

The work of Ofsted

Written evidence submitted by the National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) to the Education Select Committee (August 2015)

Key points

1. In 2013/14, just 36% of deaf children achieved 5 GCSEs (including English and Maths) at grades A* to C compared to 65% of children with no identified special educational need (SEN)¹.
2. Most deaf children - over 75%² - are educated in mainstream schools where teachers receive specialist advice from a visiting or peripatetic Teacher of the Deaf. The quality of support provided by these specialist Teachers and the wider local authority specialist education service for deaf children is currently not subject to any formal external scrutiny.
3. 90% of deaf children are born to hearing families with no prior background in deafness³. Many families rely on support and advice, particularly on language and communication, from Teachers of the Deaf. The quality of support provided to families by these specialist Teachers is again not subject to any formal external scrutiny.
4. In December 2014, the Department for Education announced⁴ that it had invited Ofsted to formally inspect local areas on their effectiveness in fulfilling their duties under the Children and Families Act 2014. In March 2015, the Department of Education stated⁵ that proposals would be put to public consultation in late spring. At the time of writing, no public consultation has been issued. It is not clear why there has been a delay.
5. Separately, in correspondence and prior to any public consultation, Ofsted have ruled out any specific inspection focus on local authority specialist education services for children with sensory impairments. This raises questions as to what impact the proposed local area inspections will have in relation to deaf children and other low incidence needs.

6. It is acknowledged by Ofsted⁶ and the Department for Education⁷ that specialist education services for deaf children, employing Teachers of the Deaf with expertise in deafness, play a vital role in ensuring that deaf children and their families get the support they need. Despite this, these supposedly vital services are not subject to any formal external scrutiny by Ofsted.

7. NDCS believes that there is a strong justification for Ofsted to focus on inspection of services for children with low incidence needs (for example, sensory impairments and physical disabilities) because:

- Commissioners are less likely to have knowledge of effective practice in commissioning services for these children.

¹ Source: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/gcse-and-equivalent-attainment-by-pupil-characteristics-2014. NDCS analysis of the relevant figures relating to deaf children published at: www.ndcs.org.uk/professional_support/national_data/england_education.html

² Source: Consortium for Research into Deaf Education (CRIDE) England 2013 report: www.ndcs.org.uk/CRIDE

³ Rawlings, B.W. & Jensema, C (1977) Two studies of the families of hearing impaired children. Office of Demographics, Gallaudet University, Washington D.C.

⁴ Department for Education press release: www.gov.uk/government/news/317-million-boost-for-life-changing-send-reforms

⁵ Department for Education report: SEN and disability: supporting local and national accountability. www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-supporting-local-and-national-accountability

⁶ Ofsted (2012) *Communication is the Key* – in this study of best practice, among the key findings was that when deaf children progressed well, it was because there was a good understanding of the need for specialist services for deaf children and a strong commitment to maintain them.

⁷ In 2012, the then Minister of State for Children and Families stated that: "It is a priority to improve the educational outcomes for all children and we recognise the important role specialists, such as Teachers of the Deaf, play in meeting this goal."

www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm101202/text/101202w0005.htm#1012037000017. The SEN and Disability Code of Practice (2015) also references the important role of Teachers of the Deaf, particularly for any statutory assessments.

- Mainstream teachers will only encounter children with low incidence needs sporadically and will have less opportunity to build up expertise on how to meet their needs. They are therefore more reliant on support from external specialists.
- Parents of pre-school school, reliant on advice and support on language and communication from external specialists, are even less likely to know if they are receiving a high quality service.

8. NDCS does not believe that a general inspection of local area SEN provision, which treats children with SEN as if they were single homogenous entity, is likely to address the significant accountability gap that surrounds these vital services for deaf children. Consequently, deaf children are likely to continue to underachieve, despite the fact that deafness is not a learning disability.

9. In correspondence with Ofsted in April 2015⁸, Ofsted stated that they are “unable” to inspect services for children with sensory impairment. NDCS does not believe that Ofsted have adequately or fully explained their reasoning for this position. Possible explanations might include:

- Ofsted do not feel this is a priority.
- Ofsted do not have adequate resources to be able to inspect local authority specialist education services for children with low incidence needs in any general local area SEN inspections.
- Ofsted believe that, if they inspect services for children with low incidence needs, they would have to inspect local authority services for other children. NDCS believes that this ignores the fact that low incidence needs are more likely to be overlooked in the current education system. NDCS also believes there is a wider point about not treating SEN as if it were a single homogenous entity.

10. NDCS would welcome support from the Education Select Committee to establish Ofsted’s position on this in more detail, as well as explore the reasons for the delay in any consultation. Some possible suggested questions to raise with Ofsted are shown below.

Possible questions to raise with Ofsted:

A consultation on Ofsted local area SEN inspections was expected in late spring. What is the reason for the delay? When will the consultation now be published?

Is it still Ofsted’s inspection that local area inspections will begin in early 2016? If not, when?

Does Ofsted have an adequate budget to be able to carry out these local area SEN inspections to a high standard?

Does Ofsted accept that there is significant accountability gap when it comes to local authority specialist education services for deaf children and other children with low incidence needs?

Why have Ofsted ruled out inspection of local authority specialist education services for deaf children as part of the general local area SEN inspections?

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⁸ Letter from Christopher Russell, Director, Local Authorities to Blind Children UK, NDCS, RNIB and Sense dated 29 April 2015. Copy available on request.