

# **Speech & Language Therapy Services for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland**

## **Follow-up Review 2005/06**

### **Executive Summary**

#### **Introduction**

The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) has recently completed a follow-up review of SLT services within Northern Ireland in order to comparatively assess current provision with that recorded in our previous review of 2004/05.

This year's review followed the same process as before with a request being made to Health and Social Services Trusts to provide information about their Speech and Language Therapy Service, in terms of waiting times for assessment and therapy, numbers of Speech and Language therapists etc. It is important to note that the information presented in the current overview report is based on the figures provided by Trusts.

NICCY wish to gratefully acknowledge the time and effort invested by the Speech and Language Therapy teams in compiling the survey responses, and is pleased to have received a 100% response rate from HSS Trusts.

Whilst NICCY is very concerned about the general lack of improvement, the issues identified in the report are not a reflection on the work of Speech and Language Therapy managers, therapists, therapy assistants or technical assistants. NICCY believes the issues at the core of this review are both more strategic and pervasive in nature; manifested in the unacceptable outcome of both inadequate and inequitable service provision across HSS Trusts in Northern Ireland.



## **Summary of Findings**

It is important to state at the beginning, that there continues to be great difficulty accessing information uniformly across Trusts. It would appear that information, which NICCY believes is critical to effective service planning, is not yet routinely collated, analysed or easily accessible. The urgent need to address this deficiency cannot be over-stated.

## **The Extent of the Need**

- Statistics provided by the HSS Trusts reveal that 15,547 children and young people are currently receiving SLT within Northern Ireland.
- A further 2,055 children and young people are currently awaiting assessment for SLT. Although this represents a 17.4% decrease from last year's figures, it is difficult to ascertain whether this lower figure means that greater numbers of children and young people are actually receiving therapy or whether, as has been suggested to NICCY by some professionals in the field, these children are now alternatively recorded amongst those who have been assessed but not yet received the therapy they require (see below).
- 3,402 children and young people within NI are still waiting to commence any form of therapy, despite having been assessed to be in need. As highlighted below, these individuals can experience delays of up to 24 months (Homefirst Trust) between assessment and therapy. Average delays between assessment and actual receipt of therapy range from 2.5 weeks in South and East Belfast Trust to 9 months in Causeway and Sperrin Lakeland Trusts; this is a clearly unacceptable situation given the identified need of these children and young people.
- Considered together, these figures reveal that 5,457 children and young people are still awaiting assessment and/or therapy.
- Up to 21,004 children and young people may therefore presently require access to SLT services within Northern Ireland.



## Waiting Times

### Community settings

- There appears to be some degree of progress in terms of overall waiting times for assessment, although the situation remains far from satisfactory. For example, in 2004/05 children and young people could wait up to 15 months for assessment within a community setting; this year the maximum wait stated by any Trust for community settings was just over 10 months (North & West Belfast) a **decrease** of 5 months.
- Unfortunately, this progress is not repeated in terms of subsequent waiting times for therapy. Whereas the maximum waiting time recorded between assessment and therapy last year was 16 months, this year the corresponding figure is 24 months (Homefirst), an **increase** of 8 months.
- The **geographical inequity** observed last year is still very much evident in terms of both assessment and therapy waiting times.
- With regards community based settings, average waiting times for assessment currently range from 3 weeks (Foyle) to 5 months (Armagh & Dungannon), while average waiting times for therapy following assessment range from nil (UCHT) to 9 months (Causeway and Sperrin Lakeland).
- The lowest average waiting time, from referral to therapy in a community setting, is 6.5 weeks within South & East Belfast Trust. This compares to an average of 13 months in Sperrin Lakeland Trust at the other end of the scale. Maximum possible waiting times from referral to therapy range from 15 weeks (South and East Belfast) to 29 months (Homefirst); an **increase** on last year's corresponding figures of 3 to 20 months across all Trusts.



## Waiting Times

### Special school settings

- Waiting times for assessment and therapy within special schools is similarly varied across Trusts, with average waiting times for assessment ranging from nil (Armagh & Dungannon and Foyle) to 2 months (Sperrin Lakeland), and average waiting times for therapy ranging from nil<sup>1</sup> to 7 months (Foyle).
- The lowest average waiting time from referral to therapy in a special school setting ranges from nil in Armagh & Dungannon to 8 months in Sperrin Lakeland. Maximum waiting times from referral to therapy range from nil in Armagh & Dungannon to 14 months in Foyle.
- It is of further significance that over half of all Trusts (9 out of 14)<sup>2</sup> indicate that they operate additional waiting lists for subsequent treatment sessions once the original block of therapy has ended. Initial access to treatment does not therefore guarantee continuous receipt of the same. Again, the length of time between subsequent treatment sessions varies according to where a child lives, with maximum waiting times between treatments ranging from 2 months in UCHT to 15 months in Foyle.
- It is therefore still, and possibly more so, the case that where a child or young person lives in Northern Ireland determines the length of wait for SLT.

### Statementing

- One third (33%) of all children and young people who have a Statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN) are 'statemented with SLT'. This represents a slight increase on the figure of 29% recorded last year.

