

Quality support for speech, language and communication in early years settings – A Strategic Approach.

Document Purpose

This document is aimed at all those wishing to improve the outcomes for young children with delayed speech and language development, or speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) in early years settings.

It is based on experience gathered by I CAN and the Communication Trust during delivery of specialist support to 24 different Local Authorities and partners between 2018 and 2021 as part of the Early Years SEND programme¹.

The current context

In 2017, the Government's Social Mobility Action Plan identified the importance of strong early language development in setting the foundations for good outcomes for children and young people. As a result, there has been a range of programmes that have sought to play a part in ensuring strong early language development.

At the time of writing, particular national programmes and resources are available to:

- identify early those youngest children who have delayed or disordered speech, language and communication development (Early Language Identification Measure)

- provide early, consistent messages to parents about the importance of the home learning environment and what is important in supporting early language development ([Institute of Health Visitor \(iHV\) training programme](#); Public Health England and iHV [Early Voices programme](#); [Chat, Play, Read](#); [Tiny, Happy People](#); [Hungry Little Minds](#); the intervention aspect of the [Early Language Identification Measure](#))
- develop staff skills (the [EYSEND partnership](#); the [Early Years Professional Development Programme](#))
- develop a strategic approach to supporting children's early language development (the [Local Government Association's early years peer challenges / reviews](#); the [Early Intervention Foundation early years maturity matrix, Early Outcomes Fund](#)).

Many of these programmes, in what is now termed ELLIE (Early Language and Local Innovation and Excellence), have a particular role to play in ensuring that there is joined up, consistent, appropriate quality support for speech, language and communication in the early years.

¹ Experience is taken from work by the Communication Trust and I CAN in EYSEND 2 and 3, with the following local authority partnerships: Bexley, Birmingham, Calderdale, Cornwall, Cheshire East, Durham, Lincolnshire, North Lincolnshire, North East Lincolnshire, Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead, Sandwell and Wakefield. Additional information has been gathered by the Communication Trust in partnership with Blackburn with Darwen, Calderdale, Cheshire East, Haringey, Middlesbrough, Oxfordshire, Plymouth, Devon & Torbay STP, Somerset, St Helen's, Staffordshire, Stockton, Warrington, Wirral and York.



Whose role is it anyway?

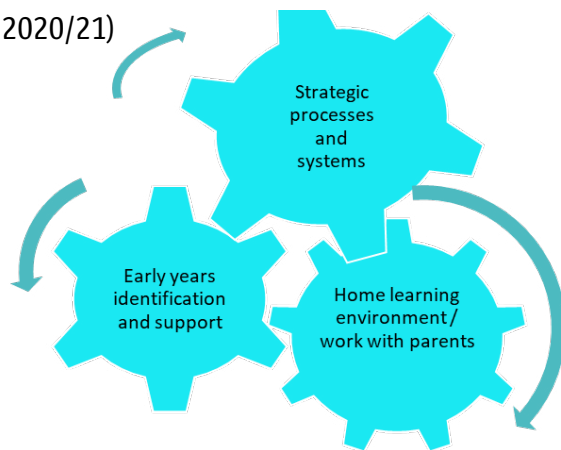
As part of a strategic approach, individual early years settings can review, plan and implement changes. They can also use documents such as the [Early Years Communication Commitment](#) or the [SLCN Quick Review Checklist](#) to support them in developing strong early language identification and support mechanisms.

Local authorities and their partners also have a strong role to play in ensuring that the support available in early years settings is part of a wider system of support and that staff within these settings are enabled to provide the quality development opportunities for communication and language and for those children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).

It is important to acknowledge the roles that parents, early years settings, health practitioners (such as health visitors and speech and language therapists) play, alongside the national and local policies that support this work. The best approach is a multi-faceted, multi-agency approach which enables all aspects of the speech and language support ‘machine’ to work together.

