



Response to

**Proposed Framework of Future
Provision for Children in the Early Years
with Special Educational Needs**

May 2018

Introduction:

The National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) is the national charity dedicated to creating a world without barriers for deaf children and young people. We represent the interests and campaign for the rights of all deaf children and young people from birth until they reach independence. NDCS supports the deaf child through the family as well as directly supporting deaf children and young people. We estimate that there are approximately 1,500 deaf children and young people in Northern Ireland.

We have a dedicated team based in Belfast led by Angela Bonomy, Director for Scotland & Northern Ireland. NDCS provides a Family Support Service across the country, training sessions for families on topics such as:- early years, communication, learning about deafness, starting school- education rights & responsibilities, technology and Family Sign Language courses. We also campaign to drive up the standards of services for deaf children and their families and undertake research to inform the sector. In addition, we provide training and resources for professionals working with deaf children with an aim to supporting children to achieve their potential.

Comments:

The National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) welcomes the development of a framework of future provision for children in the early years with special educational needs. A Framework could result in a forward-thinking, outward-looking early education for Northern Ireland, which would ultimately improve outcomes for deaf children, through into adult life.

We can see a determined effort to place children at the centre of the review ensuring good quality provision for them and we welcome the addition of focus on 0-3's as all evidence suggests the first years of life are when our brain develops the most. The importance of positive, nurturing and supportive communication skills with babies is an essential factor for establishing and maintaining development of social relationships during babyhood and aids young children during their first explorations through play while beginning to formulate communication and language skills.

This is especially important for deaf babies and deaf children. Research shows that when early identification of deafness is followed quickly by high quality early intervention, deaf children can achieve the same outcomes as other children. Deaf children who don't get this early support are more likely to struggle at school, are at increased risk of mental illness and have fewer opportunities in employment¹.

We know that communication and language difficulties are an area of concern for deaf babies and deaf young children, and early years practitioners' can have a powerful effect on children's development of such in their very early years. Ensuring the right blend of theoretical knowledge and practical skills for supporting deaf babies and deaf young children will be hugely significant for deaf babies and deaf young children.

¹ NDCS Early Years quality standards

http://www.ndcs.org.uk/family_support/education_for_deaf_children/education_in_the_early_years/index.html

We are pleased that the Framework extends beyond formal Nursery Provision. This wider interpretation of where and how children learn and develop in the early years recognises the invaluable contribution of parents and community organisations in building communication, life skills and confidence.

As childhood deafness is a low incidence disability, most early years practitioners will need additional training and support from specialist providers such as Teachers of the Deaf in order to provide high quality provision for deaf babies and young children, especially in the development of age appropriate communication and language.

It will also be important to draw on knowledge, skills and guidance from specialist organisations such as NDCS in seeking improvements in practice, reducing inequalities in learning and achievement for deaf babies and deaf young children and thus narrowing their achievement gap.

We welcome the focus throughout the document on earlier intervention and support. Parents tell us about the value of 'front-loading' expert support from Teachers of the Deaf, Speech and Language Therapists and others who can focus on improving children's communication in the early years, avoiding frustration and the need for behavioural interventions at a later stage.

We welcome the focus on the importance of parental support and the quality of provision. We also welcome the emphasis on inclusiveness, flexibility and a more integrated approach to service delivery. We would like to see specific commitments within the 'Partnership proposal' to ensure:

- that organisations made up of disabled people and parents of children with disabilities are fully represented within the proposed Working Group and Forum as equal partners;
- that consideration is given to user/parent involvement in the Early Years Panel;
- that children and young people are directly engaged in consultations wherever possible, drawing on the engagement techniques that have been developed within Northern Ireland by a range of organisations, including CINI and the Commissioner for Children and Young People.

