

Specialist education support for deaf children during coronavirus – case studies

Briefing by the National Deaf Children's Society

Summary

Over the past few months, we have engaged with local authority specialist education services for deaf children and special schools for deaf children, to identify how support for deaf children and their families is being maintained during the current coronavirus crisis. This briefing summarises what we have learnt from over 50 services and special schools/colleges.

We would like to thank all those who took the time to share with us how they're working to continue support for deaf children despite the many challenges at this time.

Whilst we've heard from a large number of schools, colleges and services, we haven't heard from all and so this briefing should not be seen as exhaustive. In particular, it's possible that services and schools may be less likely to respond to our requests for information if they are struggling to respond to the coronavirus crisis. It should also be noted that the feedback given to us by services, schools and colleges are often a snapshot at a given time, and that professionals were working quickly and flexibly to respond to changing needs.

With these limitations in mind, we hope this briefing provides a useful snapshot of how deaf children are being supported at this time.

Part one: Key issues

1. Keeping in touch with families

- 1.1 Specialist education services for deaf children work with deaf children from birth all the way up to adulthood. This means that, unlike other services, they have a particular focus on supporting families with pre-school deaf children, particularly in terms of language and development. This early intervention helps to ensure deaf children start school with age-appropriate skills. In many cases, services continue to engage with and support families as their children move to school.
- 1.2 Virtually all services described how they were keeping in touch with families during the crisis – including those with school-aged deaf children. This was being done in a number of ways including:
 - Regular contact with families, particularly with more vulnerable learners, to offer support, reassurance and advice. In nearly all cases, this was entirely done through phone or video calls. Services talked about how they were building families' confidence with home learning and supporting their own emotional wellbeing.
 - Weekly newsletters. Sharing information about what support is available in the area and signposting to other resources – e.g. local audiology support.
 - Posting out resources, often tailored to their child's learning or language plans. One service described how they had created a home activities calendar.
 - Using video calls as an opportunity to carry out observations of language and communication within the family and providing families with praise, feedback and suggestions. Similarly, encouraging families to film themselves doing activities at home to watch back.
 - Using social media to build peer support networks and share information and resources.

- Supporting existing parent groups, including local deaf children’s societies.
 - Setting up virtual groups. For example, one group had taken their Friday morning toddler group online and found that more parents were now getting involved. Using shared screen on Zoom to talk through activities. Another was offering sign language lessons.
 - Wider practical support – for example, helping families with Disability Living Allowance forms or helping with applications for free lunch vouchers.
- 1.3 One school had set up a ‘drive by’ whereby staff visit families, whilst social distancing, from their cars. These are used as opportunities to check in on the family is doing well, troubleshoot issues with hearing aids and drop off iPads and learning resources as needed. Staff have conversations in sign language through the car window.
- 1.4 Some services reported that the lockdown has provided an opportunity for some families to focus more on language and communication within the home, and how best to support their child’s learning in quiet listening conditions.
- 1.5 This wider support to families can be seen as a key strength. However, services and schools did raise a number of challenges in this area:
- Some services acknowledged that some parents may be feeling overwhelmed and were taking care not to add to this, by letting families know they were available if needed, and matching family preferences as much as possible around remote contact.
 - Support for families who use English as an additional language (EAL) where more tailored face-to-face support is needed was raised as a concern by some.
 - IT reliability – some services were less confident in setting up virtual groups in case the technology broke down at the parents’ end. One service told us how poor connectivity made communication harder (e.g. blurry screens, screen and speech disjointed). As a result, they had moved away from live interaction sessions to filming short videos to share with families.
 - Whilst some families appreciate the remote support, some are less engaged and some are not conformable joining virtual groups or meeting virtually. More direct hands-on support and contact was needed in these cases.
 - Services reported that virtual meetings did not allow Teachers of the Deaf to monitor children’s language development as closely as before or to be able to model themselves effective language development activities.
 - Some issues around which virtual communication tools to use. Some local authorities had banned Zoom even where this was preferred by families. Whatsapp was also banned in some cases due to safeguarding concerns.
 - Challenges in families where British Sign Language (BSL) is the first language of the child but not the parents. Services reported that they were offering direct support and encouragement to families in these cases.

2. Support for home learning

- 2.1 In keeping touch with families, many services and schools were focused in particularly on supporting families with home learning. This was done through contact with families and/or with education settings.
- 2.2 A number of services set out how they had been engaging with schools and SENCOs to ensure that deaf children in mainstream schools well supported – through emails, texts, phone calls and Zoom. This was done in a number of different ways.

- Tailored advice to families and staff in schools.
- Regularly reviewing work produced by schools. Ensuring work sent home is appropriate and suitably differentiated and accessible to deaf children. Modifying language as appropriate. In one case, we heard about how work was being sent to Teachers of the Deaf to differentiate by the parent, rather than the school.
- Providing advice on how to engage with deaf children virtually in an accessible way.
- Provision of additional direct support to individual deaf children through Teachers of the Deaf, teaching assistants and communication support workers. With agreement of SENCO, Teachers of the Deaf providing direct support themselves. For example, in one case, a Teacher of the Deaf told us they were delivering weekly sessions via Zoom to a child that has recently received a cochlear implant.
- Weekly newsletters with resources and ideas for home learning activities.
- Text alerts to indicate when new resources available online.
- Providing simple instructions on how they can support deaf children's school work.
- Uploading work for deaf children to the local authority online information portal for schools.
- Producing general advice leaflets and circulating to the local SENCO network, along with a daily helpline number.
- Some services told us they were producing new video resources themselves to, for example, support British Sign Language (BSL) learning, cued speech and phonics.
- Encouraging families to film themselves doing an activity – which the Teacher of the Deaf offered feedback and praise on.
- Continuing to support with transitions to a new school. Arranging training for SENCOs virtually and supporting families.
- Developing new activities for children to do at home – e.g. Lego therapy where children are asked to give instructions to others as a way of helping to develop their communication and theory of mind skills.

2.3 Some services indicated that engagement with mainstream teachers and SENCOs had improved in recent weeks and that there had been more closer working.

2.4 Special schools and colleges also told us about how they were supporting home learning:

- Regular contact with students.
- Many schools reported that initially their focus was on producing home learning packs – with a mix of physical and online resources.
- Using social media and Youtube/Vimeo to share online videos (such as in sign language or on mindfulness).
- Sharing videos two-way on a secure platform – teachers filming themselves doing an activity for the students to feedback and ask questions on.
- One college had a pool of communication support workers who were supporting students virtually, making contact every day so that clarification and advice can be provided virtually face-to-face.
- Signposting to accessible online resources – e.g. Oak National Academy.

2.5 We also heard about how special schools, colleges and resource provisions were delivering online lessons themselves in a number of cases:

- Some reported that they were running a timetable of online lessons, taught by teachers from their homes. Team of teaching assistants and communication support workers on hand.
- One school was running online assemblies with subtitles provided.

- One resource provision told us how they used Google Meet for online lessons. As Google Meet comes with live transcription, this meant that ‘captions’ could be provided in real time, and also recorded on video for offline learning and review.
- One school stated that laptops had been provided where necessary and welfare officers were visiting families where there were issues around online access
- Another college was running online lessons with British Sign Language support from a communication support worker once a week.
- One virtual resource base set up on a google classroom site to enable deaf children to have one-to-one chats with Teachers of the Deaf and support staff.

2.6 One college had developed their own guidance for online lessons, which included:

- Information to students on how to ‘pin’ communication support workers so they always appeared on screen clearly for sign language support.
- Ensuring no online lesson is longer than an hour and building in regular breaks.
- Considering the balance between live lessons and assignments/one-to-one support, to avoid online fatigue.
- Providing two communication support workers as needed – one to provide sign interpretation and another to provide follow-up one-to-one support afterwards – to avoid burnout for either communication support worker.

2.7 Some services told us about how, in addition to the above, they were particularly supporting home learning in the early years:

- Continuing with personal learning plans with activities being suggested, drawing from the Early Support Monitoring Protocol resource.
- Recording short videos to model key skills and activities.
- Feedback and online demonstrations through video calls.

2.8 Some services told us about feedback they had received from families on this, with families reporting reduced anxiety as a result. In a number of cases, this kind of virtual working appeared to lead to better engagement with families than otherwise would have been the case.