---

<sup>1</sup> UCHT; North & West Belfast; Armagh & Dungannon; Craigavon & Banbridge; Causeway; Greenpark

<sup>2</sup> UCHT; Down Lisburn; North & West Belfast; Armagh & Dungannon; Craigavon & Banbridge; Newry & Mourne; Causeway; Homefirst; Foyle



## Complaints

- The number of formal complaints recorded across Trusts has significantly **decreased**, from 101 last year to 32 this year. One should not automatically assume however that this represents increased satisfaction with service provision; based on what many parents have told NICCY, it may be more reflective of disillusionment regarding the effectiveness of complaints procedures.
- In stark contrast to Trust figures, a total of 83 new complaints about SLT provision within NI have been received by NICCY between March 2005 and March 2006. This represents more than a fourfold increase on the number of comparable complaints received in 2004/05. The significant majority of these complaints are in relation to SLT provision within Special Schools.
- The recording of informal complaints to Trusts remains patchy, as was the case last year. It is therefore difficult to obtain a comprehensive overview of the number and nature of informal complaints.

## Identified Gaps

- This year, 11 of the 14 Trusts identified inadequate financial resources and/or speech and language therapists to meet present need, compared to 9 last year.
- 8 Trusts also identified a lack of Speech and Language Therapy Assistants this year, as opposed to 5 last year.
- In comparison to last year when 6 Trusts highlighted the issue, this year 9 Trusts identified a lack of clerical/administrative support as a key issue.
- This year 8 Trusts identified the length of waiting lists as a concern, compared to 3 last year.



- 8 out of 14 Trusts this year also highlighted an inadequate appointment system as a gap in service provision. There are no comparative figures available for last year.

### **Developments within HSS Trusts**

- 12 out of 14 Trusts indicated that some changes had been implemented in terms of recording, practice and employment within the past year.
- The same number indicated that some new models of service delivery had been implemented in the last 12 months.
- 5 Trusts indicated that they had either received or been allocated additional resources for administrative support in the last twelve months. The rest stated that they had not received any such additional support.

### **Finance**

NICCY asked the Department of Health and Social Services and public Safety (DHSSPS) to identify what funding from the recently announced funding package for children and young people would be used to specifically target Speech and Language services in Northern Ireland.

DHSSPS indicated that no money had been made available specifically for this service. According to their statement, money for SLT has been included in the £4 million budget which has been allocated to establish Multi-Disciplinary Support Teams, some of which will be used to “further enhance services for children with speech and language difficulties”.

### **Comment by NICCY**

A series of recommendations were made by NICCY in 2004/05, most notably that the Ministers for Health and Education should set up a Regional Task Force in order to identify, agree and implement an action plan as regards SLT provision within Northern Ireland. One year on, this has not yet been implemented.



It is noteworthy that NICCY has been unable to find any evidence that any significant action has taken place in relation to any of the six key recommendations forwarded last year.

NICCY met with Chairpersons and Chief Executives of all Boards and HSS Trusts to inform them of our findings in 2005 and to seek their cooperation in implementing our recommendations for service improvement. Given what we have found in our review of service in 2006 NICCY can only conclude that no one at Departmental, Board or Trust level, who has the authority to prioritise issues for children's services, has made any progress to remedy the inadequate and unacceptable situation uncovered by NICCY in its review last year.

The findings from this year's review highlight a considerable number of children and young people requiring SLT provision and, although there has been progress in some Trusts in relation to reduced waiting times, overall there appears to be little significant change.

We are also very concerned to learn that although some Trusts have indicated that there are no waiting times for therapy in Special Schools, this is contrary to information NICCY has received directly from parents and head-teachers through the significant rise in complaints to us about this area of service.

Amongst the range of concerns identified within this overview, NICCY wishes to particularly highlight:

- The continued existence of a **postcode lottery**. We would question why waiting times and service delivery are not uniformly satisfactory across all Trusts within Northern Ireland.
- The **significant number** of children and young people who require access to SLT services, particularly those who are presently **awaiting assessment and/or therapy**, both in the community and special schools.
- The **inadequate** provision of resources specifically targeted at SLT services for children and young people.
- The **disparity** between the increased volume of complaints received by NICCY and the reduced number of formal complaints recorded by Trusts.
- The overall **lack of action** at a strategic and or policy level as regards the concerns raised by NICCY, professionals in the field and parents/carers.



## Recommendations

**1. NICCY would urge the Children’s Minister to set up the Task Force recommended one year ago to review SLT provision within NI. NICCY recommends that the Task Force develops a time-bound action plan to address the issues raised in both this and the previous year’s review. These actions must ensure that children and young people’s rights under Articles 6 and 23 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child are fulfilled, through the provision of timely and adequate access to speech and language therapy.**

<b>Article 6: Survival and Development</b>
<b>The child has an inherent right to life, and the State has an obligation to ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child.</b>

<b>Article 23: Children with Disability</b>
<b>Children with a physical disability or learning difficulties have the right to special care, education and training, designed to help them to achieve the greatest possible self-reliance and to lead a full and active life in society.</b>

**2. NICCY will be seeking a legal opinion in order to establish if we can assist complainants to challenge the existing inadequacy of speech and language therapy provision for relevant children and young people within Northern Ireland.**

**3. In the absence of any significant progress within the area under review, NICCY will be reporting to the UNCRC on the current SLT related breach of children’s rights.**