Education and coronavirus: meeting the needs of deaf young people in colleges

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Introduction

Coronavirus restrictions continue to impose huge challenges on colleges, which will have implications for how deaf young people access specialist support. We acknowledge the significant steps that education professionals are taking to ensure continuity of learning. This briefing sets out a number of questions that settings will want to consider in terms of specialist support for deaf young people.

Whilst it is not our role to give public health advice, it is our expectation that there will be a consideration around the risks to individual deaf young people if they do not receive specialist support as usual, and that such risks are balanced against any public health issues. We believe that any reduction in specialist support should be a last resort, given that it may fundamentally undermine how deaf young people are able to access learning. It may also have a significant impact on the mental health of deaf young people if they are unable to understand their teachers or peers whilst at college.

This briefing has been developed by the National Deaf Children's Society with support from the British Association of Teachers of the Deaf (BATOD) and the National Sensory Impairment Partnership (NatSIP). It focuses on support for deaf young people in mainstream colleges. However, many of the principles and suggestions may also be helpful for independent training providers and specialist colleges.

Principles

Later in this briefing, we set out some specific questions that colleges and colleges may want to consider. We do not provide any definitive answers, as this will depend on the individual context. However, there are a number of principles that we believe should be taken into account in making any decisions.

1. There should be no blanket policies (for example, insisting on just one remote learning platform or a ban on all external visitors). Instead, we believe that any policies should take into account the individual needs of deaf young people, and, as set out earlier, balance the risks to public health against the risks to individual young people not getting the support they need.
2. There should be a can-do approach. We encourage professionals to continue to be creative, pragmatic and flexible in ensuring that individual deaf young people have full access to their learning, as much as possible.
3. Deaf young people should also be involved in any decisions about their learning, assessment and support and kept fully informed. Where appropriate, it is beneficial for parents/carers to also be kept informed and consulted.
4. Teachers of the Deaf or other specialists working with deaf learners should be involved in any decisions on changes to learning, assessment and how support will be provided.
5. Any reduction in specialist support should be a last-resort and with a full awareness of the impact that it will have on individual deaf young people. Putting deaf young people in a situation where they cannot understand their teachers or their peers should be seen as both unacceptable and untenable. It

may also put colleges at risk of legal challenge. Where a decision has been made there is no other alternative but to temporarily reduce some specialist support, we expect there to be a clear audit trail in place that sets out what mitigating actions are being put into place. Action planning should be SMART. We also expect there to be a plan in place to ensure support is provided to enable deaf young people catch up. This might involve additional catch-up support or one-to-one tuition that is tailored to their individual needs.

Key issues and risks

The table below sets out some specific issues and risks, key questions to explore and possible mitigating actions. It is not intended to be exhaustive and it is hoped it will prompt discussion and collaboration between colleges, Teachers of the Deaf, deaf young people and their families. As set out earlier, we encourage professionals to be creative, pragmatic and flexible in ensuring that individual deaf young people receive the support they need, as much as possible.

Issue/risk	Key issues and questions	Possible mitigating actions
Accessibility of remote education and assessment	Where remote teaching is in place, what steps will be taken to ensure that any teaching is 'deaf-friendly' and can be followed by deaf young people? Where young people are being directed to online resources, has the college checked that the resources are accessible to deaf young people? For example, have captions been provided, can the speaker be seen on screen, and is the content appropriately visual and easy to follow? Course assessments may be adapted or modified (e.g. taken online rather than paper form) which could throw up new access needs.	Where signposting to online learning resources or using college produced videos, checking that these are accessible to deaf young people. At the minimum, we would expect subtitles to be provided and, where deaf young people use sign language, for there to be an interpreted version. Where automated subtitles are used (e.g. on YouTube), these are edited by college staff so that errors are corrected. Where online content is being created by the college, it is relatively straightforward to add captions to this independently. The National Deaf Children's Society has also produced guidelines on accessible content[i] which may also be helpful. Where remote teaching is being provided, funding additional communication support (such as remote speech-to-text reporter) and/or ensuring that existing support (such as a BSL interpreter or communication support worker) can be easily seen. Alternatively, some platforms have speech-recognition technology enabled. These are far from 100% accurate, however, so ongoing feedback from the student will be needed. The choice of platform should be driven by the young person as much as practical and colleges should ensure deaf learners fully understand how use the accessibility features. Seeking advice from Teachers of the Deaf on the accessibility and appropriateness of any remote education offer, drawing on advice from UK Governments, the British Association of Teachers of the Deaf and the National Deaf Children's Society. For example, the National Deaf Children's Society has produced a remote teaching checklist[ii] for teachers. Close liaison with families, as appropriate, so that they are able to support a young person's learning as much as possible.

