

REPORT TO: Schools Forum

DATE: 16th October 2024

REPORTING OFFICER: Acting Director of Education

SUBJECT: Speech and Language Service Update

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 To provide an update of the current position of the Speech and Language service by Communicate - SLT CIC the commissioned service for Halton Council and NHS Cheshire and Merseyside.
- 1.2 To provide an update on current plans and next steps to support increase in demand for Speech and Language provision.

2.0 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 A tender process took place last year for the children and young people's Speech and Language Therapy contract. The contract was awarded to a new provider, Communicate-SLT CIC. The service is jointly commissioned with NHS Cheshire and Merseyside, with HBC holding the contract.
- 2.2 HBC and ICB commissioners agreed that the service should prioritise key areas of provision based upon the clinical risk to children and young people and statutory responsibilities. These comprise of:

- Children and young people requiring an assessment or review during the EHCP (Education, Health and Care Plan) process
- Children and young people on the neurodevelopmental pathway.
- Children and young people with dysphasia (swallowing difficulties).

3.0 CHALLENGES

- 3.1 Demand for speech and language service has exceeded capacity. This is largely due to four key areas. These include:

1. Staffing Communicate set out that the service requires 12fte SLTs. Of the 7.8fte speech and language therapists eligible for TUPE at the beginning of the contract only 3 transferred, all of these left early in 2024. The service advertised for SLTs from the commencement of their contract, but has been unable to successfully recruit. The difficulty recruiting is reflected nationally. The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (2022) stated there is a 25% vacancy rate of paediatric speech and language therapists (SLTs). As of

September 2024 Communicate SLT is fully staffed and is 0.4fte SLT less than was set out at the beginning of the contract.

2. Inherited waiting lists from the previous provider as well as the increase from 147 to as of September to 735 on the ASD waiting list.
3. Data transfer from the previous provider. A point of transfer the data was 4925 young people of which 2752 we believed to have been discharged leaving 2173 active cases. Communicate have now completed the relevant admin exercise to remove all 2,467 discharged cases.
4. Understanding the caseload. The quality of data that was transferred from the previous provide was limited and not was readily easy to abstract information from to give a clear picture of caseloads as well as the required information for each child, school address etc. Work around the caseload has been completed by Communicate.

3.2 The impact has been an increase in some service waiting times and a number of informal and formal complaints relating to the waiting times for assessments and interventions. The service was requested to prioritise children and young people with the highest clinical need, the impact has therefore been higher for some elements of the service than others.

4.0 CURRENT PLANS TO SUPPORT INCREASED DEMAND

4.1 HBC are working with Communicate and other partners to update the current speech and language pathway during the autumn term. The redevise pathway will be placed within the Local Offer as part of the family hub digital platform to make it easier and more accessible for parents and carers. It will give them information around communication for children at different ages, resources etc. We are also working to include automated pathways that will push out messages to parents and carers that agree information to support them, when and how to seek help, advice, toolkits etc.

4.2 For children with EHCP there are two initial elements:

1. For an extra 7 months starting in September there will be some additional consultant capacity from Communicate that will increase the volume of EHCP completed.
2. Following conversations with senior leaders and Communicate it has been agreed that Communicates activity will be aligned to what was agreed at point of tender. They will focus on the agreed priority areas but for EHCP activity this will be within the Halton Special Schools and SLCN Resource bases initially for quarter three. This also includes some capacity that

Communicate to response to clinical high risk cases in addition to agreed work with schools.

4.3

For children on the ASD pathway there are two initial elements:

- For an extra 7 months starting in September there will be some additional consultant capacity from Communicate.
- ICB are finalising details for an agreement with Bridgewater which will see 1.6fte STL's work to support the backlog of ASD assessments.

5.0 NEXT STEPS

5.1 Commissioners will continue to work closely with Communicate as the provider to measure the output of activity across each pathway to ensure they deliver against agreed targets.

5.2 HBC are undertaking a scoping exercise across other qualified Speech and Language providers to support young people with EHCP's. The initial brief is for providers to work with schools and settings including out of borough schools where Halton young people are placed in a cluster arrangement to review EHCP's where it is identified that SLCN is a primary or secondary need.

A presentation will be given at the forum to go through more detail around this approach and the implications for HNB.