



Press Release

POOL LOCAL AUTHORITY AND HEALTH DEPARTMENT BUDGETS TO IMPROVE SERVICES FOR CHILDREN WITH COMMUNICATION NEEDS

As the National Year of Communication draws to a close, outgoing Communication Champion warns of significant cuts to speech and language therapy services at a time of growing need

The Health and Social Care Bill, currently going through Parliament, should be amended to make joint commissioning of children's community health services compulsory to improve services for the 1 million children in the UK with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).

This is one of 30 major recommendations made by outgoing Communication Champion for Children, Jean Gross in her *Two Years On: final report of the Communication Champion for children* to the Government. Her recommendations span five key themes:

- *Good communication skills are central to children's learning, wellbeing and life chances.* Jean Gross calls for the nation to get children's language and communication right before the age of 5. She welcomes increased public awareness thanks to initiatives such as the *Hello* campaign and praises work of the Department of Education and Department of Health to establish communication and language as priorities.
- *Concern about the impact of increasing cuts to front-line speech and language therapy services and specialist advisory services on which children and young people depend.* NHS savings drives and reductions in local authority budgets are coinciding with a 58% growth over the last five years in numbers of school-age children with SLCN as their primary special need.
- *Variability in joint commissioning of speech and language therapy services by the NHS and local authorities.* Whilst there has been a welcome rise during her tenure, joint commissioning is still not happening in 70% of local areas. The result is that responsibility to meet children's SLCN can be passed from one agency to another, with parents and children stuck in the middle of local disputes. In the report are examples of how commissioning of SLCN services is failing to meet children's needs including one speech and language therapist's recent experience of having to choose which of three disabled children could be given the ability to communicate using a communication aid, and which two would not.

- *The need for continued awareness-raising efforts and information dissemination to parents on the facts about how children's communication develops and what to do if they are worried.*
She notes that parents once given information often react with 'No one told us this before' and recommends that the Department of Education pursue its plans to provide parents with interesting and accessible information on children's communication and language development. This should draw on resources developed as part of the *Hello* campaign and look at phone apps, social media, texting and daytime television.
- *Concern around the gaps in services for school-aged children.*
Jean Gross highlights that teachers need more support in how to adapt their day-to-day teaching to meet the needs of pupils with SLCN and generally in how to promote children's communication skills in their lessons.

Reflecting further on the future of commissioning, Jean Gross says; "I have met no one outside government who believe that commissioning by Clinical Commissioning Groups led by GPs will change the fundamental problems. All say it will make it worse. I have found that in London, for example, only 9% of referrals for speech and language therapy go through GPs. Children requiring community health services are largely invisible to GPs, so it seems unlikely they will be a commissioning priority."

In her report, Jean Gross highlights a number of local areas that offer a continuum of integrated services for children of all ages including Barking and Dagenham, Bexley, Bolton, Camden, Derbyshire, Ealing, Hammersmith and Fulham, Hackney, Harrow, Kensington and Chelsea, Kent, North Lincolnshire, Oxfordshire and Somerset. But these areas are however in a minority.

She also praises the work of community-wide strategies to promote improved communication skills for all children such as Sheffield's 'Every Sheffield Child Articulate and Literate by 11' and Stoke Speaks Out early years campaign that has reduced the percentage of 3-4 years olds with delayed language from 64% in 2004 to 39% in 2010.

Jean Gross concludes in her report "Services for children with SLCN come from a low base. Reducing them further seems neither fair nor, in the longer term, effective. We also know that there are significant gains if SLCN are met in a timely manner. Not addressing SLCN stores up problems for the future. We know that there are significant long term costs in adulthood associated with unmet speech, language and communication needs. Children with SLCN account for a high number of exclusions from school, and are twice as likely to be unemployed in their mid-thirties."

The reflections in *Two Years On: final report of the Communication Champion for children* are based on findings from an extensive programme of meetings with local commissioners and service providers across England, undertaken between January 2010 and December 2011. Jean Gross has met with 105 out of the 152 local authority / NHS Primary Care Trust pairings in England.

The report is available to download from www.hello.org.uk

For further information

For more information or to interview Jean Gross, please contact Laura Smith, Head of Press and PR on lsmith@thecommunicationtrust.org.uk or call 07766651366.

About Jean's role as Communication Champion for Children

- Jean Gross is England's outgoing Communication Champion for children. She was appointed by government in response to the 2008 Bercow Review of support for children with speech, language and communication needs.
- The Communication Champion has been responsible for working across government, delivery partners and other stakeholders to co-ordinate and build on initiatives to improve services for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs.
- The *Hello* campaign is being run by The Communication Trust in partnership with the Communication Champion.
- For more information go to www.thecommunicationcouncil.org. Please note this website will no longer be updated from 31st December.

About the *Hello* campaign

- *Hello* (the national year of communication) has been a campaign to increase understanding of how important it is for children and young people to develop good communication skills.
- The campaign has been run by The Communication Trust, a coalition of nearly 50 leading voluntary sector organisations; in partnership with Jean Gross, the Government's Communication Champion. The campaign sought to make 2011 the year when children's communication skills become a priority in schools and homes across the country.
- The campaign was supported by BT and Pearson Assessment and backed by the Department for Education and Department for Health.
- The evaluation of *Hello* is taking place from January – March 2012. Information, updates, resources and sharing of best practice is still available from www.hello.org.uk
- The National Year was originally proposed by John Bercow MP – now Speaker of the House of Commons - in his July 2008 Review of Services for Children and Young People (0-19) with Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN).