



# Speech, language and communication needs

## Briefing for homelessness services

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## Introduction

People experiencing homelessness and/or using homelessness provision may face additional barriers in accessing and engaging with services because of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). There is limited awareness of SLCN, or the prevalence amongst people experiencing homelessness and how they can impact engagement with services. This briefing explains more about SLCN, how they might be recognised and what homelessness services can do to increase engagement, and overcome barriers, for people with SLCN.

## What is meant by speech, language and communication needs (SLCN)?

The term SLCN is used by speech and language therapists (SLTs) to capture this range of abilities along with presenting needs. **Speech** refers to the ability to speak clearly and fluently, **language** is the ability to express oneself and understand others through appropriate words, sentences and stories and **communication** means social skills including relevancy, taking turns, gestures and seeing another's viewpoint.

SLCN can affect children, young people and adults of all ages and take many visible forms, including:

- problems understanding what others say;
- difficulties explaining their actions clearly;
- not having many words to express feelings; and
- difficulties with social communication; not knowing the right kind of way to join a conversation.

SLCN can include things like stammering and slurring and can even include things like difficulties swallowing. Individuals can have SLCN from a very young age, which continue throughout their lives, whilst others can have SLCN as a result of things that happen to them e.g. brain injuries or a stroke. The diagram below helps to explain this range of needs.



Figure 1 Created by Claire Westwood, Advanced Practitioner Speech & Language Therapist, Sandwell & West Birmingham Hospital NHS Trust

## Why is awareness of SLCN important for homelessness services?

### ✓ It can be key to enabling people to access support

Good speech, language and communication abilities enable people to develop emotional well-being and social relationships, manage their affairs and achieve in learning and work and access services that they might need. People who face challenges in their speech, language and communication can struggle with emotional and social relationships, to manage their affairs and to achieve and access services including health and social care, employment and benefits. They may face bias and discrimination because of the way they speak or behave or be labelled as difficult or uncooperative.

### ✓ SLCN are very common

The prevalence of people with SLCN in the general population is thought to be about 20%. However, the rates are much higher in certain settings or amongst specific groups. For example, almost 60% of young people who have committed an offence, and 80% of people in prison are believed to have SLCN. There is currently limited data on prevalence amongst people experiencing homelessness but there is a high likelihood that people experiencing homelessness, and rough sleepers in particular, will be over represented.<sup>1</sup>

### ✓ SLCNs are often undiagnosed

SLCN are hard to spot. They might be masked by other 'labels' or 'diagnoses', such as learning difficulties, literacy issues, dyslexia or ADHD. There can be strong links with these and other conditions or disabilities.

It is possible that SLCN may have also caused an individual to become homeless in the first place, or to have caused repeat and cyclical homelessness. Understanding SCLN is therefore important for both relieving an individual's homelessness, but also helping to prevent it.

## Identifying SLCN

Understanding SLCN is the first step to be able to spot when a person may have them. As they are often undiagnosed it should never be assumed that it will have been picked up previously. It is helpful to consider that someone's behaviour (what is seen) can be a manifestation of their SCLN (which are not seen).

Here are some possible signs that someone may have SLCN:

- Poor achievement at school.
- Difficulty coping at school (may have had exclusions).
- Attendance at any sort of special school.
- Difficulty managing processes such as housing and benefits.
- Not understanding court or probation processes.
- Avoidance of situations that require communication, such as attendance at support groups / self-help groups.
- Difficulty in providing information even when the other person present is clearly there to help.
- Needing to ask questions several times.
- Difficulty admitting to being unable to understand what they are told, perhaps leading to repeated breaking of rules or an inability to explain or talk about their experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> [The speech, language and communication needs of rough sleepers in London \(wiley.com\)](https://www.wiley.com)

## What organisations can do

There are many ways services can help overcome the barriers faced by people with SLCN accessing and engaging with support.

### Ban jargon and use plain, simple language

It seems obvious but jargon can create barriers and it is surprising how many phrases and acronyms we use without realising. Getting input from people with lived experience of homelessness, and experience of using your service, could really help here. Consider reviewing/evaluating your documents for their use of clear, plain English and potential for 'translation' into easy read formats.

### Adopt appropriate verbal strategies

Consider verbal strategies when communicating with someone who you suspect may have SLCN.

- Say the person's name at the start of an instruction.
- Make instructions short and simple.
- Pause between instructions so they have time to process information.
- Check understanding by getting them to summarise what they know.
- Avoid saying 'do you understand?' because it will be hard for someone to admit this. Following the four points above should mean you don't need to say this.