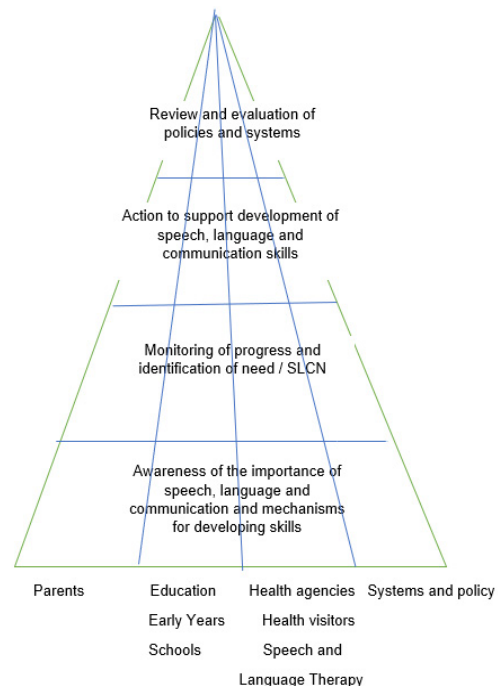
When key stakeholders are aware of the importance of strong early communication development (described below), they can respond positively by playing their part in supporting this fundamental skill. It is vital to acknowledge that just like any machine, one part cannot make the difference all on its own. Instead what is required is that the different parts of the machine- work together, as indicated in the model below.

Diagram A: The speech and language support machine (slide used in EYSEND National Seminars 2020/21)



Our experience during the EYSEND partnership programme is that almost any part of the machine can be strengthened first. This is often dependent on the local area’s appetite and capacity for change within the context of the local authority, in partnership with health agencies. In order for sustainable change to be made, all parts of the machine need to work together with one change being supported by those in a related position and by complementary programmes.

Diagram B: Support strands for positive outcomes



The triangle above demonstrates the necessary involvement of each key partner in supporting children’s speech, language and communication development and those with SLCN. This model is used to identify how work is required in all strands of the triangle, and at all levels, in order to achieve positive outcomes for children and young people

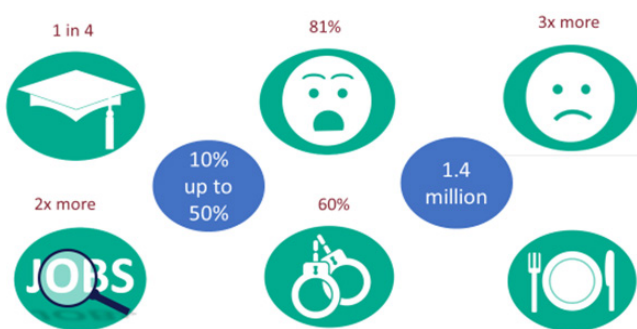
The model above shows the various strands to successful outcomes. Although these are presented separately in the model, the different vertical strands (parents, education, health agencies and the systems and policies) need to be working together, sharing information, messaging and planning at all of the horizontal stages.

Understanding why strong early speech, language and communication matter

Unless, there is an awareness that speech, language and communication matters, there is unlikely to be ‘buy in’ from the required people to make the changes necessary to support positive outcomes for children and young people.

Diagram C: Slide used in Public Health England’s speech, language and communication (SLC) training for health visitors (2018)

Why does SLC matter?



“Communication is crucial to children’s life chances” *Bercow (2018)*

“Reducing income-related learning gaps therefore requires a comprehensive approach, providing age appropriate support to all levels of need” *(EIF, 2018)*

PHE Speech, Language and Communication Training for Health Visitors



Each symbol represents an aspect of a child or adult’s life that relies heavily on speech, language and communication skills, or is impacted by SLCN.

The scholar hat represents educational attainment:

- The number of words a child has on school entry is predictive of the number of GCSEs a child will attain.
- 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 one in 25 children who had good language skills at age 5.
- 15% of pupils with identified SLCN achieved the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of their primary school years compared with 61% of all pupils.
- Only 20.3% of pupils with SLCN gained grade 4/C or above in English and maths at GCSE, compared with 63.9% of all pupils.

The middle face represents educational Social, Emotional development:

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

The sad face represents Mental health:

- Children with vocabulary difficulties at age 5 are three times as likely to have mental health problems in adulthood (Law et al, 2018).

The jobs symbol represents employment chances:

- Children with poor vocabulary skills at age 5 are twice as likely to be unemployed when they reach adulthood (Law et al 2009).

The plate represents social disadvantage:

- They are at greater risk of poverty and social disadvantage.

Early years settings' support for SLCN needs to fit into a strategic approach

The recently published **Best start in speech, language and communication (Public Health England, 2020)** provides guidance to enable commissioners and service leads to develop a pathway for speech, language and communication (SLC), including supporting evidence and good practice case studies. The development of a pathway enables all teams, services and practitioners to understand their role in supporting children's early communication and language development and, especially, identifying and supporting children with SLCN.

