The [Royal College of Occupational Therapists](https://www.rcot.co.uk/) (RCOT) is the professional body for occupational therapy representing over 33,500 occupational therapists across the UK. There are 1,299 RCOT members in Northern Ireland (RCOT, February 2020). Occupational therapists in Northern Ireland work in trusts, across health and social care services. They deliver services across housing, schools, prisons, the voluntary and independent sectors, and vocational and employment rehabilitation services.

Occupational therapists work with people of all ages who are experiencing difficulties through injury, illness or disability or a major life change. Occupational therapists consider the relationship between what a **person** does every day (**occupations**), how illness or disability impacts upon the person and how a person’s **environment** supports or hinders their activity (PEO Model). Using this approach, we help people to continue or re-engage with participating fully in daily life, including work, social activities and maintaining roles and responsibilities.

Thank you for the invitation to respond to the consultation on specific aspects of the draft SEN Code of Practice. Further information on any aspect of this response can be gained by contacting the College.

**Executive Summary**

This response outlines the vital role of occupational therapists who work with partners in education to enable children with special educational needs and disabilities to achieve their personal and academic potential.

Key points to note from this submission include:

* RCOT welcomes the move to strengthen cooperation between education and health in the identification and assessment of children who have, or may have special educational needs.
* RCOT recommends that allied health professionals are identified as ‘external agencies’ that have a relevant contribution to make at all stages of the Code.
* Occupational therapy goals should be incorporated into Personal Learning Plans where appropriate for an individual.
* As a profession that works across the lifespan, occupational therapists have the skills and expertise to support young people as they make the transition from childhood to adulthood
* Occupational therapists take a holistic, person-centred approach, ensuring that the views of children and families guide the assessment and intervention process.

Occupational therapists support children and young people with special educational needs to lead full and happy lives by enabling them to participate in activities (occupations) that are important to them; to realise their potential by developing skills and resilience to access education and carry out activities of daily living; and participate as valued members of society regardless of physical, learning and mental health needs.

RCOT welcomes the SEN Code as a coordinated approach to identifying, assessing and supporting young people who have, or who may have special educational needs. This is an important tool to strengthen cooperation between health and education and to support young people at an important life stage as they make the transition towards adulthood.

**Do you agree that the responsibilities of the Learning Support Coordinator are clearly set out in the SEN Code?**

RCOT agrees with recommendations for a graduated response to the identification, assessment and support of children who have, or may have special educational needs, overseen by the Learning Support Coordinator (LSC). RCOT believes that all LSCs will require release time from teaching and administrative support to fulfil their role, including liaising with health professionals such as occupational therapists.

RCOT recommends that allied health professionals are identified as one of the ‘other external agencies’ with whom the LSC should liaise in section 2.49 part k of the Code. This section could also be expanded so that the role of the LSC is not just to liaise with other agencies, but also to support the implementation of their advice/recommendations into the classroom/school/curriculum.

**Where there is a concern that a child may have SEN, or is at Stage 1, 2 or 3, do you agree that the process to be followed by schools is clear in the SEN Code?**

The revised stages described in the SEN Code are clear, but opportunities for collaboration between health (specifically allied health professionals) and education could be more explicit. The involvement of parents/carers/young people and the requirement to produce a Personal Learning Plan (PLP) for children at every stage are welcome. The PLP will provide evidence to support children moving from one stage to another, based on their progress and the interventions they have received.

Allied Health Professionals, including occupational therapists have a role to play at each of the three stages, not just at Stage 3. RCOT recommends that allied health professionals are specifically mentioned as an example of ‘other external agencies’ within the Code.

At Stage 1, occupational therapists provide training, mentoring and information to parents/carers and the children’s workforce, enabling them to realise children’s potential by:

* Embedding opportunities to develop fundamental sensory-motor skills and resilience into children’s daily routines and activities.
* Identifying children who will benefit from early intervention
* Supporting the implementation of home or school-based interventions to optimise children’s development and prevent the attainment gap from growing.

RCOT recognises the importance of early identification and timely intervention to have maximum impact on children’s health, development and well-being.

At Stage 2, occupational therapists work in partnership with the LSC, teaching staff and others to deliver a range of targeted interventions, for example:

* Groups (e.g. motor skills groups)
* Workshops for young people, families, teachers and others (e.g. sensory skills workshops); and
* Adaptation of activities/materials/environments to enable young people to participate in the whole school curriculum and achieve their potential.

Occupational therapists contribute to the multidisciplinary assessment of children whose progress needs cannot be met through Stage 1 and 2 provision. It is essential that referrals for specialist assessment by an occupational therapist are made in a timely manner to meet statutory timescales.

At Stage 3, occupational therapists work with individuals whose complex needs or circumstances mean they need direct, specialist intervention to ensure their progress, participation and engagement at school. Occupational therapists work collaboratively with young people, families and others, adopting a strengths-based approach that fosters self-management, self-regulation and independence. They have particular skills and expertise to recommend specialist equipment to enable children with special needs and disabilities to access learning opportunities and the wider school curriculum.

**Do you agree with the proposed content of the Personal Learning Plan?**

Occupational therapy skills and knowledge can inform the content of a PLP at all stages, for example:

* reference to occupational therapy information/training relevant to a child’s needs at Stage 1
* access to occupational therapy group interventions/workshops at Stage 2
* adaptation of materials/activities/environments at Stage 2
* provision of specialist seating and direct intervention to develop self-regulation skills at Stage 3

The PLP should, where appropriate include goals from occupational therapists and other health professionals, especially for children who attend a special school. This is particularly important for children who require specialised seating/equipment to access the curriculum.

**Do you agree that the school process for the completion of the first transition plan (when a child with a Statement reaches the age of 14) is clear?**

RCOT members agree that the school process for completing the first transition plan is detailed and easy to follow. Occupational therapists work across the life-span and have the skills/expertise to identify interventions/adaptations to support immediate and longer term needs of young people who are known to their services.

Early involvement of occupational therapists in transition planning is particularly important for young people with physical disabilities as arrangements for adaptations to the physical environment can take a while to arrange.

As a profession that takes a holistic, person-centred approach, RCOT welcomes plans to ensure that the views of children and families are central to the transition planning process.

RCOT members have requested greater clarity regarding the process by which education would ask occupational therapists to contribute to an assessment of needs for transition planning, especially for young people attending a mainstream school. The information required as part of this assessment may be greater than that normally provided for an annual review and there may be resource implications for providing it. Members suggest the development of protocols for communicating this request to occupational therapy teams, and a template for providing information in a timely and standardised way.

**Contact**

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