How many children have speech, language and communication needs? Some information on national prevalence levels to help you plan your identifcation policy in school

Why is it important to think about prevalence levels?

This fact sheet gives you some information on national prevalence levels for speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). This information can be very useful when thinking about your identification policies in school.

All schools **must** now publish information on their website about how they implement their policy for SEN (known as the SEN Information Report). This **must** include information on 'policies for identifying children and young people with SEN and assessing their needs' (section 6.79 of the 2014 SEND Code of Practice).

SLCN is often under-identified and so it's important to think about how many pupils you might typically expect to have SLCN in school. This way you can see if your current data on the number of pupils you have identified might suggest that there could be pupils who have not been identified or have been misidentified.

Identification is key across all phases of education, from early years through primary, secondary and beyond. SLCN can be complex and difficult to identify, so an ongoing focus on identification is absolutely imperative.

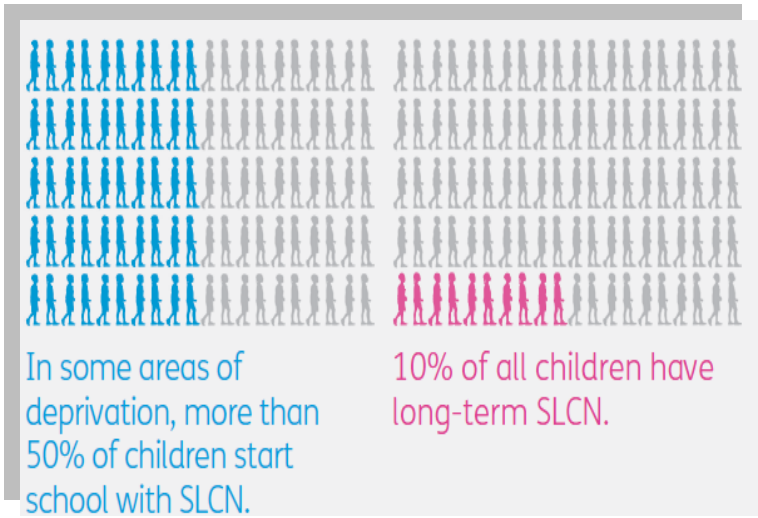
The factsheet '***Early identification and why it's important***' provides more information. Below is information on national prevalence, why identification is so important and why you should compare your identification rates with national data.

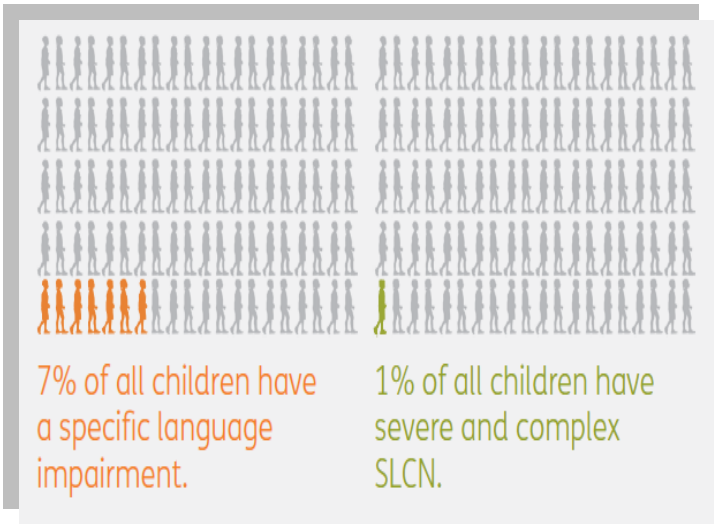
How many children and young people have speech, language and communication needs?

- **50%[1] of children in areas of social disadvantage start school with language delay**, that is with language that isn't adequate for the next stage of learning, for thinking, reasoning and communicating effectively with adults and peers. For example, children from low income families are on average 19 months behind children from the richest families in their use of vocabulary by the age of five.[2] Similar figures have been found in secondary age pupils, with up to 75% of children in one research study of year 9 pupils having significant language difficulties. All these children are at a disadvantage from the start and without the right support don't catch up with their peers.

[1] Locke, E., Ginsborg, J., and Peers, I. (2002) *Development and Disadvantage: implications for early years. International Journal of language & Communication Disorders.* 27 (1). P.3 -15
[2] Ofsted (2012). The report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills – Early Years.

