

SPEECH: delivered for Lord Rooker, Minister for Children, on 30th March 2006

1. Thank you for inviting me to this conference, I am delighted to be here with you today. Can I firstly take a moment to pay tribute to Nigel Williams. It was with great sadness that I learned of his untimely death on Tuesday of this week. Nigel held his position as Commissioner for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland for two and a half years and in that short time he worked tirelessly to establish the office and worked steadfastly on behalf of children and young people to promote their welfare and safeguard their rights. He was indeed a champion for children's rights and through his work, has laid the foundation and set the framework within which future Commissioners will work.

2. I would like to congratulate the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists and the office of the Commissioner for Children and Young People for organizing this event. The fact that this conference is taking place at this difficult time for all of you demonstrates your commitment to our children and young people. This conference presents all of us with a unique opportunity to come together and focus on a vision for speech and language provision for children in Northern Ireland.

3 I was very grateful for the Northern Ireland **Commissioner for Children and Young People's Overview Report. Government clearly has an important part to play in helping to make improvements in speech and language services.** What I want to do is to **outline what is currently being done** to meet the needs of children with speech, language and communication difficulties.

4. **Good communication** in children is something we all want to see and each of us here today would acknowledge the vital importance of developing effective communications skills to emotional, social and cognitive development. In fact, the Overview Report on the findings of a review of Speech and Language Therapy provision in Northern Ireland states that communication skills are central to positive self-esteem, learning and the development of relationships.

5. I asked officials to provide me with the statistics from the Commissioner's Follow-up Review into speech and language therapy services for children and Young People in Northern Ireland. I learned that **15,547 children are currently receiving speech and language therapy services**. However, I am very concerned about the **5,457 children waiting for assessment and/or speech and language therapy** and the length of time they have waited. It clearly is not good enough and it is incumbent on all of us here today, to work collaboratively to address the problems caused by waiting times for assessments and interventions.

As Minister for Children and Young People, I will certainly work to see significant improvements.

6. It is an acknowledged fact that **increasing numbers** of children **are presenting with speech, language and communication deficits** in Health and Social Services and Education settings. Many of these children also have complex needs with associated communication difficulties. The fact that numbers are increasing presents us with a challenge and this is one of the first things we **need to consider** when assessing the intake of speech and language therapy students. It is important to ensure that this is effectively factored into workforce and service planning initiatives.

7. I know that there is concern that there will be no intake of Speech and Language Students by the University of Ulster, in the academic year 2006/2007. From 2007/2008, the course of study is being reduced from 4 to 3 years. This is to ensure that there will be a sufficient number of relevant clinical placements for under-graduates and subsequently ensure the continuity of recruitment of future graduates.

8. Health and Social Services Trusts also realise the importance of **attracting new graduates** and that they need to advertise for graduates early in the academic year to ensure that they are not lost to Northern Ireland because they are unable to secure local employment.

9. I am aware that there has been some criticism of the **apparent lack of collaboration** between providers of Health and Education services in addressing the needs of children and young people with speech and language difficulties and the need for **a more integrated approach**.

10. You may be aware that the **two departments work together through a special educational needs Inter-Departmental Group**, which was established in 2001 to help ensure that children with special educational needs are provided with the appropriate support services such as speech and language therapy. This is in line with the Northern Ireland Programme for Government target of promoting the health and social development of children.

11. There have been a number of more **recent measures** taken to enhance joint working between DHSSPS and DE. For example, both departments have combined to publish **Draft Standards for Promoting Collaborative Working** between Teachers and Therapists in Schools. This is a very important step in promoting co-operative working and effective skill deployment within the school setting, therefore helping to ensure that the communication needs of each child are properly identified and met.

12. **Further examples** of improved collaborative working will include the “**Partnership Agreements**” that are being drawn up within between the Departments of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and Education, Health and Social Services Boards and Education and Library Boards and Health and Social Services Trust and Schools. Within the school setting, this will help ensure that each child’s communication needs are properly identified and met. Closer Collaboration between Health and Education in this area will help to promote better speech and language therapy practice.

13. A further development of “Partnership Agreements” will address the needs of children and break down the barriers caused by professional groups working in isolation.

14. While on the issue of collaborative working, I think it is important to mention the importance of **Sure Start** which is one of the many emerging effective interventions for children of pre-school age. Sure Start includes the employment of speech and language therapists in the **pre-school sector**. Teachers, parents and classroom assistants are trained using the “Hanen Method” to develop communication skills amongst pre-school age children. The provision of speech and language therapy in the pre-school setting cannot be underestimated because it enables communication difficulties to be recognised at an early age and, therefore, prevents more complex difficulties developing in later life.

