

## **Introduction**

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This fact sheet contains information on childhood deafness; the progress recently made in Scotland for deaf children and young people; and the National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) key asks for political parties and candidates in the run up to the 2016 Scottish Parliament Elections.

NDCS Scotland invites candidates to meet and be fully briefed on national and constituency matters in the new term. NDCS Scotland can also help new MSPs to meet deaf children and their families in their local constituency.

## **What is deafness?**

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NDCS uses the term 'deaf' to mean anyone with a permanent or temporary hearing loss. This could be mild, moderate, severe or profound hearing loss. Every deaf child is different. Deaf children communicate in a variety of ways, including using speech, British Sign Language or a combination.

Deafness can be inherited or caused by childhood illness or other factors such as accidents. Half of deaf children are born deaf and the other half become deaf during childhood. Many children experience temporary hearing loss as a result of conditions such as glue ear.

Over 90% of deaf children are from hearing families with no first-hand experience of deafness.

## **A landmark year for deaf children**

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2015 was a landmark year for deaf children, young people and their families in Scotland:

- The year began with Scotland's first ever Deaf Learners Conference which brought over 70 deaf young people together in Glasgow to discuss their education experiences.
- Their views were reflected in the Education and Culture Committee's Inquiry into the attainment of pupil's with a sensory impairment which began in the Spring;
- The landmark passage of the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act (2015) in October marked a historic turning point in empowering the deaf community in Scotland.

The new term of the Scottish Parliament marks an opportunity to build on this progress and help every deaf child realise their rights.

## **Key facts about deaf children**

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- There are as many as 3850 deaf children in Scotland;
- 90% of deaf children have hearing parents with no previous knowledge of deafness;

- Deafness is not a learning disability, but deaf learners consistently do worse than their hearing peers at school;
- Deaf children have poorer life chances: fewer go on to university and less than half of deaf adults have a job;
- Teachers of the Deaf are a lifeline for many deaf children but these services are being squeezed and half are due to retire within the next 10 to 15 years.

## **Key issues for deaf children and their families**

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### **1. Early years**

- 1.1. The early years are a critical time in the cognitive and social development of every child. Deaf children experience unique barriers at this time given that 90% have hearing parents who may struggle to communicate with them.
- 1.2. The introduction of newborn hearing screening in Scotland ten years ago has allowed hearing losses to be identified much earlier than before. However there is no national guidance about the kind of supports that should be made available to a child and their family following diagnosis. As such there is much disparity in early years support across Scotland.
- 1.3. **If elected, we ask that candidates support our recommendation that national guidance is established to inform standards of provision following the diagnosis of deafness at newborn hearing screening.**
- 1.4. Getting it Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) in the early years is key to supporting their ongoing development, wellbeing and attainment. For deaf children, developing language in the early years is critical. Deafness impacts on a child's entire language system and research shows that every category of deafness, including mild hearing losses, has a negative effect on the attainment of English grades. Evidence also shows that early access to a visual language can promote better language outcomes among deaf children.
- 1.5. **If elected, we ask that candidates support our recommendation that the provision of Family Sign Language courses are made available to parents and carers of deaf children. NDCS offer our support in helping to deliver on this. We would welcome the opportunity to share learning from the delivery of our externally funded early years project Your Child Your Choices which delivers Family Sign Language classes in a number of locations across Scotland.**

### **2. Education**

- 2.1. Closing the attainment gap is rightly a key priority for the Scottish Government. The initiatives that are driving this forward also offer opportunities to achieve the shared aspiration of inclusive education for every learner, including those with additional support needs.
- 2.2. Deafness is not a learning disability and with the right support, deaf young people can achieve as much as their hearing peers of similar ability. However NDCS continues to be concerned about the persisting education attainment gap facing

deaf young people and in 2014 NDCS Scotland published the [Close the Gap](#) report highlighting this.

