



Response to

Northern Ireland Committee

Education funding in Northern Ireland
inquiry

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1. 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 our Director for Scotland & Northern Ireland. NDCS provides a Family Support Service across the country, training for families on topics such as: early years, communication, learning about deafness, starting school, education rights & responsibilities and technology. We provide Family Sign Language and 'Communication is Fun' 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 the aim of supporting children to achieve their potential.

2. General Comments:

The National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) welcomes this inquiry into the funding of education in Northern Ireland. We want to see a forward-thinking, inclusive and responsive education service for Northern Ireland, which will ultimately improve outcomes for deaf children through into adult life. This will not be possible without both sufficient funding levels and robust, transparent mechanisms for effective allocation of resources.

3. Funding for Special Educational Needs:

3.1 Research shows that when early identification of deafness is followed quickly by high quality 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.

3.2 Supporting deaf children in education goes beyond the special educational needs (SEN) provisions. However the statementing process and the provision of additional supports identified through a SEN statement continue to be important to many deaf children. In common with many organisations representing the interests of children with disabilities, we have grave concerns about support for children with special educational needs (SEN) and about the impact of funding restrictions on the ability of the Education Authority and of individual schools to meet the developing educational needs. Many of our concerns would apply equally to all children with disabilities, and are not specific to deaf children, so we will not focus on these unduly in this submission.

¹ NDCS Early Years quality standards

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

3.3 Areas where we have particular concerns that insufficient funding is causing a problem include: delays in producing Statements of SEN for individual children; difficulties in accessing Educational Psychologists in a timely manner; reluctance to include an adequate level of quantification and specification in Statements, leaving families unclear about exactly what level of support they can expect; and access to specialist classroom support.

3.4 This last issue is of particular concern to deaf children with very specific communication needs. To save money, schools are combining classroom support hours for children with very different disabilities and employing general classroom assistants. Because of this, they are in danger of not meeting the identified educational needs of the individual children.

3.5 We would be very happy to expand on these issues if required.

4. Educational provision for disabled children beyond SEN arrangements

4.1 Not all children with disabilities (including those with ongoing disabilities such as deaf children) will have ongoing ‘special educational needs’. Yet, as specified in the Disability Discrimination Act, 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.

4.2 Deafness is not a learning disability, but deaf learners consistently do worse than their hearing peers at school. The data released in 2018 for the 2016/17 cohort of school leavers illustrates that a significant attainment gap persists for deaf learners:

School leavers obtaining 5+GCSEs A*-C2 including GCSE English and Maths (*Department of Education, 2018*)

	Deaf pupils	All pupils
2016/17	40.0%	69.6%
2015/16	57.1%	67.9%
2014/15	48.1%	66%

4.3 The early years are a critical time in the cognitive and social development of very child. Deaf children experience unique barriers at this time given that 90% have hearing parents who have no previous experience of deafness and may struggle to communicate with them. Deafness impacts on a child’s entire language system including: distinguishing the sounds of words, understanding the meaning of words, the grammar of language and how language is used socially. Developing language in the early years, before formal statementing occurs, is critical.

4.4 Language development among deaf children is also affected by lower general knowledge, delayed theory of mind cognition, and lower early literacy. As a result of this, research shows that **every** category of deafness, including mild hearing losses, has a negative effect on the attainment of English grades. Limiting access to educational support, based on level of hearing loss, as a cost-cutting measure is currently being reported to us by parents, and is a matter of great concern.

4.5 We are pleased to see that that the proposed Framework for Early Years SEN provision, on which the Education Authority has recently consulted, recognises the vital importance of early intervention and 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. However, it is notable that the consultation gave no indication of how this development would be resourced.

4.6 Training and support for parents' language and communication skills, right from their deaf child's early years, is vital if a child is to fulfil their potential in formal education. This is currently accessible to parents in an extremely limited way, i.e. through advice from Teachers of the Deaf and through access to short-term programmes funded through the Department of Communities Sign Language Partnership, not through education.

4.7 As well as additional investment in early years' provision, there are other areas where additional funding for specialist support to deaf children could make a significant impact. To give two examples:

- As childhood deafness is a low incidence disability, most early years' practitioners and teachers in mainstream education 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.
- Access to radio aids and other assistive technology in educational settings can make a huge difference to a deaf child's ability to learn. Currently only disabled children who are failing in school are guaranteed access to auxiliary aids and services in school, despite being entitled to these aids and services on entering FE/HE. This isn't consistent with priority given to early intervention within the education system as a need for an aid or services should be consistently maintained, rather than initiated at higher level.