2.9 However, some services reported some issues and challenges in this area:

- In one case, we heard about challenges in securing engagement from schools – service reported that they were having to apply pressure on the school to ensure they took heed of guidance around making work accessible. In another case, we heard how a school was requiring Teachers of the Deaf to get their consent before contacting individual teachers.
- In a number of cases, we heard about how services were printing out work and delivering through letterboxes where families did not have internet access or were unable to download work. It was clear that in some cases Teachers of the Deaf were doing this at their own initiative to ensure there was no breakdown in home learning.
- IT issues within the local authority came up regularly – some services had to set up new protocols to allow services to use Zoom or Team. In one case, service wanted to share resources through social media, but local authority protocols did not allow this
- Not all parents confident in using technology. In some cases, we heard about a lack of webcams or reliable internet access. A few times we heard about families where siblings were having to share one computer for home learning.

- One school highlighted the increased risk of fatigue for deaf children for online lessons (in addition to any listening fatigue they may experience) and had taken steps to mix up the timetable with different activities in the afternoon.
- 2.10 As already can be seen, there was some interest in a shift to online learning and support, and whether a blended learning approach could work. Some potential benefits have already been identified earlier. One service reported positively on the time being saved through being able to carry out virtual meetings with SENCOs and teachers (i.e. reduced travel times). They indicated that they were able to have longer conversations with teachers at times when they were less distracted, and to carry out more 'visits' with deaf children.
- 2.11 At the same time, services were clear that such virtual meetings would not work well in all cases. In particular, face-to-face support was seen as better for:
- Meeting families of newly identified deaf children for the first time.
 - Supporting families that are less engaged or where more hands-on support is needed.
 - Where it would be helpful for a Teacher of the Deaf to model what effective practice looks like.
 - Carrying out some assessments, including speech and listening assessments.
- 2.12 Virtual classrooms also had their challenges for deaf children:
- Communication barriers through not being able to listen/see their teacher in 3D. Risk of sub-optimal sound.
 - Increased fatigue for deaf children have to listen/watch a screen for long periods of time.
 - Reduced opportunities for hands-on learning and modelling.
 - Reduced opportunities for peer support and socialisation, as well as incidental conversations with teachers. Risk of further isolation.

3. Support within the school and school re-openings

- 3.1 It was clear that only a very small number of deaf children were attending schools (either because their parents were key workers or they had an EHC plan). Where deaf children were attending schools, services reported that they were:
- Providing their usual advice and support to deaf children, teachers and SENCOs.
 - Informing risk assessments
 - Ensuring all necessary adaptations and adjustments are in place, that hearing equipment is being used consistently and that activities are accessible.
- 3.2 In some cases, services had already begun discussions over how deaf children will be supported in schools once they re-open more widely to more pupils. Parents had also raised concerns with them about how social distancing rules would impact on wellbeing and specialist support. One service said they were providing deaf awareness training around the implications of this for communication and learning.
- 3.3 The shared use of radio aids in a hygienic way was also raised.
- 3.4 Some services reported concerns about the potential increased use of face masks by teachers.
- 3.5 One service said they were developing visual cards for schools to use to support communication.

3.6 The general assumption from many services is that they would not be able to carry out usual face to face visits to schools in the short term (as schools would be keen to limit external visitors) and instead virtual support would continue for the time being. One service told us that a child's school had already effectively barred all external visitors in light of concerns over the spread of coronavirus.

4. British Sign Language (BSL) support

4.1 A number of services and schools told us about the support they were providing around BSL:

- In some areas, BSL lessons have been made available to families to access virtually whilst others indicated that they're producing tailored videos for families (e.g. signed stories).
- One service reported that they were signing the government updates on coronavirus to deaf children.
- Several services reported they were signposting families to online resources – including a free level 1 course offered by Doncaster school.
- One area, acknowledged that BSL access was an issue and were exploring possibility of virtual support from a deaf instructor.

4.2 In a couple of areas, services reported issues around where families were not as competent in sign language as their children. Specialist targeted support was being offered in these cases. This sometimes involved assigning a communication support worker to support the family.

4.3 In one area, the service was taking the opportunity to provide additional BSL lessons to staff to further develop their skills during lockdown.

5. Speech and language therapy

5.1 One school told us about games and activities that were being delivered virtually by speech and language therapists. Parents were able to get in touch for further support.

5.2 Another school's speech and language support was still being supported online with over 100 one-to-one sessions being provided.

5.3 A few services had a focus on early language development – achieved through joint support from Teachers of the Deaf and therapists with regular contact with families, reviewing targets, advising on strategies, and activities and resources being provided.

5.4 One service reported an issue around being unable to carry out language assessments or speech tests virtually because face-to-face contact needed. Another was prioritising pre-verbal children and post-meningitis, carrying out telehealth appointments. They said that ¾ of families were happy to accept a telehealth option.

