

Llais' response Talk with Me Phase 2 Speech and Language Therapy consultation

About Llais

Llais is the independent body that reflects the views and represents the interests of people living in Wales in their National Health Service (NHS) and social care services. We work locally, regionally and nationally to ensure people's voices are heard and used to improve planning, design and delivery of services.

This response draws on what we have heard through our engagement activities, complaints advocacy service, and ongoing relationships with communities, professionals and partner organisations across Wales. Our comments are informed by **The Health and Social Care We Want – The People's Principles**, which reflect what matters most to people using services.

Question 1

Do you agree that the name Talk with Me Phase 2 is helpful and relevant to cover the extension of this work to children aged 5–11?

Agree

Comments:

The name *Talk with Me Phase 2* builds appropriately on the existing programme and places communication and relationships at the centre of the work. This **reflects** what people consistently tell us they value most: being listened to, understood and treated as individuals.

The continuation of the name also supports continuity as the programme extends to include children aged 5–11.

What we hear through our engagement activities and complaints advocacy service highlights the importance of clear and accessible

communication so that families and children understand what Talk with Me Phase 2 means in practice.

Clear information will be needed about how universal and targeted speech, language and communication support relates to access to specialist Speech and Language Therapy where required.

This will be key to ensuring the programme is well understood, trusted, and meaningful to families.

Question 2

Do you agree that the approach to raising awareness of the importance of SLC (Objective 1) will help facilitate better outcomes?

Agree

Comments:

We support the emphasis on public awareness and accessible messaging. Our engagement shows that many families are unsure of what “typical” speech, language and communication development looks like, or when and where to get help.

This objective reflects the People’s Principles, especially the need for clear **and honest communication** and **access that works for everyone**. To work for everyone, awareness campaigns should:

- Use plain language and everyday examples
- Be bilingual from the start
- Reach people through trusted local and community settings, not just online

We particularly welcome the intention to consider the impact of screens and technology, as people frequently tell us they are seeking clearer, evidence-based guidance.

We broadly agree with the approach to raising awareness of Speech, language and communication. What we hear through our complaints advocacy service shows that where there is confusion about speech, language, and communication needs, or about what Speech and Language Therapy can and cannot offer, this can lead to anxiety, disagreements, and loss of trust. Clear, child, and family focused information would help people engage with support earlier and with more confidence and reduce misunderstandings later.

Question 3

Do you agree that the approach to improving identification of SLCN (Objective 2) will help facilitate better outcomes?

Agree, with caveats

Comments:

Early and consistent identification of speech, language and communication needs is essential. Across what we hear from people across Wales, they often describe, delays in recognising needs, confusion about thresholds and referral routes, and inconsistency between settings and regions.

The use of standardised, evidence-based tools to support more consistent identification is a positive step.

Identification must not become a **tick box exercise** or a one-size-fits-all approach.

Practitioners will need to be supported to use tools flexibly and alongside professional judgement, particularly when working with neurodivergent children whose communication needs may present differently.

To reflect the People's Principles of **timely care** and **joined-up services**, it will be important that identification is clearly linked to what happens next.

Families regularly tell us they need:

- Clear information on what happens *after* identification
- Transparent pathways that are easy understand
- Ongoing monitoring and review, rather than one-off assessments

Families should not be left feeling they are responsible for finding their way through complex systems alone.

Llais agrees that improving identification is an important step, but advocacy data indicates that identification alone is insufficient without clear, consistent follow-through. Families tell us of repeated cycles of identification followed by discharge or removal from waiting lists, resulting in children being reidentified multiple times without the ongoing support needed. Addressing this gap between identification and ongoing intervention will be important to achieving better outcomes.

We hear from people that long waits, uncertainty and repeated reassessment have a significant emotional impact on families. Improving communication, reducing avoidable delays and providing support while waiting would help protect family wellbeing as well as improve outcomes for children.

Question 4

Do you agree that the approach to improving support for those with SLCN (Objective 3) will help facilitate better outcomes?

Agree

Comments:

The focus on evidence based universal and targeted interventions delivered at the point of need is right. Many people tell us that support often comes **too late**, after difficulties have escalated or become more complex. This can limit its effectiveness.