5. Teachers of the Deaf:

5.1 The main issue specific to the education of deaf children that we wish to highlight concerns the Teachers of the Deaf service in Northern Ireland.

5.2 We thought it might be helpful to share with the Committee evidence from the Consortium for Research into Deaf Education (CRIDE) 7th annual report on Educational Staffing and Service Provision for Deaf Children². It covers the 2016/17 academic year³ and sets out the results of the survey for Northern Ireland. The UK-wide research was tailored to ensure that it was suitable for NI, and we were delighted that responses were received from all 5 services.

² For the purpose of this survey, 'deaf children' were defined as all children and young people up to the age of 19 with sensorineural and permanent conductive deafness, using the descriptors provided by the British Society of Audiology and BATOD. We used the word 'deaf' to include all levels of deafness, from mild to profound.

³ Reports from previous years can be found on the BATOD website at www.ndcs.org.uk (search 'survey') or on the National Deaf Children's Society website at www.ndcs.org.uk/CRIDE.

Two key findings emerge from the survey. The first is that number of deaf children in education in Northern Ireland appears to be rising, while at the same time, numbers of Teachers of the Deaf are decreasing. Secondly, 61% of existing specialist staff are due to retire in the next 10 to 15 years.

5.3 Facts from the 2017 CRIDE report

- Based on responses from the 5 services, the total number of deaf children in Northern Ireland is 1,553. This is up from 1,497 in 2015/16, a 4% increase.
- In the last 7 years, despite a 25% increase in the number of deaf children, the number of specialist Teachers of the Deaf to provide this support has reduced by 16%.
- 61% of existing specialist staff are due to retire in the next 10 to 15 years.
- The evidence is that in Northern Ireland we face a huge challenge to ensure deaf children receive the support they need in the future.
- When deaf children don't get the right educational support it means
 - struggling to communicate
 - falling behind at school
 - failing to achieve their potential.
 - Despite deafness not being a learning disability, deaf children fall a whole grade behind their hearing friends at school.
- 71% of school-aged deaf children in NI attend mainstream schools. Teachers and staff need specialist support.
- Teachers of the Deaf are the key to unlocking a deaf child's future
 - training up classroom teachers
 - improving how teachers communicate with deaf children
 - doing intensive 1 to 1 tuition with deaf children at key points
 - organising specialist technology
- More than 90% of deaf children have hearing parents, so independent expert support is a vital lifeline.

5.4 From this, it is clear that we need:

- a long term plan to train new Teachers of the Deaf
- a recruitment drive to get more of them into the classroom
- consistent access to services across Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland-wide planning by the Education Authority is needed urgently to avert crisis. The fact that we now have a single Education Authority in Northern Ireland should make this easier to achieve. However it is apparent that no funding has been made available to address these issues.

5.5 Our understanding is that no teachers from Northern Ireland have been supported to train as Teachers for the Deaf in the coming year, despite attention having been drawn to the impending crisis through the CRIDE report. Anecdotally, a lack of funding has been reported as the reason for this potentially disastrous situation. Short-term cost saving will have severe consequences for the education and future life prospects of deaf children in the coming years.

6. Progressive realisation of rights

There are statutory duties on government and on the Education Authority through domestic legislation (including the Disability Discrimination Act) and through commitments to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Of particular relevance to Education funding decisions, are:

- the residual duty on the Education Authority in relation to the making of reasonable adjustments under the DDA: and
- requirements through Section 75 of the NI Act 1998 on all public bodies in Northern Ireland to ensure that equality of opportunity is central to policy making and service delivery. This includes ensuring that affected groups (such as disabled children and parents/carers) are consulted in policy making.

Funding should be made available to ensure that all statutory requirements are fully met, and also to allow for progressive realisation of rights, as required by international conventions.

In particular, we recommend that all budget decisions are made in compliance with the Equality Commission's 2015 guidance 'Budgets and Section 75: a short guide'⁴.

It is also essential that individual funding decisions made about support for specific deaf children are made in an open and transparent manner, and in full consultation with parents/carers.

7. Conclusion

We appreciate the opportunity to bring these issues to the attention of the Committee. As stated at the outset, we want to see a forward-thinking, inclusive and responsive education service for Northern Ireland, which requires both sufficient funding levels and robust, transparent mechanisms for effective allocation of resources.

NDCS would be very happy to present verbal evidence to the Committee to assist in further consideration of these matters, should the Committee feel that this would be helpful.

⁴https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Employers%20and%20Service%20Providers/Public%20Authorities/Section_75_and_Budgets_short_guide.pdf