

Market review of British Sign Language and communications provision for people who are deaf or who have hearing loss

National Deaf Children's Society response to DWP call for evidence

Summary

The National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) is the leading charity dedicated to creating a world without barriers for every deaf child and young people. We work with and support deaf young people until they reach independence.

We welcome this call for evidence and hope that it leads to tangible action to improve the availability and provision of high-quality communication support that meets the diverse needs of deaf children and young people.

1. What is the size and value of the demand for the different types of communication and language support in the UK?

Size of population

NDCS is a member of the Consortium for Research into Deaf Education (CRIDE) which carries out an annual survey of local authority education services for deaf children. To our knowledge, this is the best source of demographic data on deaf children and the professionals who support them currently available in the UK.

Some of the key findings from the 2015 UK-wide summary report, include:

- There are at least 48,932 deaf children aged 0 to 19 across the UK. This is a reported increase of 2% between 2014 and 2015 and of 18% between 2011 and 2015. It is difficult to be certain about the extent to which this increase is due to changes in demography or accuracy in reporting by local authorities. There is a very good chance that the number of deaf children is increasing across the UK.
- The majority of deaf children have a mild (28%) or moderate (31%) hearing loss compared to severe (10%) or profound (12%). 19% have a unilateral (one-sided hearing loss).
- 7% of deaf children have a cochlear implant. The reported absolute number has increased from 2,689 in 2011 to 3,515 in 2015 (a 30% increase).
- The CRIDE report for 2015 shows that 2% of deaf children use British Sign Language in education. 8% use Spoken English together with signed support. 87% use spoken English or Welsh. The CRIDE data does not enable us to establish if the same proportion of children use these languages in their home setting or if these are their preferred languages. It is difficult to be certain whether the relatively low number of sign language users in education settings reflects parental wishes or a lack of choice for specific communication approaches in different education settings.
- Within Wales, 13% of deaf children communicate mainly in Welsh in education.

More detailed demographic information (including information on geographical variations) is available in the full reports which can be downloaded from www.ndcs.org.uk/CRIDE. We recommend that DWP read and consider the reports in full as we would regard this a key source of data for the review.

It is apparent from the CRIDE reports that one area where some services have less information is around deaf young people over the age of 16. Figures from the Office of National Statistics suggest that 15% of all children and young people aged 0 to 19 are aged 16 or above. However,

only 8% of children identified by CRIDE in England fall into this age group. We believe that this underreporting is because, in many areas, education services no longer provide support to deaf children once they leave school. This means that it is likely that we do not have a good enough understanding of the numbers of deaf young people in further or higher education or undergoing apprenticeships or training or of their communication needs – we encourage DWP to look into the needs of this age group in more detail, particularly in light of wider government changes around how young people are supported into work.

Unfortunately, data from the Department for Education (through the School Census) on deaf children and young people does not include all deaf children and young people. Only children and young people who have been formally identified as having a special educational need are included. The School Census identified 23,945 deaf children in England, which amounts to 58% of the number identified by CRIDE. The Department for Education has recently confirmed to NDCS that it has no plans to improve its data collection which means that official government statistics on this age group will continue to be patchy. We encourage the Department for Work and Pensions to raise this issue with the Department for Education.

Different types of communication support that deaf children and young people and their families will use

Most deaf children use a spoken language. However, as no hearing technology has the potential to replace any hearing loss, many of these deaf children will require some form of ‘visual’ support in order to access the spoken language. This visual communication support can be provided in a range of ways:

- Lipreading or speechreading
- Signed supported English – using signs to supplement the spoken language, but whilst following the structure of the English language
- Cued Speech – which provides visual representation of the sounds in each word
- Written support – i.e. provided through a notetaker, palantypist, speech to text support, etc.

NDCS believes that the above should be seen as a spectrum. Children and young people may move flexibly on this spectrum, depending on the situation and as their preferences change, as they get older. In other words, there will rarely be one single approach that deaf children and young people will use all the time.

A large number of children use British Sign Language, which is a separate language in its own right. These children will largely mostly require support from someone with advanced skills in sign language. In our response to question 3, we explain what this might require.

