

Speech therapy cuts will hit the most vulnerable

Cutting funding for speech therapy services in Edinburgh would hit the most vulnerable the hardest, the council has been warned ahead of the budget.

The body which represents the profession wrote to the council's education boss this week after documents showed speech and language therapy could lose £3.4 million over the next four years as part of a plan to plug a £76 million hole in the city's finances.

Glenn Carter, head of the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists in Scotland, said he was "deeply concerned" the authority was planning to pull "most" of its funding, warning it is "the wrong cut at the wrong time".

According to the council there is "significant overlap" between the treatments it funds in schools and the ones available on the NHS.

Education bosses said the balance of resources would be 'shifted to benefit the most vulnerable' if councillors approve the decision.

They said a reduction in the number of speech therapists may lengthen waiting lists for support.

In a letter to Amanda Hatton, director of Edinburgh's Education and Children's Services, Mr Carter said local authorities need to "urgently address the spoken language

crisis in Scotland, not make it worse”.

He said: “Teachers are reporting alarming numbers of children coming to school with minimal spoken language.

“Almost 90% of early years practitioners report that they have seen an increase in the numbers and complexity of children with communication needs in Scotland.”

Mr Carter said upwards of half of all children from “areas of poverty” go to school “without adequate spoken language skills for learning”.

The cut would mean the majority of speech and language therapy would be provided in NHS clinics with most school-based services axed.

“We know a very high percentages of children from areas of deprivation do not attend clinic appointments,” Mr Carter added. “Therefore, the most vulnerable children in Edinburgh would be disproportionately impacted.”

Listing the consequences of proceeding with the cutback, he said the decision will lead to poorer attainment for children, deepen poverty and inequality, lead to poorer well-being and mental health for children and “undermine the human rights of children with communication needs within education settings”.

Although the council’s spending plans will not be finalised until 23 February, when political groups will table their own proposals which could include retaining speech and language therapy funding, it is one of several suggested cash-saving measures set out in a report published last week.

The report said: “We propose a shift towards more focus on complex needs in the provision of the speech and language therapy additionally funded by The City of Edinburgh Council through a service level agreement with the NHS.

“The aim of the suggested change to the service delivery is to target the most vulnerable children in our society and ensure that they have every opportunity to improve their communication skills and continue to reduce any inequalities in line with the Local Authority’s Education statutory requirement.

“There is a need to be more effective and targeted in the referral process and the data reporting and monitoring needs to be interrogated more to identify actual / potential efficiency savings. This targets our limited budget to where the need is greatest.

“Children, young people and their families will continue to access support provided universally through the NHS clinics. Individual schools in areas of material deprivation, or upon evidence of a specific need, may continue to purchase speech and language therapy in addition to the support provided in NHS clinics.”

by Donald Turvill

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