### Use visuals

Drawing and using visuals (simple flowcharts, timelines and pictures) can often be really helpful. It reduces the chances of people taking away different meanings. The person you are communicating with might also want to draw or respond using visuals too so always have pens and paper for them to use too. Here are some more benefits.

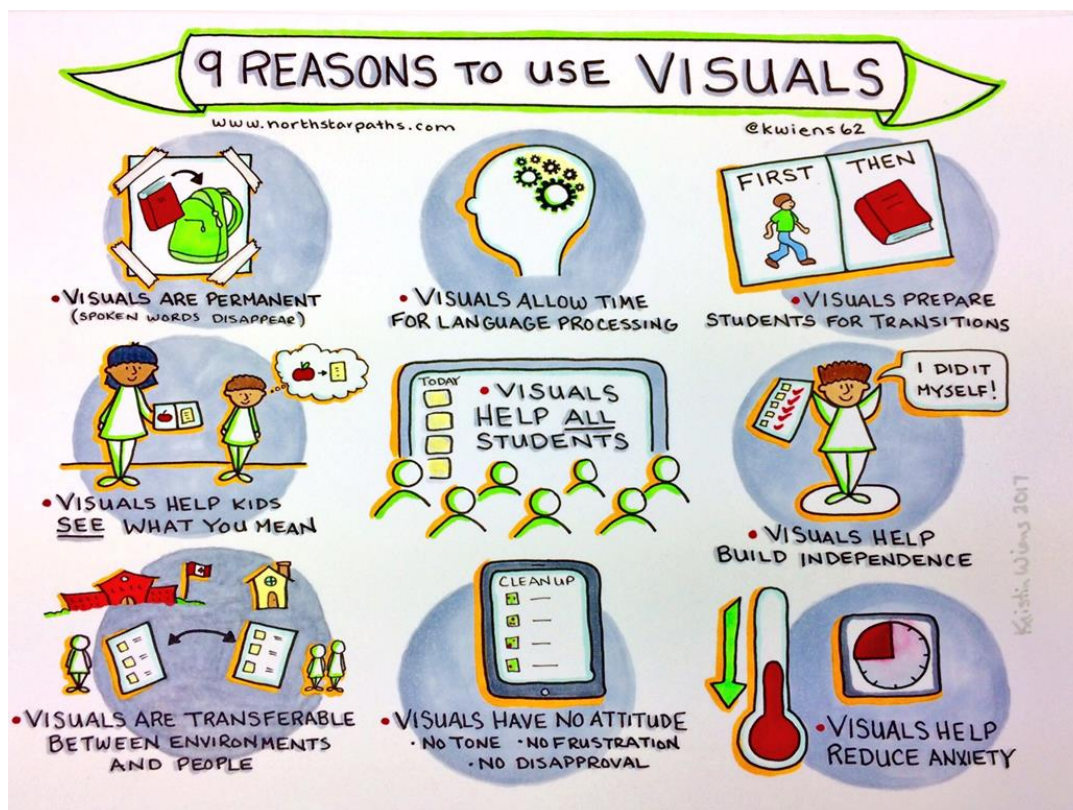


Figure 2 – Drawn by Kristin Wiens, North Star Paths

## Homeless Link

### Include staff training on SLCN

Consider training for front line staff on SLCN and encourage them to access resources and research. As well as this briefing, Homeless Link has guidance on Brain Injury<sup>2</sup> and also Autism<sup>3</sup> which may be helpful. Change Communication<sup>4</sup> provides support around SLCN to the homelessness sector, some of which may be free to access. More general resources on SLCN are available on the website of the Royal College of SLT's<sup>5</sup>. The homelessness sector may be able to learn lessons from SLT services operating within the youth justice field.

### Equality and Inclusion

Consider how you can overcome barriers to engagement with people with SLCN within the context of the Equalities Act 2010, The Human Rights Declaration Article 19 and your own organisation's equalities policies and procedures.

It is important that homelessness services consider whether the rights and responsibilities contained within important client/service user documents are understood by individuals that might have SLCN. The communication rights of people with disabilities, impairments or sensory difficulties accessing health and social care services are enshrined in law through the **Accessible Information Standard (2015)**.<sup>6</sup> The homelessness sector is not bound by this (it's a legal requirement for publicly funded health and social care) but increasing your understanding of the standard may help homelessness services ensure that people who are homeless with SLCN are provided with appropriate access to, and information from, health and social care services.