The development of a local area wide SLC pathway relies on the following four stages:

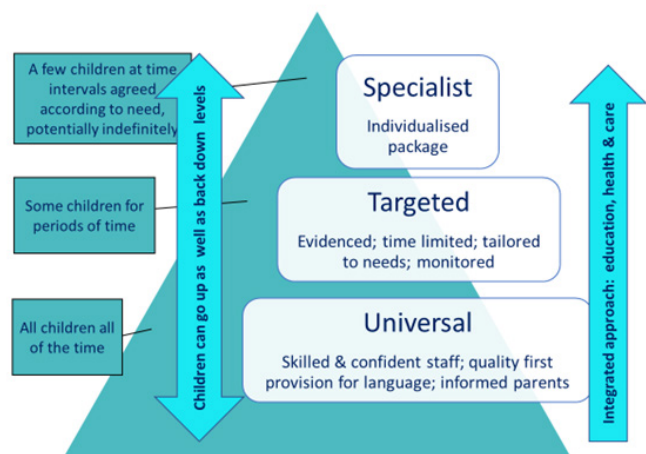
- **Step one:** Identifying need and key stakeholders - building local engagement and commitment – self assessment
- **Step two:** Building a case for a local early years SLC strategy – know and share your data across agencies; policy and evidence drivers
- **Step three:** Collective action- Making the change – workforce development; developing and sharing

the visual pathway across the continuum of need

- **Step four:** Continuous improvement: How will we know when we have got there?

Public Health England (PHE)'s SLC pathway model "details the key features of provision that should be offered to cover a continuum of need for each of the age groups/stages". The continuum of need is sometimes known as the 'universal'. 'targeted' and 'specialist' model or Wave 1, 2 and 3 support. One way of describing this pathway in the early years is identified in the diagram below

Diagram D: The Communication Trust's model used to support of local authorities to develop a SLCN pathway



This model demonstrates that providing strong positive support for language to all children, early on, can prevent children requiring more targeted or specialist support later. An added benefit is ensuring that those children whose needs are more complex can have more timely and plentiful support from specialists. This is achieved because specialist services are not already filled up by chil-



-dren with less severe needs.

In conjunction with a strategic speech, language and communication pathway, work can take place to ensure that all children attending early years settings are appropriately supported to develop strong early language skills. This will also include enabling staff to achieve early identification and appropriate support for children with SLCN.

Working out what is needed

I CAN's experience through the EYSEND Partnership demonstrates that to have successful support for SLCN in early years settings, a range of other requirements is needed. These requirements can be seen as 'outputs' in the logic framework headings below. The language used here reflects the logic framework approach that is also used in the PHE Best Start guidance, see above. The outputs, when successful, are sometimes seen as proxy indicators for the desired interim outcome.

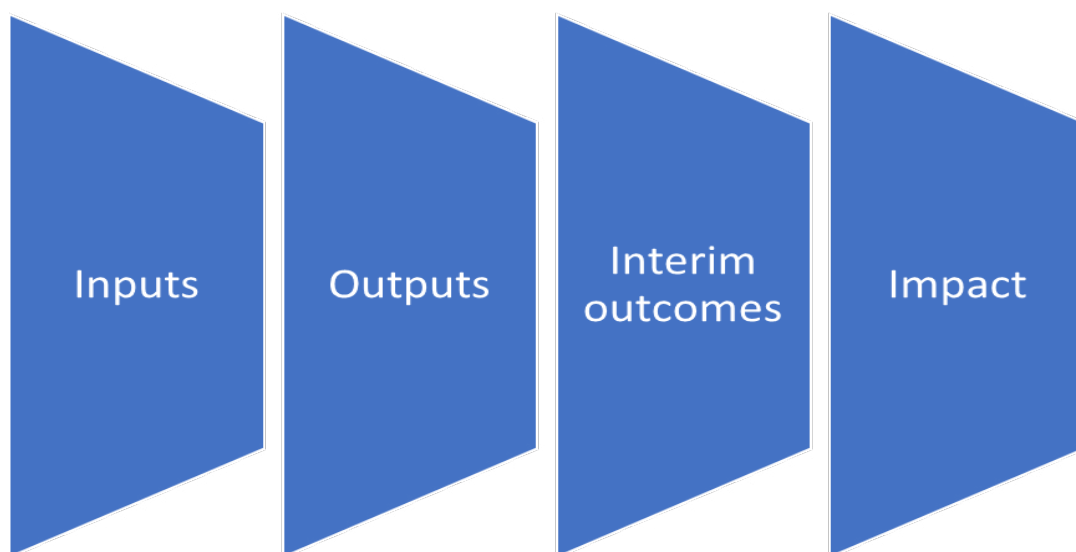
It is useful to think, not only about what effects these outputs will have (interim outcomes), but also to look at what is required to make them successful. The elements required to achieve success are described below as 'inputs'.