Some children may be bilingual and move between a spoken language and British Sign Language. As above, there will rarely be one single approach that deaf children and young people will use all the time and preferences may change as children get older or depending on the situation. This is why it’s important that there be a wide range of communication support available to deaf children and young people, so that the varying needs can be met at any one time.

It’s important to remember as well that many hearing families of deaf children will also need support to learn specific communication skills – specifically, to be able to support their child’s spoken language with visual information (such as through Cued Speech or signed supported English) or to learn British Sign Language. This kind of support must be available to families as soon after diagnosis as possible as the vast majority of a child’s language skills are acquired in the first four years of life. It is also important that, when families learn sign language, they are able to learn signs that are appropriate to their circumstances – i.e. knowing how to sign children’s stories will be more useful than knowing how to order a meal or give directions. This is why NDCS has

developed a 'Family Sign Language' curriculum, on which we provide ongoing training to professionals.

Mild hearing loss

NDCS considers there to be a large amount of 'unmet' demand. For example, research into the experiences of children with mild and moderate hearing loss found that:

- The terms "mild" and "moderate" used to describe the hearing loss do not describe the impact described by parents and professionals at home and school.
- Children and young people with mild/moderate hearing losses in school have to use greater levels of effort than generally realised.
- While hearing technologies are very effective in this group, they may appear not to need them, and appear to "hear" without them. This can lead to confusion for them and their parents and teachers and possible non-use in later years.

Children with mild/moderate hearing loss often fall below the eligibility criteria for support from education services.

Many children and young people will not require communication support. However, it is clear from the research that, for many, their communication or language needs are not always being met and hence, there may be some unmet demand for further support in this area. This may be through better, more consistent use of hearing technologies but it may also suggest a need for more support from speech to text reporters or palantypists or other spoken language support systems such as Cued Speech.

Area where provision is required

The call for evidence asked where provision **must** be provided. NDCS would argue that communication support must be provided as needed within education and especially in the early years before school when all children develop their language skills. A failure to do so would arguably be unlawful under the Equality Act 2010 and under laws governing how children with special educational needs or additional learning needs must be supported.

NDCS would also consider that communication support must be provided where social care support is required in order to promote deaf children's full participation in whatever service is being provided, whether that be support to access community facilities or to participate in child protection meetings.

2. How might this demand change in the future?

In one sense, this is a difficult question to answer as the extent to which demand will change will depend on the steps taken to raise awareness of the different communication support options. Many young people and families are unaware of the wider communication options available to them and so do not always get the communication support that best meets their needs and which enables them to achieve good outcomes.

As awareness of different communication options increases, there is likely to be more demand for that provision. For example, we believe there is relatively low awareness of speech to text reporters/palantypists and that this is an area where there is currently a lot of 'unknown' and unmet demand – for example, from young people with a mild hearing loss at university or college who want to be able to follow lectures or discussions in real time. Research by the Ear Foundation and Phonak (due to be published later this year) has found that 52% of deaf young people aged 18 to 25 surveyed did not believe that they had sufficient information about communication support

options available to them. Many stated that it was hard to access this information. 84% said there was no-one they could think to turn to for information about communication support in work. Organisations like the Ear Foundation and NDCS will be working to address these gaps in coming years. Indeed, NDCS has been funded by the Department for Education to explore how deaf young people can be supported in entering the workforce.

Separately, we also believe that government initiatives and the raising of the participation age are likely to lead to an increase in the number of young people aged 16 to 25 who require communication support. These might include:

- The expansion of apprenticeships
- Introduction of new 'boot camps' for young people who are not in education, employment or training.

3. What is the number of communication and language professionals nationally and the type and level of skills that are on offer?

Number of communication and language professionals

The CRIDE survey asks about numbers of specialist staff (other than Teachers of the Deaf). Numbers are usually expressed as 'full-time equivalent' (i.e. someone working part-time would be recorded as 0.5 FTE). In 2015, CRIDE found that there are 424.42 communication support workers across the UK. The majority are from England. Education authority regions in Northern Ireland did not report having any CSWs and Wales only reported having 7.2 CSWs.