15. You will also be aware of the **Children and Young People's funding package** announced by the Secretary of State earlier this month. The investment of more than £76 million over the next two years demonstrates the clear commitment of this Government to reduce underachievement. This will improve the life chances of children and young people by enhancing their educational development and fostering their health, well-being and social inclusion through the integrated delivery of the support and services necessary to ensure that every child has the best start in life.

16. As Minister for Children and Young People, I am delighted to see this funding package. I am especially pleased that one of the **key themes is "Children with special needs and disabilities"** and that **£4 million in each of the next two years and beyond will be made available to set up "Multi-disciplinary teams"** which will be able to provide support services including speech and language therapy to schools and other settings within the extended schools and early years arrangements.

17. I don't want to go into too much detail at the moment because I know that Leslie and Dorothy will have more to say about that later. However, what I do want to stress is that all the activities funded through the package will be underpinned by **greater co-operation between all Departments and their agencies** to secure more effective services through integrated delivery.

18. The package announcement is, of course, the springboard from which we will launch the **10-year strategy for children and young people** in the next few months. Again, as Minister for Children and Young People, **I will have a key role** in driving the strategy forward. Through the strategy we will seek to achieve improved outcomes for all children and young people in Northern Ireland, including those with special needs and rights.

19. One of the recommendations of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People's "Overview Report" called for the Minister responsible for DHSSPS and the Minister for DE to **set up a Regional Task Force** to identify, agree and develop an action plan to improve the provision of speech and language therapy throughout Northern Ireland.

20. Today I am pleased to announce that it is our intention to establish a Regional Task Force later this year, in line with the Commissioner's recommendation. The Task Force will be a dedicated sub-group of the Inter-Departmental Steering Group and will include a **wide range of stakeholders** to facilitate **effective collaboration** and to help us deliver on the strategic responsibilities set out in the Inter-Departmental Partnership Agreement and to which we are committed.

21. The Task Force will report to the Steering Group, which will agree an annual work programme and oversee delivery of this. It will be responsible to and report to the Deputy Secretaries within both Departments and will be co-chaired at senior level. **The new Task Force will include representation from NICCY, the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists**, and the wide range of stakeholders required to be involved to support effective policy, service delivery and monitoring.

22. As chair of the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People, I shall, of course, be kept in touch with the progress of this Task Force and how it is helping to achieve our aims.

23. Hand in hand with this goes the very important role of the **teachers in our schools**. They need to be able to recognise the children in the class who might have language and communication difficulties, and to know what to do when they recognise these difficulties – where to get professional advice and support, both for themselves and for the children; and how best to work with these children to meet their educational needs.

24. I am therefore very pleased to tell you that the **DE has committed further resources to support the project “Early Intervention for Children with Speech and Language Difficulties”**. I know that discussion of this project is on today’s agenda. This project focuses on training for teachers and classroom assistants, and crucially involves parents; it has been implemented in all Education and Library Board areas over the last 3 years. By entering

into agreement with relevant Health and Social Services Trusts, Education and Library Boards have enabled Speech and Language Therapists to be employed as advisers to participating schools, right at the forefront of service delivery in the classroom.

25. As you have heard, evaluation to date has shown marked improvement not only in the skills of teachers, but also in the understanding of the needs of teachers by Speech and Language Therapists. Children have shown significant progress in receptive language, phonological language and expressive language skills, together with improved listening skills and social skills in group situations.

26. As Minister for Children and Young People, I am delighted that **further resources** have been committed to continue this support. This project is a positive example of a multi-agency approach to a cross-departmental problem. It represents a significant step forward, which will build lasting partnerships.

27. The Department of Education also plans to use **additional resources** from the 2006-08 Education budget to further enhance the service provided to children with speech and language difficulties. The details of this are under consideration, but it is likely to involve the employment of language and communication teachers to provide a link between the existing speech and language project and the Northern Curriculum.

28. I hope you agree that these are all very **positive steps**, which demonstrate the commitment of Government and, in particular, the commitment of DE and DHSSPS to respond to the challenge presented by the very particular needs of these children.

29. Thank you again for the opportunity to come here today. It is my view that just by being here together, we are demonstrating our determination to move forward, in partnership, to ensure that we are indeed involved in 'Shaping the Future' for this very vulnerable group of children.