### Language and bias

It can be useful to recognise and acknowledge the existence of 'communication or language bias'. Slurring, stammering, pitch, tone and accents are all examples of the way language can be used to make incorrect or unfair judgements about people.

It is still common for people with regional or non-standard accents to be treated less favourably by people in positions of power and privilege or for people who speak in a non-standard way to be stereotyped as 'difficult' or 'slow' for example. These negative judgements, or bias toward more standard language, can often be unconscious but can lead to serious and damaging discriminatory behaviour. A 2019 study of school exclusions highlighted that Roma, Irish Traveller and Black Caribbean children were significantly over-represented in the number of school exclusions, found to be related to bias based on language.<sup>7</sup> There are further resources available for ways to explore and raise awareness of language discrimination which are included below.

## What other help may be available for people with SLCN?

It may be possible to access help and support from **speech and language therapists** (SLTs). Speech and language therapy provides treatment, support and care for children, young people and adults who have difficulties with communication, or with eating, drinking and swallowing to help them communicate better.

There are around 17,000 practicing SLT's in the UK working in a variety of settings. These are mostly within the NHS in places such as hospitals, schools, prisons and in young offender services. Some SLT's will specialise in supporting specific groups such as children, adults or people with specific conditions like autism, ADHD, brain injury or mental health needs.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.homeless.org.uk/brain-injury-and-homelessness>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/autism-homelessness>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.chgcomm.org/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.rcslt.org/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.england.nhs.uk/ourwork/accessibleinfo/>

<sup>7</sup> Timpson Review of School Exclusions 2019

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/807862/Timpson\\_review.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/807862/Timpson_review.pdf)

Where a person may need help and support with their SLCN, it is possible for them to seek this by speaking to their GP regarding a referral to an SLT, or by contacting their local NHS Speech and Language Therapy Service (for adults). It is useful to note that many GPs may lack awareness of SLCN and there will be limitations on what NHS help is available within each area. As a result of Covid-19 face to face SLT services may be further limited.

At present, there are limited links between SLT and homelessness services (only one organisation, Change Communication CIC, works specifically with homeless people in London). However, within the SLT professional community there is a clinical excellence network made up of SLT's with a special interest in homelessness.

Change Communication CIC (<https://www.chgcomm.org>) is a not for profit organisation that supports people and organisations to understand more about homelessness, health and communication. They provide information and training, carry out assessments, provide support and therapy for a wide range of communication difficulties. Homelessness services can contact them directly to explore closer working on SLCN. It may be possible for them to offer free training or they may be able to match organisations with local SLT's with a special interest in working with people who are homeless.

## Summary

In summary here are some golden rules for increasing engagement with people with SLCN:

1. Be wary of using jargonistic and overly professional language.
2. Tolerate silence – allow people time to process and respond.
3. Use drawings to communicate so always have a pen and paper to hand.
4. What is the person actually saying? Listen to the words used not how it is said.
5. Does anyone else communicate well with the person- learn from them?
6. Consider what may be triggering challenging behavior e.g. are there issues with communicating even when a person has not used substances?
7. Think about what else you could do as an organisation; training staff, building partnerships with specialist organisations and reviewing your policies, procedures and written documents.

## Useful links & further information

**Change Communication** <https://www.chgcomm.org/>

Not for profit organisation that supports people and organisations to understand more about homelessness, health and communication.

**Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists** <https://www.rcslt.org/>

Professional body for people working in, or studying speech and language therapy, in the UK. Online resources and factsheets to explain SLCN, what SLT's do and how to find one.

**The Accentism Project** [www.accentism.org](http://www.accentism.org)

Website project which provides the opportunity for people to share their own stories and experiences of language-based bias, prejudice, and discrimination. Information, resources and current research on topics around the issue of accentism.

**Accent Bias Britain** <https://accentbiasbritain.org/training-intervention/>

More information and resources about controlling language and accent bias through training.

**Research Report** [The speech, language and communication needs of rough sleepers in London \(wiley.com\)](#)

Study of the SLCN of people rough sleeping in London by Leigh Andrews and Nicola Botting. Published 2020.

**Homeless Link** [www.homeless.org](http://www.homeless.org)

Recording of webinar held in April 2021 '**Understanding the speech, language and communication needs of people who are experiencing homelessness**' <https://www.homeless.org.uk/understanding-speech-language-communication-needs-of-people-who-are-experiencing-homelessness>

Guidance for homelessness services on **Brain Injury and Homelessness**

<https://www.homeless.org.uk/brain-injury-and-homelessness>

Toolkit and guidance on **Autism and Homelessness**.

<https://www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/autism-homelessness>

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