children with SEND. The Education Select Committee (2019) report on SEND concludes; “Special educational needs and disability funding is completely inadequate. There is simply not enough money in the system to provide for the scale of demand”. Councils in England are facing a reported funding shortfall of more than half a billion pounds and are therefore planning spending cuts and service reviews over the coming years. Figures covering 131 of England’s 151 “upper tier” local authorities show the combined forecast “overspend” on high needs budgets comes to £503m for the 2020-21 financial year. This is despite an extra commitment of £780 million in SEND in 2021 in line with the Conservatives 2019 manifesto; a manifesto pledge that has already been delivered on. Yet, County councils alone in England are warning of a £1.3bn special educational needs deficit over the coming years.

It is clear that urgent action was needed to ensure sufficient funding in the SEND system to meet rising needs, even before the pandemic.

### **The pandemic, the level of need and the consequences**

The pandemic is estimated to have caused a serious, deleterious effect on children’s ability to speak and understand language. [Evidence in October 2020 from Ofsted](#) found that children in early years settings were now less likely to

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/cco-we-need-to-talk-june-2019.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england-january-2021>

start a conversation or comment on things during play. This is corroborated by evidence in January 2021 which found 92% of teachers believe that the word gap widened further following school closures brought about by Covid-19. (See [here](#): survey carried out by the Centre for Education and Youth and Oxford University Press). Evidence was also found of a reduction in speech and language therapy support – the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists found that out of the 98% of survey respondents receiving speech and language therapy before March 2020, 62% didn't receive any in the first lockdown. In this time, nearly half saw no progress in communication skills, and 24% said it had dropped<sup>6</sup>.

Our own research in our recent report [Speaking Up for the Covid Generation](#) has shown that teachers believe that children who struggle with speaking and understanding language won't catch up after Covid unless urgent action is taken. This was based on a survey of 1,000 primary and secondary school teachers from across England, Scotland and Wales and concluded 1.5 million<sup>7</sup> children and young people are at risk of behind with their speaking and understanding of language. It found more than half of English and Welsh teachers are worried that children moving to secondary school this month will struggle with speaking and understanding language at their new school and 56% of teachers surveyed think the government has not offered very much/ any extra support at their school to help children and young people with their speaking and understanding.

Teachers have commented that since the return to school in September they have seen:

*"A reduction in range of vocabulary, children are less used to engaging in conversations in person and lower SLCN skills are shown in language screening across key indicators"*

*"A lot of students have arrived with us (in year 7) working at year 2/3 level. They don't have the language to be able to understand the content in some secondary "*

*"An increased delay regression of social skills and a decrease in complex vocab".*

To help with Covid recovery, this year in June a wider package of support, broadly titled as the Recovery Package, was announced for children in early years settings. This focuses on £153 million of funding for training for early years staff to support children's learning and development including on skills such as speech and language, and the further announcement of funded training was made by the Government in February 2021. Furthermore, a June 2021 announcement states there is "£18 million funding to support language development in the early years – £10 million to be allocated to a pre-reception early language programme and £8m for Nuffield Foundation to deliver the Nuffield Early Language Intervention for reception children". Funding for the NELI is now at £17 million which means it is now fully funded for the current project projection but the sector is still awaiting announcements on the details on the further £10 million to account for the "£18 million" spend in the Recovery Package (often designated as "help for Early Years speech and language").

The relevant minister reported in a recent debate: "Funding of £10 million will support language development for pre-reception children in the next academic year" (i.e. 2021-22). However, we still await further details on the scheme. Fleshing out where this small amount of extra funding is alongside the money on helping to train teachers and early years practitioners to identify those struggling children should be a priority.

### **The cost of late intervention**

The compound effects on children who struggle to speak and understand language are grave and cost the public purse dearly:

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.rcslt.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Building-back-better-March2021.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Teachers surveyed estimated the percentage of children affected were subjected to a mid-point interval analysis. Using a pupil population estimate of England, Scotland, and Wales of (\*9,190,799 primary and secondary pupils) this equated to 1.5 million children.

- 1 in 4 children who struggled with language at the age of 5 did not reach the expected standard in English at the end of primary school, compared with 1 in 25 children (at the age of 5) who had good language skills<sup>8</sup>
- In 2019, only 19% of children with speech, language and communication needs achieved the expected level in reading, writing and maths at the end of primary school compared with 65% of all pupils<sup>9</sup>
- Children with poor understanding of vocabulary at age 5 are twice as likely to experience periods of unemployment (amounting to more than a year) as an adult <sup>10</sup>
- 81% of children with emotional and behavioural disorders have significant language deficits, often unidentified <sup>11</sup>
- Communication needs are highly prevalent amongst rough sleepers and significantly greater than for the UK general population – recently a prevalence rate amongst homeless people of 17.1% was found compared with 10% in the general population.