To reflect the People's Principles of **care that recognises the whole person**, support should:

- Take account of family context, wellbeing and wider needs
- Be flexible and responsive rather than time limited by service boundaries or fixed timeframes
- Work alongside education, health and social care rather than in isolation

Clear information about what support families can expect, and when, will be important for building trust and confidence in the system.

Llais strongly supports the ambition to improve support for children with speech, language and communication needs. Concerns raised through our complaints advocacy service, highlights gaps between identification and effective, ongoing support. Families describe repeated discharge, limited review and difficulty accessing further help, leading to children cycling in and out of services.

Strengthening support beyond initial intervention, particularly for neurodivergent children, would better reflect lived experience and reduce distress for families.

Question 5

Do you agree that the proposed actions to upskill the workforce (Objective 4) will result in better identification and support?

Strongly agree

Comments:

We hear that workforce confidence and capability is a recurring issue. People tell us of experiencing poor communication, inconsistent advice, or a lack of understanding of individual needs when using services. These experiences are particularly common where staff do not feel confident in recognising or responding to speech, language and communication needs.

We strongly support the proposed focus on:

- Cross sector training
- Pre-registration inclusion of SLC
- Accessible, practical learning for those working with children aged 5–11

This objective strongly reflects the People's Principles of **dignity and respect** and **clear communication**. Training should emphasise not just technical knowledge, but relational and communication skills. Listening, and adapting communication to meet individual needs.

Llais agrees that upskilling the wider workforce is essential to improving both identification and support. Many speech and language therapy related concerns happen at the boundaries between services, where professionals lack shared understanding or confidence. Targeted training for education, ward-based staff and social care professionals could improve coordination and help to stop issues becoming complaints.

Question 6

Do you agree that embedding preventative SLC support across Wales (Objective 5) will help facilitate better outcomes?

Strongly agree

Comments:

People often tell us that where you live should not affect how quickly or easily you can get support. This objective supports the idea that services should be fair, accessible and work well for everyone.

We welcome the focus on making support more equal across Wales and on working closely with services such as mental health, Additional

Learning Needs (ALN), literacy and justice. Preventative support works best when services work together and families can access help early, rather than only when problems become more serious.

Llais strongly supports embedding preventative speech, language and communication support across Wales. What people tell us shows that early and consistent support can prevent difficulties from escalating, especially where families are currently left to cope without enough professional help. To make this work, it will be important to monitor and address differences between regions, so that access to preventative support does not depend on postcode.

Families regularly tell us that support can drop away at key transition points, like moving schools or settings. Clear expectations for continuity of speech, language and communication support during transitions would help reduce disruption and distress for children and families.

Question 7

Are there any other objectives that should be included?

Yes

Suggested additional objective:

Strengthen co-production with children and families

Comments:

A clear objective on co-production would strengthen the plan. Children and families should be active partners in shaping speech, language and communication support, rather than only receiving services that have been designed without their input.

This would reflect the People's Principles of:

- **Treating people like people, not numbers**

- **Care that recognises and responds to the whole person**

What people tell us highlights that families often feel decisions about speech, language and communication support are made about them rather than with them. People tell us there is a lack of clarity about review points, discharge decisions, and what options are available if they disagree with Speech and Language Therapy decisions.

A stronger focus on co-production could support clearer review processes, clearer decision making, and access to independent or multi-disciplinary review where concerns are raised.

Embedding co-production as an objective would strengthen accountability, improve trust, and help make sure services better reflect the real needs and experiences of children and families.

As children get older, there are more opportunities to hear directly from them about what helps their speech, language and communication. Supporting age-appropriate ways for children aged 5-11 to share their views would strengthen co-production.

Question 8

Are there any other actions that should be included?

Yes

Suggestions include:

Based on what we have heard, the plan would be strengthened by including additional actions that help families understand, engage with, and influence speech, language and communication support.

These could include

- Clear, accessible explanations of speech, language and communication pathways, so families know what to expect and where to go for help
- Built-in ways for children and families to give feedback on whether support is helping, and to influence changes where it is not
- Stronger links with community and voluntary organisations who are often trusted first points of contact for families
- Support for families while waiting for assessment or intervention, to reduce anxiety and prevent needs from escalating
- While we recognise that there are separate Welsh Government policies and programmes focused on neurodivergent children, they are often among those most impacted by speech, language and communication difficulties. Clearer links between Talk with Me Phase 2 and neurodivergence and Additional Learning Needs frameworks would help reduce gaps in support and make it easier for families to understand where help should come from.