Separately, CRIDE indicates that there are 103.33 deaf instructors/deaf role models/sign language instructors.

If, as CRIDE reports, there are 789 children who communicate only in British Sign Language and an additional 3,003 who use English/sign language combined, the figures on CSWs and other specialist staff imply a considerable amount of unmet demand.

Communication support workers

It should be noted that, in an education context, 'communication support worker' has a specific meaning of an education professional tasked with providing flexible support to a child or young person who needs support to access the curriculum. This support could be provided in a range of ways including signing, lipspeaking, notetaking, etc. depending on the individual needs of the deaf child. In effect, NDCS would regard a communication support worker as a type of specialist teaching assistant.

Where children need sign language support to access the curriculum, we believe it should be provided by someone with **at least** a level 3 qualification in British Sign Language. Depending on the individual needs of the child, a higher qualification will also be needed. Level 2 is roughly equivalent to a GCSE – asking a communication support worker with a level 2 qualification to support a deaf children would be akin to expect a student with a GCSE in French to support a French speaker.

In our experience, relatively few communication support workers hold a level 3 qualification. This is supported by findings from a survey carried out in 2010 by the Deaf Education Support Forum¹ which found that less than half of all communication support workers held a Level 3 or higher qualification.

¹ www.acsw.org.uk/PDFs/DESF%20Survey%202010.pdf

In education, communication support workers are **not** sign language interpreters. This is because communication support workers do more than just interpret what the teacher is saying – they provide additional support to access the curriculum.

Given that communication support workers act as a type of specialist teaching assistant, NDCS also believes that there is a need for a further qualification to provide assurance that communication support workers are also able to take notes to a high standard, provide general language support and able to support the pupil appropriately (i.e. by ensuring they don't act as a barrier themselves to the pupil's inclusion in the wider classroom). We understand that a qualification is in development.

For the past three years, NDCS has been provided with funding by the Department for Education to issue grants to communication support workers wishing to improve their sign language skills. In 2015/16, 37 grants were issued. In each year, the grant has been oversubscribed. It is not possible to reliably estimate what unmet demand there was, as publicity ceased after the grant became depleted – however, we believe it is considerable.

One of the conditions of the grant was that funding be 'matched' – i.e. we only met 50% of the costs. It was our expectation that local authorities or schools would meet this additional cost. However, a large proportion in 2015/16 (59%) funded the other 50% themselves at their own cost. We believe that this indicates a widespread lack of funding from schools and local authorities for staff to learn sign language. We believe this is partly because of restricted training budgets but also because there is no specific requirement for communication support workers to hold any particular qualification.

Over the long-term, NDCS would like to see government standards or expectations in place on the role of communication support workers in education. The National Sensory Impairment Partnership (NatSIP_ have already carried out a feasibility study² into national occupational standards for communication support workers in education. Given that deafness is a low incidence need, standards will be needed because many local authorities will not always have a good understanding of the specialist needs of deaf children in this area.

Family sign language

In 2011, we carried out a telephone survey of local authorities to investigate the level of provision of sign language support for families with deaf children. 80 councils – picked at random - were contacted. 10 councils did not return any of our requests for information.

- Of the 70 that responded, 39 (56%) councils did not provide any services or support for parents of deaf children wanting to learn sign language.
- 31 (44%) stated that they made some form of provision of support or services for families wanting to learn sign language. However, the level of support varied considerably between councils and it is clear that not all families can rely on ready access to family-friendly sign language classes. The variations include (with some councils offering more than one option):
 - 24 (34%) councils provided support within the home. This support varied between being taught very basic signs to having 6 week sessions. Many councils confirmed that families have to request this service.
 - 14 (20%) councils provide classes for parents. These vary from baby signing, toddlers and under 10s, and are held weekly, fortnightly or monthly.
 - 5 (7%) councils provide support through specialist resource bases for deaf children within mainstream schools.

² <https://www.natsip.org.uk/index.php/bsl-coalition/664-standards-for-csws-feasibility-study>

- 4 (6%) councils fund the cost of British Sign Language level 1 free of charge to parents. However, in one council, parents would need to pay for the assessment.

