

Kelly Tolhurst MP
Minister for Schools and Childhood
Department for Education
20 Great Smith St, London SW1P 3BT



06 October 2022

Dear Minister,

On behalf of the Royal College of Occupational Therapists (RCOT) I would like to take the opportunity to welcome you to your new role. I look forward to working closely with you and your officials as we enter what will undoubtedly be a challenging period for children and families across the UK. Our dedicated and skilled workforce can go a long way to resolving many of the difficulties facing children's services in England.

Occupational therapists meet children and young people in variety of settings from the NHS, social care, independent practice, child, and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), acute services, schools and third sector. Our role is to help children and young people manage the everyday activities that keep them busy (or 'occupy' them) during the day - from eating lunch, writing a story, riding a bike, using a bus. These are activities that most people take for granted but which are often difficult for disabled children and those with special educational needs.

Given the vital role that occupational therapists play in supporting children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, RCOT carried out a survey of our members in July this year. The purpose was to understand factors affecting children's access to occupational therapy and to assess the impact that COVID-19 has had on our services across the country.

We spoke to nearly 350 occupational therapists and found unmistakable evidence of a rising demand and not enough staff to meet this need. 85% of occupational therapists said demand for their services had increased since July 2021 with 65% saying children are presenting with more complex physical, learning, and mental health needs.

COVID-19 has clearly had a profound impact on children and young people, with 58% of services reporting an increase in referrals for children whose development, performance or wellbeing has been affected by school disruption. Most of these services have been unable to access COVID-19 recovery funding.

What we are seeing right across the UK is an unsustainable equation. There is rising demand for occupational therapy, an increase in the complexity of children's needs - often with pandemic-related anxiety - and not nearly enough staff to help them due to a workforce crisis. The outcome of this is that occupational therapists cannot provide children and young people with the support they desperately need and deserve.

Our key recommendations are that:

- Children's occupational therapy services must be resourced to meet the needs of their local community and to support children and young people with increasingly

complex needs.

- Every school should have access to a children's occupational therapist to address children's needs early.
- Equipment and adaptation services require investment and should be streamlined to minimise delays in provision.
- Occupational therapists should be included in school mental health teams to prevent difficulties escalating and employed in roles enabling them to support children's physical and mental health.
- Strong occupational therapy leadership is required to ensure our skills and workforce are used effectively.

We recognise there will be many pressing issues in your new ministerial inbox, however recent statements from senior leaders in the Government about the importance of children's services highlights that urgent action is needed.

We are keen to meet with you to discuss our findings in further detail and outline how we think occupational therapists can help. Our Policy and Public Affairs Manager, Benjamin Powick, in our team would be happy to coordinate with your office to find a suitable time and date to meet.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steve Ford". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style. Below the signature is a short, horizontal black line.

Steve Ford
Chief Executive of the Royal College of Occupational Therapists