

SOCIAL AND HEALTH CARE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting	Thursday, 12 th February 2026
Report Subject	The Development and Impact of Speech, Language and Communication Support in Early Years Service
Cabinet Member	Cabinet Member for Social Services and Wellbeing
Report Author	Chief Officer (Social Services)
Type of Report	Operational

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Speech, Language & Communication (SLC) is one of the four elements of the Flying Start programme, introduced with dedicated guidance nationally in 2015. SLC needs in the early years (0-4) have implications for children's development, wellbeing and prospects and is now recognised as a crucial aspect of development and predictor of positive relationships between the child and caregiver. Since then, the offer has evolved considerably in Flintshire and incorporates universal, targeted and specialist interventions from the antenatal period to pre-school age children.

The support is based on the fact that parents or immediate caregivers are always the best people to generate improvements in a child's language development through play and communication. Recent developments in national evaluation methodology have allowed the team to gain further insights into the impact of the Flintshire pathway and demonstrate the progress made in this field. With implications for ongoing education and health outcomes, these services are growing in recognition and potential for development and ongoing investment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1	Members support the promotion of awareness of Flying Start Flintshire's comprehensive offer among local communities.
2	Members support the Champion SLC support as a priority for early years investment, by monitoring outcomes to ensure continued improvement in children's communication and school readiness.
3	Members support integration of SLC strategies across wider early years and education services.

REPORT DETAILS

1.00	EXPLAINING THE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPACT OF SPEECH, LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION SUPPORT IN EARLY YEARS SERVICE
1.01	<p>Speech, language, and communication (SLC) skills form the foundation of a child's cognitive, social, and emotional development. They underpin early learning, build the capacity for positive relationships, and strongly predict long-term outcomes in education, employability, mental health, and wellbeing. The Welsh Government's <i>Talk With Me</i> Delivery Plan (1) sets out a national ambition for all children to have the best start in life, emphasising that early communication skills are essential for achieving their full potential. Evidence from the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (2) (RCSLT) highlights that SLC needs, particularly when unidentified, can significantly affect children's wellbeing, educational attainment, emotional literacy, and ability to form relationships. Early identification and targeted intervention are therefore critical to preventing long-term disadvantage. Communication itself is a layered process that relies on several interconnected skills: receptive language (the ability to understand) usually develops before expressive language (speaking), speech clarity relates to how accurately words are produced, and communication refers to how we interact with others.</p> <p>Over 10% of children and young people in the UK have persistent speech, language and communication (SLC) needs that can limit their ability to learn and engage in everyday situations. Evidence consistently shows that children growing up in poverty are more likely to experience delayed language development—meaning their language skills progress significantly more slowly than those of peers of the same age, even when no specific disorder is present. Because communication skills shape a child's learning, relationships and long-term prospects, delays can reinforce cycles of disadvantage, with poor language skills often passed from one generation to the next. (3)</p>
1.02	<p>This report outlines Flintshire's comprehensive SLC support through the Flying Start programme, delivered during the crucial first 1,000 days up to preschool entry, ensuring children in disadvantaged areas or with identified concerns receive timely, universal, targeted, and specialist support. Vocabulary at age 5 is found to be the best predictor (from a range of measures at age 5 and 10) of whether children who experienced social deprivation in childhood were able to break the cycle and escape poverty in later adult life.</p>
1.03	<p>Strategic Importance of SLC Support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Early identification of SLC challenges prevents long-term educational and social disadvantage.• Timely, targeted interventions, working with parents and children together, improve school readiness, confidence, and independence.• Parental engagement ensures strategies are embedded at home, strengthening outcomes.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outcome measurement ensures accountability and demonstrates impact to funders and policymakers.
1.04	<p>EYFS / Flying Start Flintshire Offer The Team, training and local CPD:</p> <p>Speech, language, and communication (SLC) interventions within Flintshire EYFS are delivered by a multi-agency team. This team comprises a qualified Speech & Language Therapist (SaLT), Local Authority employees, and commissioned childcare service providers. The responsibility for SLC is integrated across health, childcare, and parenting teams, with all practitioners involved in the delivery of the Flying Start service contributing to SLC support.</p> <p>The contracted SaLT plays a key role in ensuring additional support for children under the Flying Start programme and maintains strong links with core SLC services. This position also covers training and consultation, guaranteeing ongoing investment in continuing professional development (CPD) related to SLC across the Local Authority, Health, and commissioned childcare services.</p> <p>The current Welsh Government guidance for SLC delivery within Flying Start benefited from the expertise of the co-author of this report, who manages the Early Support Practitioners team. This team is tasked with identifying children in need of support and facilitating interventions either in the family home or through group-based sessions. Practitioners are qualified to use the Wellcomm screening tool to assess and address children's needs.</p> <p>The EYFS childcare team is instrumental in fostering SLC development within childcare settings. All children eligible for Flying Start are offered a funded childcare place, making it essential for practitioners to possess an elevated level of awareness, knowledge, and skill, particularly regarding the needs of 2–3-year-olds and those entering childcare with SLC needs.</p>
1.05	<p>The interventions described in the following sections are delivered in-house by the team, spanning the entire EYFS service landscape. A SLC pathway (Appendix 1) is followed to ensure all children can access timely support and that parents of children reaching school age are confident to support their child's language development on an ongoing basis.</p>
1.06	<p>Intervention definitions and practice:</p> <p>Makaton</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combines signs, symbols, and speech to give children multiple ways to communicate. • Supports children with learning or communication difficulties by providing visual cues. • Encourages language development, confidence, and independence.

