Section 2 - General principles

This section contains general good practice principles on:

✔ Speech, language and communication needs (SLCN)
✔ Helping children to access the phonics screening check
✔ Interpreting children’s responses to the check
✔ Next steps… suggested approaches and strategies
✔ Whole school approaches and policies

Speech, language and communication needs

The term ‘speech, language and communication needs’ (SLCN) is used to describe a wide range of issues that make it difficult for children to communicate with others. This may be because they can’t say what they want to, they don’t understand the words that are being used or they don’t know how to have a conversation. It may be a combination of these problems or it may be that they don’t have enough words or they don’t talk as well as they should for their age. To find out more about ages and stages of communication development, please visit www.talkingpoint.org.uk

SLCN is the most common Special Educational Need (SEN) identified by primary schools (26.5%) and is a feature of many other areas of SEN, such as hearing impairment, learning difficulties and autistic spectrum difficulties. SLCN is also the most common childhood disability: 10% of all children have SLCN as a long term need. Evidence also shows that in areas of social deprivation 50% of children may enter school with delayed language.

SLCN affects educational outcomes including literacy, there is a direct link between SLCN and literacy. This is in terms of difficulties with speech sounds and phonological skills as well as broader language difficulties, particularly weaknesses in vocabulary knowledge and grammatical skills, which may put children at risk of reading comprehension difficulties. Such issues are discussed in detail in the I CAN Talk paper Speech, Language and Communication Needs and Literacy Difficulties.

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2 - www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000925/sfr09-2010.pdf
3 - Silva et al, 1987, Howlin and Rutter, 1987
4 - Snowling and Hulme, 2011
5 - I CAN, 2006
It’s important to consider if any children you’re working with will have difficulties in accessing the check due to SLCN, and to think about how their results are interpreted and then how their reading skills are further developed.

Where a child is known to have SLCN, it’s recommended to talk to a specialist such as a speech and language therapist who can give more information on the links between the individual’s SLCN and phonics.

More detailed information around particular types of SLCN is provided in section 4, but it’s important to remember:

✔ SLCN coexist and overlap, for example many children with specific language impairments will also have speech (phonological) delays or difficulties and auditory processing difficulties

✔ Each child with SLCN is unique, their profile of strengths and needs and the severity of their SLCN will vary, so not all the strategies given will be appropriate or necessary for every child

✔ Many children have SLCN which have not yet been identified, which may also impact on their ability to access the phonics text, as well as their wider literacy development and learning. It’s important to consider whether a child’s responses to the phonics check may actually be linked to an undetected SLCN

If you have concerns about a child’s communication development, we recommend that you get in touch with your local speech and language therapy department who will be able to give help and advice about the next steps you might want to take.  

Learning an additional language isn’t in itself a SLCN, therefore specific information about English as an additional language isn’t included in this guidance. However, some children who are learning more than one language may also have SLCN. This would be characterised by difficulties in their home language as well as how they learn English.

These children are at the same risk of difficulties with phonics. However, there’s an additional challenge in that it can be difficult to accurately identify. For more information please go to 

www.londonsigbilingualism.co.uk

So, many children who are taking the phonics check will have speech, language and communication needs which will impact on their responses to the check, as well as how they develop wider literacy skills.

There are some simple key principles on supporting children with SLCN to develop their literacy skills within appendix 1.

6 -To find your local speech and language therapy department please go to www.talkingpoint.org.uk/talkinglinks
Helping children to access the phonics screening check

Many children with SLCN will have difficulty in accessing the check. This could be because:

✔ They are not yet ready for the check, as their speech and language skills are not yet at a level where they can do the task
✔ They have difficulties understanding the instructions or what’s involved in the check
✔ They need extra time in order to process what’s said and what they need to say or do
✔ They lack the confidence in their own speaking and listening skills needed to do the check
✔ They may have a specific difficulty in using phonic routes, so they struggle to hear or recognise the differences between words and sounds
✔ They need specific, alternative approaches to access the check, for example additional visual or multisensory support
✔ Their speech isn’t clear which, can mean they can’t produce the target sounds or blend them correctly or consistently
✔ They may have particular difficulties with saying, or blending, non-words (pseudo words)

Schools have responsibilities to include all children in the phonics screen and need to make adaptations to achieve this where necessary. Whether the child takes the check or is ‘disapplied’, it’s important that their experience is not negative and that they don’t feel like ‘failures’ or increasingly ‘different’ to their peers. For some children, teachers understanding their particular difficulties and taking a slightly different approach can make all the difference.