		Arranging for specialist support to be provided remotely (e.g. from a communication support worker or Teacher of the Deaf). Steps should be taken to ensure that both parties have robust IT equipment in place to allow this and any other necessary equipment, for example headphones that fit over hearing aids. Any safeguarding policies should be followed but should be proportionate to the situation and balanced against the risk to individual young people if they do not receive the specialist support they need. Safeguarding precautions that could be followed might include, for example, ensuring young people are in a 'shared space' for any virtual meetings. Where a college provides a young people with a radio aid, to allow them to take it home to improve access any remote learning opportunities. Ensuring that deaf young people have any necessary additional equipment (for example, leads to connect the radio aid to a laptop). Ensure that deaf learners taking assessments still have access to equivalent access arrangements (e.g. extra time or modified language) that they would have had previously for exams and assessments. Any use of video or audio for online assessments may require subtitles or communication support.

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Temporary learning spaces and changes to classroom layouts	We understand that, in some areas, consideration is being given to deliver teaching and learning in temporary learning spaces to create additional room, or to delivering lessons outside. We also know that in many areas classroom layouts are being changed so that all learners face forward. This may make it harder for deaf learners to lipread or understand their peers. What will the acoustic conditions be like in any temporary learning spaces used? Portakabins and village halls, for example, are known to be 'echoey' and difficult listening environments	Identifying which rooms have optimal learning conditions and ensuring that groups or bubbles with deaf young people are prioritised for such rooms. Ensuring that young people's listening, language and communication needs are taken into account when considering seating position, potential sources of background noise and how information is delivered and presented in any temporary learning spaces. Ensuring that radio aids are used effectively. Reminding teachers of the importance of revoicing or paraphrasing what other learners have said in any classroom discussions, or allowing deaf learners time to turn around and face the pupil speaking. Seeking advice on the acoustics of any temporary learning space from a Teacher of the Deaf or education audiologists. It should be noted that portable soundfield systems will not work well in any temporary learning spaces that already have poor acoustics and may make the situation worse.

Issue/risk	Key issues and questions	Possible mitigating actions
Reduced access to specialist support within the college (e.g. learning support assistants or communication support workers)	What will the impact be on a deaf young person if they do not receive the usual support from a communication support worker or learning support assistant? What is the risk that reduction in this support will result in the young person not being able to understand or access learning?	Our view is that, where learning support assistants or communication support workers have a specific role in directly supporting individual deaf young people, they should not be redeployed to other roles. In many cases, the support from a learning support assistant or communication support worker may be listed in a young person's plan. Steps should be taken to ensure that any learning support assistant or communication support worker with responsibility for ensuring a particular deaf young person can participate in college is in the same 'bubble' as the young person. Some learning support assistants have a more generic role that doesn't involve providing direct individual support to an individual deaf young person. Depending on the nature of the task and individual needs it may be considered to be most beneficial to the young person if they are put in the same group as their usual learning support assistant. This might involve grouping young people who most benefit from learning support assistants in the same bubble. Additional flexibility with the curriculum to ensure targeted catch-up support or individual one-to-one tuition is in place.

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Reduced access to specialist support where this is provided by any specialist staff visiting a college site (e.g. a peripatetic Teacher of the Deaf or speech and language therapist)	What is the impact to the individual learner if the Teacher of the Deaf or any other external specialist is not able to provide face-to-face support to an individual learner and/or college staff? Is there a risk that reduced access will impede the student's ability to access learning?	To carry out any meetings in the college in a well-ventilated room that can be easily cleaned afterwards. It should be noted that meetings outside may be problematic for deaf young people unless the level of background noise is very low. To ask visitors to confirm they will follow social distancing requirements and provide records for any test and trace efforts that may be needed. As testing is rolled out, allowing visiting specialists to access any testing that may be in place within the college. To conduct meetings, including one-to-ones with learners, virtually. This assumes that the young person or college staff will be provided with the necessary IT equipment, time and space to be able to do this effectively. Any safeguarding policies should be followed but should be proportionate to the situation and balanced against the risk to individual young people if they do not receive the specialist support they need. Safeguarding precautions that could be followed might include, for example, ensuring young people are in a socially distanced 'shared space' for any virtual meetings. Ensuring Teachers of the Deaf or other external specialist staff wear a face covering as they enter and move through the college. The face covering should be removed when engaging with the deaf young person.

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Reduced access to specialist equipment that needs to be passed between individuals (such as radio aids)	What is the impact to the learner, both in terms of access to education and their emotional wellbeing, if they are not able to hear their teacher clearly? Note that if there are any changes to the classroom acoustics and/or in light of social distancing requirements, the use of radio aids is likely to become more, not less, important, including among young people who may not have previously used radio aids.	Emphasising usual hygiene requirements – i.e. regular handwashing. Providing hand gel with a radio aid so that a teacher can easily clean their hands each time they handle the radio aid. Providing wipes so that a radio aid can be cleaned before and after it is used. Note that this must be done carefully, following guidance provided by manufacturers, to avoid damage to the device. You should seek advice and support from your local specialist education service for deaf young people on this. In addition, the British Association of Teachers of the Deaf (BATOD) has also provided guidance[iii]. Some radio aids have a conference or 'pointing' functionality enabled. Asking deaf young people to take responsibility for positioning any radio aids that have this functionality device in a way that it can pick up the teacher's voice clearly, as well as peers in any group discussions, without the teacher having to handle it may be an option. However: • This relies on the teacher staying close to where the radio aid is • It also assumes that the deaf young person is a confident user of the radio aid who can be relied on to move the radio aid to where it needs to be. Reminding teachers of the importance of revoicing or paraphrasing what other learners have said in any classroom discussions, or allowing deaf learners time to turn around and face the student speaking.