May I Join You

- A play-based strategy enabling parents/carers to engage with their child's interests.
- Promotes social communication through child-led play.
- Focuses on children developing language or experiencing communication difficulties.

Elklan Evidence informed SLC Group based programmes: (Let's Talk with Your Baby / Let's Talk at Home / Let's Talk Under 5's)

- Facilitator led practical strategies to improve listening, attention, vocabulary, and expressive language.
- Equip parents/carers with skills to significantly enhance children's understanding of language.
- Use accessible and inclusive language and resources to appeal to a broad range of parents, caregivers and Early Years practitioners.
- During the group work, parents are shown how to use familiar household objects or accessible craft activities as resources to improve their communication with their child.

Talk With Me Messages

Welsh Government's key language messages shared with parents during antenatal workshops, at 8 weeks and 8 months.

- Reinforced through weekly stay-and-play sessions across five bases.
- Delivered via play, listening, and talking opportunities to promote early language skills.

Wellcomm Screening

- Screening offered at 20 months to all eligible children, aligned with the Healthy Child Wales programme.
- Identifies potential SLC difficulties and Developmental Language Disorders (DLD) early.
- Provides targeted intervention and follow-up review at 23 months.
- Ensures timely referral to Speech and Language Therapy (SaLT) services where required.

PaRRiS outcome measure

- Flying Start practitioners are now using PaRRiS (Parents & Relationships Responsive Interactions Scale) to measure changes in the adult and environment.
- This tool demonstrates the impact of receiving Flying Start SLC provision on family communication practices.
- Introduced while the Welsh Government develops the new SLC Package for Wales, ensuring Flintshire is at the forefront of national priorities.
- The aim is to ensure children start school with functional speech, language, and communication skills, enabling them to reach their full potential.

1.07

Outcomes and Impact

The combined measures and pathways outlined above mean that children in Flintshire are now more likely to grow up in positive home learning environments with the language skills needed to succeed in social, educational and employment contexts. We know that in terms of SLC, the impact of successful evidence based interventions will have widespread impact.

- Early intervention reduces demand on specialist services later in childhood.
- Improved school readiness: children enter education with stronger communication skills reducing pressures on teachers and supporting effective learning.
- Parental empowerment: families gain confidence in supporting their child's language development.
- Parent – Child relationships improve where communication is part of family life. Children's behaviour often improves, and parents understand and respond to their child's needs.
- Community engagement: informal group sessions foster peer support and shared learning.
- Positive progress evidenced: the majority of children reviewed after WellComm intervention show measurable improvement.
- PaRRiS data provides robust evidence of environmental and adult behaviour change, strengthening the case for continued investment.
- Outreach – The EYFS outreach service means that any child in Flintshire living outside of postcode targeted areas can be referred in for SLC support.