Communicating Phonics
Section 2 > General principles
### Key principles for helping children with SLCN access the check

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The issue</th>
<th>The solution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Background noise can make careful listening and speech perception incredibly difficult for children with SLCN</td>
<td>Minimise background noise and visual distractions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasks focusing on an area of a child’s difficulty (i.e. phonics for a child with SLCN) can be extremely tiring and challenging</td>
<td>Deliver the check in short sections if necessary to avoid children getting tired and losing concentration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Some children will feel very anxious and lack confidence</td>
<td>Make the check situation as relaxed as possible to reduce anxiety and increase confidence, give reassurance and encouragement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Many children with SLCN will need more time to process information</td>
<td>Give extended time for children to process what they hear and to respond to it</td>
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<tr>
<td>Some children will struggle to understand instructions for the check</td>
<td>Give instructions in short, simple sentences using words and ideas you know the child understands. Accompany instructions with gestures or any sign or symbol system the child uses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some children will appear to ‘fail’ because they say the words incorrectly</td>
<td>Check whether the speech sounds the child ‘fails’ on during the check are sounds he or she has difficulty with in their spontaneous speech, for example, do they always say “tat” for “cat”?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Interpreting children’s responses to the check

The phonics check aims to see how effectively children are using their phonic skills to decode words.

The responses of some children with SLCN on the check may indeed show how effectively they are using their phonic skills in this way. However, responses may in fact be more of a reflection of their SLCN than their decoding or phonic skills.

As a general principle, it’s essential that a child’s SLCN are fully considered when interpreting their responses to the check. Details of how to interpret responses in relation to specific types of SLCN are included in section 4, but this table outlines some general possible interpretations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Possible interpretation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accurate response</td>
<td>Effective use of phonic skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>However, it would be important to see whether children are also skilled in reading comprehension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response or delayed response</td>
<td>Difficulties with phonic skills</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>And/or one or more of the following issues:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Difficulties understanding instructions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Limited confidence or anxiety</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• SLCN which prevent access to the check</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Not developmentally ready to respond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Difficulties processing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Speech difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inaccurate response</td>
<td>Difficulties with phonic skills</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>And/or one or more of the issues mentioned above</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Speech difficulties – children may have difficulties with their phonic skills alongside their speech needs; however some children will be able to decode effectively but their speech may make this difficult to evaluate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accurate response to real words</td>
<td>• Difficulties in producing nonsense words</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Difficulties understanding the concept of ‘made-up’ words</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Limited vocabulary making decisions about real or non-words difficult</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Some children, although they can decode effectively, will turn the non word into a real word as this would make more sense</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Next steps… suggested approaches and strategies

The results of the phonics check may identify children who are struggling to use phonic skills as part of learning to read. Some may just need more opportunities and practise to learn phonics, though others may need additional support. These children may need their foundation skills building further in order to develop phonics skills, or they may need alternative or complimentary approaches to phonics in order to support their ongoing literacy development. This may be particularly important for children who have, or who may have, SLCN.

Systematic phonics teaching is an important element of learning literacy and shouldn’t be discounted because a child has SEN. However, there are a number of different approaches to enabling access to phonics and to support the wider development of reading for children with SLCN, including:

- A hybrid approach – utilising whole word and phonics learning within a language rich environment
- Developing foundation speech, language and communication skills
- Developing phonological awareness skills as a foundation to phonics teaching
- Developing vocabulary knowledge

For those children who aren’t ready for phonics teaching, it’s important to revisit this approach when appropriate.

There is more detail on each of these approaches in Appendix 2.

Specific approaches for different types of SLCN are also identified within Section 4.

Whole school approaches and policies

There are many ways in which schools can support the speech, language and communication and literacy skills of children who have SLCN. This includes developing and implementing a whole school approach to communication and literacy and reflecting speech, language and communication effectively in literacy and SEN policies.

Additionally, when supporting the literacy development of children with SLCN it’s equally important to involve parents and work collaboratively with other professionals, such as speech and language therapists.

More information on these areas is included in Appendix 3.
Case Study

David has difficulties understanding and using language and this impacts on all aspects of curriculum access including literacy. His SLCN mean that he has problems with short-term memory; this results in him being unable to ‘hold’ sequences of sounds and remember instructions.

David also has difficulties hearing the difference between speech sounds (discriminating sounds). However, he has been able to acquire some phonic skills, using a range of additional strategies.

What helps David

The teaching staff helped David learn the ‘language’ of phonics, which was something that he was struggling with. They specifically taught him the concepts that he needed to know, for example first, last, next. It helped him to have these represented visually, so they made sure that he had some symbols that he could use to remind him what these words meant. Consequently he was able to concentrate on listening to the sounds rather than worry about what the words meant.

David's speech difficulties meant that he had some problems pronouncing the sounds accurately and struggled to blend sounds independently. He was helped by staff using a signing system that represented sounds when they spoke - ‘Cued Articulation’.

This system provides a visual representation of sounds of speech; each sound has a different sign that shows where and how in the mouth the sound is made. Seeing the sounds as well as hearing them, helped David to remember what he had heard and gave him longer to process the information.

David required a very systematic approach to learning phonics; the teaching staff needed to build in opportunities for over learning and revision and build on previous knowledge.

He was helped additionally by the use of multi-sensory approaches and hands on manipulation of sounds using resources such as phoneme frames and wooden letters. The physical movement of bricks and wooden letters helped him to process and read the target words.