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One-to-one tuition and catch up programmes	Many deaf young people will be eligible for formal tuition and catch-up programmes of the kind that is delivered to all young people. What steps will be taken to ensure that the person delivering tuition or catch-up is deaf aware and that any such intervention is tailored to the needs of deaf young people?	Providing tutors with deaf awareness information and training, as well as clear advice on the impact that deafness has on individual young people's learning. Advice from a Teacher of the Deaf should be sought to support this. College catch up programmes and interventions need to be accessible to deaf young people. Advice from a Teacher of the Deaf should be sought to support this.
Emotional wellbeing of deaf young people	Deaf young people are already known to be at risk of lower emotional wellbeing. Lockdown is likely to have had a negative impact on many young people's emotional wellbeing. Deaf young people may have felt particularly isolated and lonely during this time Is there a need to carry out an assessment and/or to amend the learner's statement or plan?	Establish peer support programme for deaf young people, as appropriate and in line with social distancing requirements Where classes are broken up into smaller groups or 'bubbles', ensuring that a deaf learner is in a group with one or two friends who the learner can easily understand or who can provide peer support. Ensuring that any pastoral/support programmes or interventions take into account the needs of deaf young people. Similarly, ensuring that any college counsellors are deaf aware and are able to meet the needs of deaf young people. Some interventions such as 'virtual circle time' may be inaccessible to deaf young people and risk causing distress. Where deaf young people are being signposted to online resources, checking that these are accessible and appropriate to deaf young people. Considering if the college needs to make a referral to further support, including from deaf CAMHS (England) or any nominated contacts for mental health support for deaf young people in your area.

Issue/risk	Key issues and questions	Possible mitigating actions
Accessibility of work placements	Social distancing measures put in place by employers offering work placements, apprenticeships, traineeships and supported internships may vary from those of a college and present new barriers to deaf young people.	Providing guidance to employers so that employer risk assessments take into account the issues and barriers deaf employees may face as a result of social distancing measures, use of face coverings and remote working. For example, advice from the Business Disability Forum[iv] on remote working. Supporting deaf learners to advocate for their needs in the workplace. For example, talking with a deaf young person about some of the issues that might come up and what conversations it might be necessary to have with colleagues on a work placement.
Face masks and coverings	The use of face masks or coverings in classrooms will have a very significant impact on the ability of deaf young people to communicate, to the extent that attendance at college may be redundant.	If a decision was made for teachers to wear face masks in classrooms, it will be important that a meeting take place between the education setting, the deaf learner and any specialist support staff to identify the risks to deaf young people's access to learning and emotional wellbeing, and to identify what reasonable adjustments should be introduced. Depending on the individual needs of the deaf learner, these reasonable adjustments may include, for example, wearing clear face masks or shields, increased use of radio aids technology, additional deaf awareness training. Colleges should also be aware of the exemption in place that allows face masks and coverings to be temporarily removed if needed to communicate with someone who relies on lipreading. More information is available in the National Deaf Children's Society position paper[v] on face masks and coverings in education and in the document produced by BATOD.[vi]

More information

The National Deaf Children's Society [coronavirus blog for professionals](#)[vii] provides more information on coronavirus and support for deaf children and young people and is regularly updated, in response to any changes in government guidance and/or feedback from professionals.

You can also contact the National Deaf Young people's Society [helpline](#)[viii] if you would like further information, advice or support. You can also [refer families](#)[ix] to them if they would benefit from their support.

A range of coronavirus-related resources are also available through [BATOD](#)[x] and the [National Sensory Impairment Partnership](#)[xi].

Endnotes

References to government guidance correct as of 2 February 2021

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[i] [www.ndcs.org.uk/documents-and-resources/how-to-make-your-resources-accessible-to-deaf-children-and-young-people/](#)

[iii] [www.ndcs.org.uk/blog/deaf-friendly-remote-learning-a-checklist-for-teachers/](#)

[iii] [www.batod.org.uk/resource/uk-assistive-listening-technology-working-group-and-batod-joint-advice/](#)

[iv] [businessdisabilityforum.org.uk/knowledge-hub/resources/webinar-covid-19-and-supporting-deaf-colleagues/](#)

[v] [www.ndcs.org.uk/media/6209/face-covering-in-education-position-paper.pdf](#)

[vi] [www.batod.org.uk/batod-update-in-relation-to-face-coverings-in-education-settings/](#)

[vii] [www.ndcs.org.uk/blog/coronavirus-and-support-for-deaf-young people-information-for-professionals/](#)

[viii] [www.ndcs.org.uk/helpline](#)

[ix] [www.ndcs.org.uk/our-services/services-for-families/helpline/referral-form-for-professionals/](#)

[x] [www.batod.org.uk/resource/suggested-resources-from-batod-members/](#)

[xi] [www.natsip.org.uk/coronavirus-advice-and-resources](#)