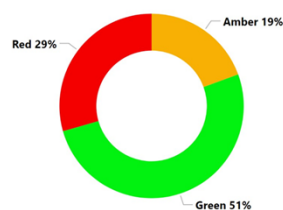
1.08

Flintshire SLC intervention monitoring 25/6 data to date:

20 Month WellComm Results 2025/26

Qtr	Amber	Green	Red	Total
Q1	9	34	21	64
Q2	20	38	30	88
Q3	13	39	14	65
Q4	1	2	1	4
Total	43	113	65	219

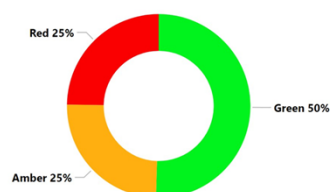
WellComm Outcomes %



WellComm Review Results 2025/26

Qtr	Amber	Green	Red	Total
Q1	13	16	9	38
Q2	5	15	8	28
Q3	8	20	9	37
Q4		2		2
Total	26	53	26	105

WellComm Review Outcomes %



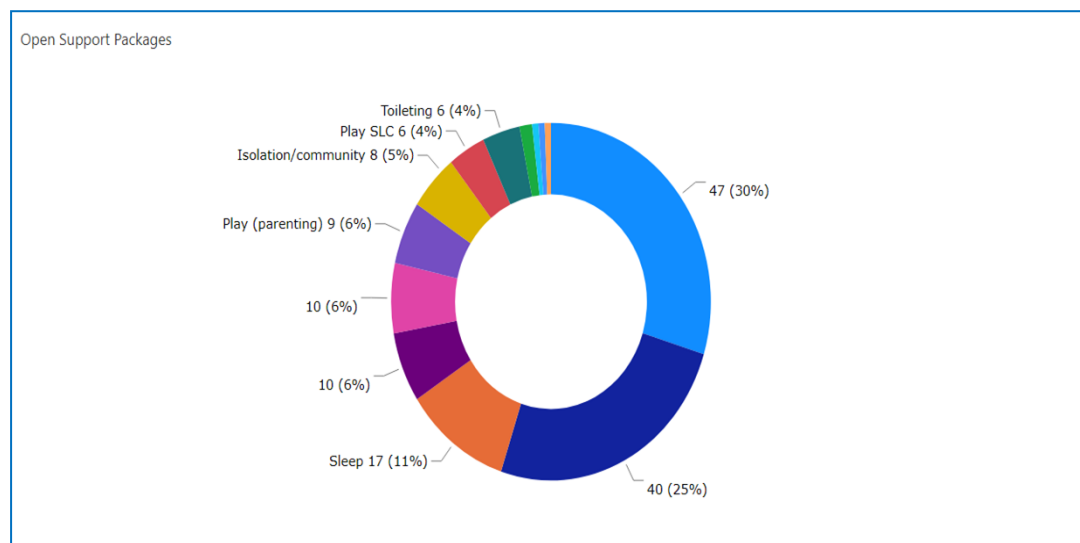
The above graphic shows the results of the Wellcomm screening. 229 Children have been screened so far this year and of those, 51% scored green meaning that no further intervention is needed. The 49% remaining indicates a requirement for support which is implemented before the next review. These results are in line with national expectations for children living

in areas of deprivation who are disproportionately impacted. The review data shows that of those children, the support implemented has been effective for all but 26 children who will now be picked up by the SaLT in line with the pathway. This data shows the effectiveness of the EYFS interventions and the positive impact that a dedicated SLC service has when applied efficiently.

The results also indicate that most children are impacted by resolvable SLCN which means that with the right support, parents are in most cases able to implement recommended strategies, seeing their child develop and flourish through their own acquired skills.

1.09

Tailored support for SLCN



The above figure shows the number and proportion of support packages currently open to the EYFS Early Support Practitioner team. 35% of all support is now SLC related. These packages of support can include a combination of the interventions listed above, advice and modelling on the use of play to support language development or hints and tips as simple as turning the TV off when playing with children. Increasingly, the team are also advising parents on screen time across different devices for young children and helping parents to use their own interaction as distraction or soothing for children such as reading stories or helping during a supermarket shop.

1.10

Elklan Groups

SLC							
Course title	Course Status	# of courses	Delivery Type	# of Parents	Avg # of Parents	% Attendance	# not completed
Let's Talk with Under 5's	Closed	5	Group	29	6	97%	1
Let's Talk with Your Baby	Closed	4	Group	43	11	83%	12
Let's Talk at Home	Closed	3	Group	26	9	73%	10
Total	Closed	12	Group	98	8	87%	23

The above table shows Elklan group support uptake year to date (01/04/25 to 31/12/25) We aim to deliver at least one group per family centre per term with

