

**Speech given by Barney McNeany, Acting Commissioner, at the
Speech and Language Conference on 30th March 2006.**

Good Morning Ladies and Gentlemen. On behalf of the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapy and NICCY can I welcome you to this conference today on Shaping the Future – meeting children’s language and learning needs? We have a busy day planned, and I hope you all benefit from the event, but perhaps more importantly contribute your views and knowledge so that we can together work towards making things better for children and young people.

It is with great sadness that I stand here today because I’m sure most of you know Nigel died on Tuesday after a long battle with illness. We will miss him as a friend and an inspiring colleague who was passionate about making children and young people’s lives better. Nigel presented the findings of NICCY’s review of Speech and Language therapy provision in 2005, and presented a very clear plan for how we would like to see progress made. He has consistently expressed his concerns about the need to improve the speech and language service provision to enable children who have difficulty in communicating, due to a lack of speech, have a better chance in life.

I don’t need to tell you about the importance of being able to communicate; the absolute joy we all feel as parents when our children say their first words, the fun we have when they mispronounce, the pride when they are able to complete a sentence, the pleasure we share in reading stories together, the irritation when they ask - for the hundredth time ... are we there yet, on a car journey. Think what we would miss, as parents, if our children couldn’t do any of those things.

But much more importantly think of the child.

The frustration and emotional impact of not being able to talk and communicate what you want is so enormous it is hard to understand when we have, by and large, the ability to communicate effectively with others.

The good thing to note however is that for the majority of children with communication difficulties, there is a real opportunity to do something about this, by providing them with speech and language therapy.

Parents have told us about their gratitude to the therapists and assistants who have provided a lifeline to their children.



Young people have expressed what a difference being able to talk has meant to their lives and of the invaluable assistance speech and language therapy has been to being able to do so and of the help and assistance the therapists have been to them and their families.

I would not be standing before you, and indeed we would not be having this conference today, if all in the garden was rosy. You know from the review carried out by NICCY in 2005 that, in our role as Ombudsman for Children, we received 19 complaints from parents because their children could not access speech and language therapy. You will know the report we produced in 2004/05 highlighted the inequitable provision of therapy provision across Northern Ireland, the long delays in accessing both assessments and therapy, and NICCY's recommendations about taking action to ensure that provision improves. We ensured that Trusts and Boards were made aware of the findings of the Review in a series of face to face meetings with Chairpersons of Trust and Health Boards and Senior Officials.

In a few moments members of the Research and Service Review team will present the findings of this year's review. Unfortunately, the findings show that the picture since our initial review has not substantially improved. Whilst there is evidence of positive change, it is small in relation to the overall problem of a postcode lottery for children and young people who need therapy across Northern Ireland.

NICCY is required by our founding legislation to inform Government about the adequacy and effectiveness of services to children and young people – that is one of the duties in our legislation. In light of the findings of this year's review of we believe, having allowed time for change and improvement in the system of delivery of therapy services, to make it clear that what we have found, overall, is neither adequate nor effective. I make no apology for highlighting the fact that a child can still wait up to 10 months for an assessment and up to 24 months for therapy. I think I need to say that again- almost a year to get assessed and then, for some children, post assessment, a possible wait of up to 2 years to get therapy. Now it is a long time since I was a child, too many years to count, but I do remember the appreciation I had of time was substantially different from when I was an adult. A week was a long time to wait for anything let alone two and a half years. And in this period, this critical period, we may have missed the opportunity to make that crucial difference to these children and young people's lives.

Now in our role as Ombudsman for children NICCY has received 107 complaints this year about the absence of speech and language therapy for



children. The majority of those complaints, 102, have been from parents of children who attend special schools. I would like to ask you a question. Are we disabling further those children who have already a disability by not providing them with speech and language therapy?

I believe we are.

I am sorry it is not a good news story today, I am sorry that we have not done better for our children.

At the heart of this problem, I believe, is a lack of co-ordination - A lack of co-ordination between Trusts and Boards, between Trusts and Education, between Commissioners and policy makers and between Government Departments.

Why is it that in one Trust area we have no waiting lists and no or practically no waiting time for treatment? Why has this best practice not been replicated across Northern Ireland?

I believe all 182 of you in this room today must work together better, across organisational and other boundaries, to put in place plans with clear time frames for delivery of best practice, so that we will not be standing here again next year, saying the same thing.

I believe the expertise and the willingness exists to do this, to harness the resources and skills that in some places produce services of a standard we can all be proud of. I hope today you will begin by learning from others about how you can kickstart the process of making sure that **all** children in Northern Ireland can access quality services to meet their communication needs.

Ladies and Gentlemen I would now like to hand you over to Dr Helen Beckett and Mary Anne Webb from our Research, Service Review and Policy team who will present the findings of NICCY's 2005/2006 review of speech and language therapy provision.