It is therefore no surprise that, like many potential early interventions, we estimate that there will be substantial, positive savings to the taxpayer if the issue is addressed head-on in schools and other settings. Furthermore, the estimated cost savings associated with the work of speech and language therapists to carry out speech and language assessments and provide support to meet specialist speech, language and communication needs (only two of many possible interventions for this group of children) is also substantial and is evidenced in Government's own evaluations<sup>12</sup>.

## **Recommendations**

### *Investing in catch up support across the ages that works and supports early intervention*

At I CAN, we have strong evidence that programmes like Early Talk Boost, a programme of special activities that nursery-aged children do in a group with an adult, help the majority of children to improve their speaking and understanding, with almost two thirds catching up with their peers completely after just nine weeks.

These types of interventions are inexpensive, with an average cost of £700 over three years per school, or around £20-25 per child. To implement this type of programme across the country the Government has already invested £17m in the NELI programme for reception-age children. However, children of all ages have missed out on months of speaking practice and must be supported to catch up. Extending a similar intervention to children at key stages 1 and 2, such as I CAN's Talk Boost could be achievable for similar amounts as the investment in NELI. We estimate funding of £20m available for the next three years could provide schools with grants towards the cost of implementing a suite of targeted language interventions for older pupils.

Alongside the cost of interventions like these, we need to train teachers and teaching assistants to understand their role in supporting children's speaking and understanding skills in the classroom. Given the expansion of online training during the last 16 months, there are numerous cost-effective ways that this could be done. £200,000 could be used to develop a series of training modules on Speech, Language and Communication Development and the core role it plays in learning.

### *Early intervention must be matched by Early Identification.*

What happens during pregnancy and early childhood has a fundamental impact on children's physical health, their speech, language and communication, and their emotional wellbeing. The Government's vision for the early years is right: universal integrated support delivered through Family Hubs; a clear Start for Life offer in the

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<sup>8</sup> Save the Children. (2016). Early language development and children's primary school attainment in English and Maths: New research findings.

[https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/13399/pdf/early\\_language\\_development\\_briefing\\_paper.pdf](https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/13399/pdf/early_language_development_briefing_paper.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Department for Education, 2019, National curriculum assessments: key stage 2, 2019 (revised): National, local authority and regional tables, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/national-curriculum-assessments-key-stage-2-2019-revised>

<sup>10</sup> Law et al, 2009

<sup>11</sup> Hollo et al., 2014

<sup>12</sup> [Evaluation of the No Wrong Door Innovation Programme Research Report, Department for Education](#), (2017)

first 1,001 days; universal midwifery and health visiting services, and a subsidised childcare and early education offer. This vision can't be overlooked when it comes to funding and so far, we have not seen spending match it.

What it also means though is that we need to track children's progress in speaking and understanding so that children can get help early. It improves support and early intervention positive externalities. Yet we estimate that as many as 400,000 children with DLD go undiagnosed every year and that many thousands more will be undiagnosed with delayed language. That's why we are calling for better universal identification of language difficulties in academic settings.

Assessment of children's speaking and understanding must be on a long-term basis so we know whether children are continuing to struggle in these areas and much more rigorous than the RBA<sup>13</sup>. We need funding to support DfE to develop a programme of training so that all school staff understand how to develop children's speaking and understanding skills and how to identify those who are struggling for teachers (esp. beyond age five). This should also include providing all tutors who are part of the National Tutoring Programme with training in how to identify children struggling with their speaking and understanding and how to support them.

#### Further investment in speech and language throughout the Spending Review cycle

Even pre-pandemic, support for speech and language was still under-funded there was a clear need for more money in the system. However, there is general agreement that recovery from Covid will be long-term, and Governments need to make sure that speaking and understanding language is more central to our education system for years to come.

That means HMT should provide additional funding to children's speech and language therapy services to enable them to support the children whose needs have been identified late or increased as a result of the pandemic; namely:

- Committing to creating a children's speech, language and communications strategy that works across Government departments to recognise that almost all subjects and most future employment rely on children being able to speak and understand language.
- Making a multi-year settlement for supporting all year groups with their speaking and understanding - not just early years and reception.

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<sup>13</sup> Although DfE have a new initiative at the start of Reception due to be introduced soon: the Reception Baseline Assessment, it is a twenty-minute, teacher-recorded assessment of children's communication, language, literacy and early mathematics skills.