	<p>an emphasis on ensuring access to 'Let's Talk with your Baby' to get the key messages to parents very early on in their child's life. 'Let's talk with Under 5s' and 'Let's Talk at Home' form part of the universal offer and the intervention pathway.</p> <p>132 Children have had a contact from the EYFS SaLT or Technical Instructor as part of an enhanced piece of work. These children may then go on to work with BCUHB language services. For 24/5 figures please see Appendix 2, SLC section of Flying Start Annual report.</p>
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2.00	RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS
2.01	There are no revenue, capital, or human resource implications for the current financial year or for 2026-28. All SLC services within Early Years are funded and delivered within the Children & Communities Grant incorporating SLC as part of the Flying Start programme of work. This element has benefitted from recent Welsh Government capital investment in Flintshire's Family Centre estate where development works have incorporated dedicated SLC resource purchases for families.

3.00	IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT
3.01	None.

4.00	CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED/CARRIED OUT
4.01	The Prosiect Penguin research group is working on behalf of Welsh Government to develop tools and resources that will support health, education, and childcare practitioners to identify and support speech, language, and communication skills in the early years. The work also incorporates the development of a new screening tool fit for use with the Welsh language. (4)
4.02	This project is part of a Welsh Government plan to support and enhance the ways in which children in Wales develop their speech, language, and communication skills. The Flintshire EYFS lead for SLC sits on the national task and finish group for the work ensuring that Flintshire is at the forefront of developments and that the feedback from parents and practitioners gathered as part of this research can be quickly implemented in our local context.

5.00	APPENDICES
5.01	SLC Pathway.

6.00	LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
6.01	https://www.gov.wales/talk-me-speech-language-and-communication-slc-delivery-plan https://www.rcslt.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/RCSLT-Strategic-Vision-2022-2027.pdf https://www.gov.wales/flying-start-speech-language-and-communication-guidance https://www.cardiffmet.ac.uk/research/research-and-innovation-centres-and-groups/prosiect-penguin-research-group/

7.00	CONTACT OFFICER DETAILS
7.01	Contact Officer: Hayley Wilkes. Early Support & Family Centre Programmes Manager Telephone: 07436750904 E-mail: hayley.wilkes@flintshire.gov.uk

8.00	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
	<p>Additional Learning Needs (ALN): A child has ALN if he or she has a learning difficulty or disability which calls for additional learning provision (ALP) (Welsh Government, 2020a)</p> <p>Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE): Traumatic events that occur before the age of 18 and can affect mental and physical health in adulthood.</p> <p>Developmental Language Disorder (DLD): (previously known as Specific Language Impairment or SLI) a persistent type of speech, language and communication need that cannot be explained by an obvious cause. Late talker: children between 18 to 35 months who acquire language at a slower rate than their typically developing peers. These children have limited expressive or receptive vocabulary. This term excludes children with identified neurological, socioemotional, or sensory difficulties.</p> <p>Parental Responsiveness Rating Scale (PaRRiS): A validated practitioner observation tool to measure developmentally appropriate parental responsiveness to their child.</p> <p>Speech and Language Therapist (SaLT): The title given to a Health Care Profession Council (HCPC) registered professional who assesses, treats, and helps to prevent speech, language, and swallowing difficulties.</p> <p>Speech, Language and Communication needs (SLCN): an umbrella term to describe the full range of communication difficulties in children, irrespective of origin or presenting features.</p>

• **Speech** comprises of: - Articulation: the ability to pronounce sounds. This relates to the movements of the articulators; tongue, soft palate, jaws, teeth, lips. - Phonology: the study of speech sounds, their patterns and sequences and the rules that dictate sound combinations to create words.

• **Language** comprises of: - Receptive language: the comprehension of spoken (or written) language, includes an understanding of vocabulary and grammar. - Expressive language: the use of vocabulary, grammar, and morphology using words, signs or symbols. - Syntax and Grammar: the way that words are put together to form phrases and sentences. - Morphology: the study of internal word structure. This includes minor changes to words e.g. plurals. - Pragmatics: the study of the social use of language. This includes the capacity to interact effectively, to use the right word in the right place and to take the listener's perspective into consideration when talking.

• **Communication** (sending and receiving messages) comprises of: - Verbal communication: involves communication with spoken words. - Non-verbal communication (NVC): involves communication without words. It includes facial expressions, eye contact, gestures and tone of voice, as well as less obvious messages such as posture and spatial distance between individuals. Babies, young children and many children with speech, language and communication difficulties use NVC to communicate.

WellComm: A licensed product that offers rapid universal screening with a traffic light system to identify speech and language needs.