What we have heard through our complaints advocacy service suggests that clearer national expectations around discharge decisions, review points, and routes to escalation would improve confidence in the system. This could help reduce repeated complaints and the need for families to re-enter services when support has been ended too soon.

Alongside service and system measures, success should reflect whether children and families feel listened to, informed and clear about what will happen next. Capturing feedback on people's experiences would provide a meaningful measure of whether support is working in practice.

Question 9

What are the likely effects of the proposed objectives on the Welsh language?

Comments:

We see significant opportunity for positive impact if bilingual provision is embedded from the start. People tell us that choice of language is central to feeling understood, respected, and confident.

However, there is a risk that Welsh language provision could be treated as secondary if:

- Tools, training, or interventions are not developed equally in Welsh
- Welsh speaking staff are not supported or increased

Embedding Welsh language support reflects the People's Principle of **inclusive, accessible, and fair services for all**.

While our complaints advocacy casework does not routinely capture Welsh-language-specific issues, Llais emphasises the importance of ensuring assessments, advice and interventions are available bilingually. This is particularly important where misunderstandings about risk, discharge, or support can have significant consequences for families.

Question 10

Could the objectives be changed to enhance positive effects on the Welsh language or mitigate negative effects?

Comments:

Yes. We recommend:

- Explicit commitment to parity of Welsh- and English-language tools, resources, and training
- Monitoring access to Welsh-medium SLC support
- Actively promoting Welsh language use as a strength in children's development, not a barrier

Complaints advocacy casework raises children's rights concerns where access to appropriate speech and language support is delayed,

withdrawn incorrectly, or difficult to challenge. Strengthening review, participation and transparency would promote children's rights to be heard, supported, and protected, in line with UNCRC principles.

Question 11

Could the objectives be changed to promote positive effects on children's rights?

Comments:

The objectives broadly support children's rights, particularly the right to be heard and supported to express themselves.

To strengthen this further, the plan could:

- Explicitly reference children as active agents in their care
- Emphasise communication as foundational to dignity, participation, and wellbeing
- Ensure children's lived experience informs evaluation and improvement

Llais advocates regularly support people raising concerns about Speech and Language Therapy across Wales, including issues of access, discharge, safety, communication, and coordination between services.

While *Talk with Me Phase 2* focuses on universal and targeted SLC support rather than specialist SLT, advocacy data shows that gaps between these parts of the system are experienced as distressing and, at times, unsafe. Consideration of how universal and targeted approaches interface with specialist services would strengthen the overall impact of the delivery plan.

Question 12

Any additional comments

Comments:

Llais welcomes the ambition of Talk with Me Phase 2. To realise its full potential, delivery must be:

- Clear to families
- Consistent across Wales
- Grounded in what people tell us matters most: being listened to, understood, and supported at the right time
- Appropriately funded

While the plan sets out clear ambitions and a strong framework for improving speech, language, and communication support, it is less clear how delivery will be funded and resourced in practice. We would like to see more detail on whether additional resources will be made available, and how delivery will be supported across sectors and local areas, would help provide confidence that the proposed actions can be implemented consistently and sustainably.

Across all objectives in the Plan, Llais would emphasise the importance of making sure ambition can be met with delivery capacity. People consistently tell us that shortages of Speech and Language Therapists, delayed access to support, gaps between assessment and intervention, and difficulty accessing AAC support remain significant barriers. Addressing these structural issues will be important to make sure that Talk with Me Phase 2 leads to meaningful improvements in children's experiences, rather than increased identification without the support to follow through.

People often tell us that when responsibility for speech, language and communication support is unclear, problems are harder to resolve, and families feel passed between services. Clear accountability for decision-

making and delivery across education, health and local authorities would help families know who to turn to and improve confidence in the system.

The People's Principles provide a strong lens through which to continue shaping this work, ensuring that speech, language, and communication support is not only effective, but humane, inclusive and rights based.