- **7% of all children have a speech and language impairment; it's the most prevalent childhood disability**, but a condition that is much misunderstood. These children can have a rich communication experience, with lots of support from parents, but despite this will have a specific language impairment. They are developing typically in other ways, for example, they have no additional learning, physical or sensory difficulties. They also start school without the language they need in order to learn and are disadvantaged from the start. Children within this group have differing needs, dependent on the nature and severity of their difficulties. They need specialist support in order to learn and communicate to the very best of their ability.
- **At least 3% of all children have SLCN linked with other impairments**, including those with hearing impairment, autistic spectrum disorders, specific learning difficulties, such as dyslexia and general learning needs. In fact, the majority of children with SEN have some degree of SLCN. They too need support in order to learn and to communicate to the very best of their ability. **Of these children an estimated 1% of children have the most severe and complex SLCN which prevent them from expressing their basic needs.**[3]





[3] Lindsay, G., et al (2008) *Effective and Efficient Use of Resources in Services for Children and Young People with Speech, Language and Communication Needs* DCSF Research Report RW05

What is the issue with identification?

Although numbers of children identified in schools with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) as their primary need has increased by around 70% over the last 6 years, there remain true challenges.[4]

In ***A Generation Adrift***, we provide data from the Better Communication Research Programme on the importance of identification and some of the challenges. You can access this document in full at www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/agenerationadrift.

Despite internationally accepted prevalence figures of 7%, only 3% of the school population is ever identified as having SLCN.[5] Children are being missed. Identification of SLCN continues to challenge professionals, with continued variability in age and process of identification continuing throughout the school years.[6]

Despite committed and experienced staff, current policy and practice isn't enabling consistent identification of all children with SLCN, far from it.

In The Communication Trust's Talk of the Town project, an average of around 40% of children with SLCN were not being identified; most difficult to spot were older students, students who had difficulties with vocabulary (45% not identified), those who struggled with formulating sentences (52% not identified) and children with difficulties understanding (29% primary , 48% KS3 not identified). This under identification was happening despite a highly committed staff team.[7]

Children with SLCN often have academic, emotional and behavioural difficulties that pose a challenge to the professionals working with them.[8] SLCN can be difficult to spot and the nature of the difficulties can change over time, often becoming more complex.[9]

Ofsted have also reported examples of children's SLCN being misinterpreted; some children and young people "*were allocated support for their behaviour when, in fact, they had specific communication needs.*"[10]

The Better Communication Research Programme (BCRP) indicates strongly that national curriculum data and/or establishing a pupil's primary need provides insufficient information to plan services and differentiate the curriculum.

Research highlights the fundamental importance of profiling and monitoring children's needs, rather than providing support by diagnosis or category, which can result in challenges of identification and issues regarding meeting the changing nature of children's needs.[11]

How should I compare national data with data in my school?

[4] Strand & Lindsay (2012) ibid

[5] Meschi, E., Micklewright, J.,Vignoles, A. And Lindsay,G. (2012) *The transitions between categories of special educational needs of pupils with Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as they progress through the education system* Department for Education

[6] *ibid*

[7] The Communication Trust (2014) – Talk of the Town Evaluation Report

[8] Dockrell, J.,Ricketts, J., Palikara, O., Charman, T. and Lindsay, G. (2012*) Profiles of need and provision for children with language impairments and autism spectrum disorders in mainstream schools: A prospective study* BCRP,

[9] Conti-Ramsden, G, Simkin, Z and Botting, N (2006) *The prevalence of autistic spectrum disorders in adolescents with a history of specific language impairment*: Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry Vol 47 (6)

[10] Ofsted (2010) *The special educational needs and disability review "A Statement is not Enough"*

[11] McLaughlin, M.J., Dyson, A., Nagle, K., Thurlow, M., Rouse, M., Hardman, M., Norwich, B., Burke. P.J., & Perlin, M. (2006). *Cross-cultural perspectives on the classification of children with disabilities*: Part II. Implementing classification systems in schools. Journal of Special Education, 40(1), 46-58.

Look at your SEN register or school census data. How does it compare with what you might expect from the evidence? If you work in an area of social disadvantage, how many of your children have you identified with delayed speech, language and communication skills?

You can use the table below to compare the national data with that of your school or setting.

National data	**Our data**
Around 7%[12] of children and young people are expected to have specific speech, language and communication needs (primary SLCN)	
In areas of social disadvantage, often more than 50%[13] of children are likely to have delayed speech, language and communication skills	

What should I do if I think our data is low compared to national data?

If your school's SEN register or school census data is much lower than the national figures, what should you do?

It might be that there are unusually low numbers of pupils in your school with SLCN. However, it may well be that you are missing pupils.

Either way, it will be an extremely useful exercise to review your identification policy and ensure that you have the right process and procedures in place for identifying pupils who may have needs.

The factsheet '***Early identification and why it's important***' provides more information on how to develop your identify policy and review your current system.

[12] Meschi, Micklewright, Vignoles, Lindsay *ibid*

[13] Locke, E., Ginsborg, J., and Peers, I. (2002) *Development and Disadvantage: implications for early years.* International Journal of language & Communication Disorders. 27 (1). P.3 -15.