We recognise and welcome the intention to expand the range of provision options by introducing additional support options within mainstream pre-school settings. These options may well provide the additional help with communication and inclusion that will allow deaf children to flourish in mainstream settings. In Northern Ireland, 71% of school-aged deaf children attend mainstream schools. 2% attend mainstream schools with resource provisions, 2% attend special schools for deaf children whilst 24% attend special schools not specifically for deaf children. 36% of deaf children are recorded as having an additional special educational need. The most common additional need appears to be moderate learning difficulties.²

There is a welcome emphasis on better information and support for parents, and better communication with them. Parents frequently express their frustration with the current SEN process as overly cumbersome, slow and time-consuming, with difficulties in tracking down and chasing up staff and great problems in ensuring that statements are agreed with assistance in place for the start of the school year.

² CRIDE 2017 Report for Northern Ireland http://www.ndcs.org.uk/professional_support/national_data/cride.html

We therefore welcome a review and streamlining of the process, alongside better information and communication. However, from a parent's perspective, we have some concerns about how the decision-making processes will work within the proposed framework.

It is very unclear from the consultation documents exactly how much choice or influence parents will have on decision-making about transition into pre-school settings and onwards into year one school placements. We would appreciate considerably more information in just how the Early Years panel will work in partnership with parents to truly make these decisions with parents and not for them. Before any Framework is complete, there would also need to be clarity about mechanisms for resolving disagreements with parents about what constitutes 'appropriate support' for their child.

We welcome the value-based approach, underlined by starting off with a commitment to underpinning principles. We support all of the underpinning commitments within the Framework. However we would also like to see a commitment to securing and progressively realising children's rights. There are statutory duties on government and on the Education Authority through domestic legislation and through commitment to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and these also need to be recognised as underpinning the Framework.

Finally, we need to flag up that not all children with disabilities (including those with ongoing disabilities such as deaf children) will have ongoing 'special educational needs'. Yet they may still require reasonable adjustments, particularly in the early years, to ensure that they are able to communicate and learn to the very best of their ability.

For deaf children, particularly in mainstream settings, this may involve the provision of aids and adaptations to improve the learning environment. It may also require specialist assessment of the learning needs of children at particular stages in their development. This should be followed by either specialist advice to teachers or specific input for children (or both) from properly trained and accredited Teachers of the Deaf.

We note the recommendation from the NI Audit Office in 2017 that: 'The Department and the EA should review the current funding arrangements to ensure that available resources are used effectively to meet the needs of all children with SEN, with or without a statement.'³

We would like to see a commitment to establishing a pathway which will ensure that children with disabilities, including deaf children, who are not subject to a SEN plan continue to be able to access the support and reasonable adjustments that they need in order to flourish from their earliest years in education.

Recommendations:

- A commitment within the 'Partnership proposal' to ensure:
 - that organisations made up of disabled people and parents of children with disabilities are equal partners in the proposed Working Group and Forum;
 - that consideration is given to user/parent involvement in the Early Years Panel;

³ <https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/publications/special-educational-needs>

- that children and young people are directly engaged in consultations wherever possible, drawing on the engagement techniques that have been developed within Northern Ireland by a range of organisations, including CINI and the Commissioner for Children and Young People.
- A detailed outline of processes to be followed by the Early Years Panel to ensure that the Panel truly makes decisions with parents and not for them.
- Clarity about mechanisms for appealing decisions and for resolving disagreements with parents about what constitutes 'appropriate support' for their child.
- A commitment to securing and progressively realising children's rights as expressed in legislation and in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- A programme of training and support for early years practitioners, involving by specialist sensory services such as Teachers of the Deaf, that will empower them to seek improvements in their practice to support deaf babies and young deaf children, reduce inequalities in learning and achievement for deaf babies and deaf young children and thus narrow their achievement gap.
- A commitment to establishing a pathway which will ensure that children with disabilities (including deaf children) who are not subject to a SEN plan continue to be able to access the specialist support and reasonable adjustments that they need in order to flourish from their earliest years in education.

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