- 2.3. The latest [Scottish Government attainment data](#) shows there is still a persisting gap for this group when compared to those with no ASN. There has also been a reduction in the number of deaf pupils obtaining Highers and Advanced Highers which is of concern. For example, the latest data shows 33.3% of deaf pupils obtaining a higher qualification compared with 64.8% of pupils with no Additional Support Need and 58% for all pupils.
- 2.4. **If elected, we ask that candidates support our recommendation that the National Improvement Framework should be inclusive of every learner, including those with additional support needs. The framework is an ideal opportunity to embed the principles of inclusive communication and ensure accessibility is built in from the very beginning.**

### 3. Acoustics

- 3.1. Part of the Scottish Government's GIRFEC agenda is about breaking down barriers to inclusion and the promotion of inclusive education environments. Good acoustic environments support the learning of all children, not just those who are deaf.
- 3.2. Research has found that poor classroom acoustics negatively affects numeracy skills, literacy skills, attention and memory among pupils. For deaf children, this is particularly important given the limited nature of hearing technologies to provide a child with access to sound beyond three metres even in good listening conditions.
- 3.3. Making the appropriate adjustments at the earliest stage of a school build is critical to ensure acoustic environments and prevent more costly and disruptive adaptations from being required later on. Current guidance in Scotland makes reference to the Buildings Bulletin 93, which is recognised as the most comprehensive single source of guidance on acoustics. However unlike other parts of the UK, the Bulletin does not have statutory status in Scotland and acoustics practice varies locally.
- 3.4. **If elected, we ask that candidates support our recommendation that Buildings Bulletin 93 be put on a statutory footing in Scotland, following best practice in other parts of the UK.**

### 4. Mental health

- 4.1. GIRFEC means ensuring every child and young person has the supports they need to flourish physically and mentally. Ensuring the services that support young people are equipped to address their unique needs is critical.
- 4.2. Deafness itself does not cause mental health problems however the communication barriers and language delays that deaf children and young people may experience increases how likely they are to be affected by mental ill health. According to NHS statistics, 40% of deaf children and young people will

experience mental ill health compared with 25% of hearing children (NHS, 2004). In addition, at our recent Deaf Learners Conference, bullying and social isolation was identified by deaf young people as one of their top challenges.

- 4.3. There is currently no specialist mental health service for deaf children in Scotland, despite such services being available and well established in other parts of the UK. A specialist Deaf Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (Deaf CAMHS) could provide invaluable outreach initiatives and direct clinical support to deaf children. This service would also complement the work of the deaf adult mental health service which was set up in Scotland in 2011.
- 4.4. **If elected, we ask that candidates support our recommendation that a new Deaf CAMHS is established for deaf children and young people, building on the expertise that exists in NHS Lothian from delivery of the deaf adult service.**

## 5. Social security / welfare

- 5.1. Creating a fairer Scotland through person-centred social security is a key aspiration for the Scottish Government as part of welfare reform. Social security benefits such as Disabled Living Allowance (DLA) and Personal Independence Payments (PIP) are vital for families of deaf children.
- 5.2. The challenges with PIP have been well documented and include inaccessible application processes and inconsistent and unfair assessments. For example, NDCS is aware of deaf people who have been told they have to use the phone to make an application, highlighting a lack of deaf awareness in the current system.
- 5.3. **If elected, we ask that candidates ensure these issues are addressed in any new system of social security for disabled people. A new system should adhere to a person-centred, human rights based approach that ensures information is accessible and that advocacy and flexibility are core.**

## 6. Protecting local services

- 6.1. NDCS is aware that, due to significant reduction in local budgets, a number of local authorities across Scotland are making cuts to support services for deaf children, including cuts to school budgets and staff working with deaf children.
- 6.2. NDCS urges any elected candidates to protect local service budgets for deaf children by acting to ensure local authorities retain funding for services which support the needs of deaf children and young people.

## About NDCS

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NDCS is the leading charity in Scotland dedicated to creating a world without barriers for deaf children and young people. In Scotland, we have a dedicated team based in Glasgow led by Heather Gray, Director.

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