Essential ingredients for a logic framework for ensuring quality support of children with SLCN in early years settings

In the information below, the overall targeted impact is the strong progress of children's early years development.

It is important to identify what outputs can be developed to achieve the interim outcomes, which, in turn, lead towards the overall targeted impact. A note is also made of possible inputs required to achieve the successful outputs identified.

Diagram D: Logic framework headings



Inputs:

- » Acknowledgment of the importance of strong early speech, language and communication development
- » Staff skills and knowledge development (health visitors, family support practitioners and early years practitioners and advisors), reliant on training and CPD of staff working with all ages of children
- » Clear consistent messages to parents
- » Positive parental relationships
- » Appropriate early identification of SLCN
- » Appropriate support and follow-up available for children who have been identified as having a delay, including early years setting based targeted interventions
- » Strong local authority systems and monitoring of delivery
- » Shared acknowledgment of the importance of strong early speech, language and communication development
- » Awareness of the role of parents and all practitioners in supporting speech, language and communication at a universal and targeted level
- » Awareness of where different services fit into the journey of support for children's strong speech, language and communication development
- » Ability to deliver support for settings (including public health messaging)
- » Funding for evidenced staff training, delivery, resources, interventions and back fill
- » Monitoring of delivery systems and evaluation of impact

- » Commitment to funding for targeted and specialist support for children who have been identified as having SLCN
- » Activity to develop an authority-wide SLCN pathway

Outputs:

- » Joint integrated reviews supporting consistent screening / early identification
- » Regular monitoring of children's progress within and across settings
- » Development of staff skills and knowledge
- » Specific evidenced interventions for children at a targeted level
- » Close working between the local authority and the local speech and language therapy department
- » Quality teaching in early years settings with support from LA Advisors, including an understanding of what is normally expected from early years settings for children at universal and targeted levels
- » Consistent information sharing with parents
- » Evaluating, demonstrating and sharing success
- » An understanding by services supporting older children of the fundamental nature of speech, language and communication
- » Strategic support and buy-in and involvement of a range of stakeholders

Interim outcomes:

- » Appropriate early identification of SLCN
- » Parental awareness of children's needs
- » Opportunity for early years settings and family support practitioners to provide appropriate, evidenced intervention at a universal / targeted level



- » Opportunities to further develop joint working, between practitioner groups and with parents
- » Acknowledgment of the importance of strong early speech, language and communication development
- » Awareness of the need for appropriate, evidenced intervention at a targeted / specialist level
- » Identification of settings in need of support and training from specialist advisors
- » Clear consistent messaging to parents
- » Identification of settings' strengths and areas for development in supporting children's early speech, language and communication development
- » Understanding of what is normally expected of early years settings in supporting children's early speech, language and communication development at a universal and targeted level
- » Shared acknowledgment of the importance of strong early speech, language and communication development
- » Awareness of where different services fit into the journey of support for children's strong speech, language and communication development
- » Opportunities for joint working between practitioners, services and with parents
- » Development of staff knowledge and skills

Using the above information, it is also possible to identify existing strengths or areas of need (under the headings of both the input and interim outcomes) and use this information to identify next steps for your setting or area.

Next steps

Using the materials above, stakeholders within any part of the speech and language machine can review their services and answer the following questions:

- Which outputs do you already have in your local authority / for your early years setting?
- Which of the related inputs (i.e. related to your existing outputs) are in place?
- What interim outcomes do you want to achieve?
- What are the necessary steps (outputs) to achieve these?
- What is required to achieve the outputs? (These will be the identified inputs above)

Action Planning:

- What are we trying to achieve for children with SLCN?
- What are our strengths?
- What is stopping us from achieving our goal?
- Who do we need to work closely with?
- Who does our work impact?
- Who else do we need to get 'on board'?
- What plans will we make?
- How does this tie in with other programmes?
- How will we review our success?

For more information on the experience of I CAN in the EYSEND Partnership programme, contact eysend@ican.org.uk