The CRIDE survey for England in 2014 asked what provision was available in each area to support the development of British Sign Language in deaf children. The following table indicates sizeable gaps in each area – for example, over half of local authorities do not provide designated sign language lessons for families or deaf children.

Provision	Number of services	Percentage of services providing this provision
Access to deaf role models	88	66%
Direct one to one tuition	67	50%
Designated BSL lessons	65	49%
After school clubs	46	35%
Home School communication Projects	24	18%
Direct payment support workers	9	7%
Other	72	54%

Speech to text reporters

We've seen earlier that most deaf children use spoken English. This suggests that many will prefer to use speech to text reporters as their main form of communication support. NDCS understands the total number of registered speech to text reporters is very low – standing at 34 in 2013/14³. As set out elsewhere in this response, we consider this to be an area where there is low awareness of this as a communication support option and hence, relatively low demand for it.

We recommend that DWP specifically look into how the number of speech to text reporters can be increased. This may involve looking into whether the recruitment and training of these reporters can be done in a more co-ordinated and efficient way.

4. How this support might change in the future?

NDCS is concerned that cuts to local authority education budgets may result in reduced investment in specialist staff to support the communication needs of deaf young people. We believe that, as deafness is a low incidence need, funding for communication support should be centrally funded, to ensure value for money. Reductions in local authority budgets therefore have the potential to be extremely damaging.

Separately, in England, the Children and Families Act 2014 introduced a new framework for supporting children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities which applies to children and young people aged 0 to 25. This means that many young people aged 16 who would have been outside of the framework now have stronger rights to education support. Similar reforms are underway in Wales and Northern Ireland.

5. What are the types of technology currently available that facilitate communication and the future developments in the pipeline?

Types of communication that employ technology and new developments

Many deaf young people make use of radio aids which support communication by amplifying the sound of any speaker holding the microphone. Technology continues to improve with radio aids becoming increasingly powerful, discrete and available to use in a range of different scenarios.

³ http://www.nrccd.org.uk/documents/published_information/nrccd_annual_report_2013-14_final

Over the past few years, we have noticed a key trend to the use of 'remote' speech to text support or sign language support where the support is provided by someone who is not physically present and who instead is 'listening' in remotely and providing the support via a dedicated private webpage. The use of tablets and widely available Wi-Fi make it easier to book and arrange remote communication support in different locations. We understand that Cued Speech and speech and language therapy may also increasingly be available remotely also.

The introduction of Next Generation Text Service (NGTS) and the option to use this on tablets and smartphones has the potential to support communication. This technology enables deaf young people to make phone calls where a 3rd party operator listens in and types up verbatim what the other is saying. However, in our experience, NGTR is extremely slow and is unlikely to be popular with deaf young people who may find the interruptions of a 3rd party speaker to be impersonal, unprofessional and cumbersome. Unless significant improvements are made to this service, including to the speed in which text is transcribed and the user experience, it is unlikely to be more widely used. NDCS recommends that DWP engage with Ofcom and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to identify where improvements can be made to this service.

Areas where use of technology is not appropriate

It should be remembered that no hearing technology - including cochlear implants and radio aids - cure deafness. For the majority of deaf young people, there will remain a need for communication support.

Remote support is only effective where there is reliable Wi-Fi and where the user has a device with a high quality microphone that can pick up speech around it. It will not always be appropriate to rely on this type of support being provided remotely, and on-site support may be needed.

For some situations, for example where a child needs one-to-one support or in outdoor activities, communication support must continue to be available face to face.

6. How might an increasing uptake of both current technology and new developments affect the market for communication and language services in the future?

As set out earlier, we believe there is considerable unmet demand for some forms of communication support, particularly among deaf young people. Many young people and families are unaware of the wider communication options available to them and there is a need to raise awareness of this so that children get the communication support that best meets their needs and so they can achieve good outcomes. Greater awareness of the different options available to them and wider availability of remote support is likely to lead, in our view, to increased demand. We believe that government action will be needed to improve awareness and respond to this increase in demand.

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