5.5 Others said that speech and language therapy support had stopped as therapists had been deployed into health. Some indicated that Teachers of the Deaf were picking up some of this work. In one area, staff shortages meant that staff were prioritising the development of telehealth to enable them to see more children.

5.6 One speech and language therapist was concerned that they may have to wear PPE in future – it was believed this would be challenging for some deaf children in terms of reducing ability to see faces or hear sounds clearly.

6. Specialist equipment

- 6.1 We were particularly interested in whether deaf children were able to take radio aids home. Radio aids are additional hearing technology that allow deaf children to hear a speaker more clearly, cutting out background noise. Radio aids can also be connected to computers or tablets to help some deaf children hear any auditory content more clearly.
- 6.2 The majority of services we spoke to indicated that children were able to take radio aids from school to use at home. One service reported that children were “very engaged” with their use. Services were providing direct input leads so that radio aids could be used with computers and tablets. Some had signposted families to information about using radio aids effectively and troubleshooting issues.
- 6.3 One service indicated that schools were being asked to cover the cost of insurance.
- 6.4 In addition, services were continuing to make radio aids available to families to use with pre-school deaf children in the home. However, in one case, this was being rolled-out but has now been put on hold.
- 6.5 One service outlined the impact that being able to use radio aids at home has had:
- *One child who was not confident at using radio aid in school has been using it at home with mum and sister during home schooling and grown in confidence. She has indicated she will use it at school when she returns.*
 - *A parent has fed back about the support they received from the sensory support service to use their son’s radio aid with other technology items in the home. Family’s confidence and understanding has increased and the equipment is now in daily use.*
- 6.6 This approach was not universal, however, and some services told us that radio aids remained at school. Various reasons were offered for this:
- Fear of loss/damage if allowed to go home.
 - In another case, schools closed before radio aids could be taken home (and it’s apparently not possible to retrieve them). The service feels that this is not causing a “significant barrier” to learning.
 - One service indicated that the senior leadership team at the local authority had yet to make a decision to allow home use.
 - One service reported there was confusion among schools as to how/why radio aids could help and hence were not allowed home.
- 6.7 A couple of services reported that not all families felt this was needed at home or did not want the additional responsibility.
- 6.8 One service indicated they had spoken with a radio aid manufacturer on management of equipment such as radio aids so there is a minimal touching by other adults when children return to school.
- 6.9 As well as radio aids, a number of services and schools indicated that some pupils, particularly those who identified as being vulnerable, were provided with tablets or computers, where not available at home, to support home learning. Webcams and internet dongles were also being

provided. Some were also supporting families in accessing government or local authority funding for equipment.

- 6.10 Where families don't have computers, some services are printing off resources and sending these to the family.
- 6.11 Several services and schools indicated that they were supporting families with hearing aids repairs or other troubleshooting issues remotely or through the post. In some cases, this was done through 'drive-by' support, following social distancing rules, at the garden gate.

7. Multi-agency working

- 7.1 Services reported how they were keeping in contact with other services for deaf children, to share information, conduct 'team around the child' meetings, help ensure effective signposting and joined up support for families. Such contacts were also used to carry out joint risk assessments and share concerns around individual families where further support may be needed. In many cases, it appeared that the Teacher of the Deaf was acting as the lead professional.
- 7.2 Example of joint working included:
- Liaising with audiology to ensure families have access to hearing aid batteries and spare parts for hearing aids.
 - Liaising with auditory implant centres, particularly for children who were recently implanted.
 - Joint virtual sessions between Teachers of the Deaf and speech and language therapists.
 - Liaison with educational psychologists for needs assessments.
- 7.3 Services reported finding it easier to keep in touch with other professionals with new approaches and virtual calls being tried.
- 7.4 A few services referred to more joint working and increased contact with social care, helping to pick up low level safeguarding concerns that might not have been picked up otherwise. One service reported more co-working and closer contact in monitoring how particularly vulnerable children were doing. This joint working enabled Teachers of the Deaf and social care to respond quickly to any concerns about lack of engagement from families, with joint risk assessments being carried out.
- 7.5 Some services reported on the challenges arising from audiology services not being able to carry out usual appointments – e.g. not being able to get new ear moulds fitted to use with hearing aids.
- 7.6 As set out earlier, some services indicated that engagement with mainstream teachers and SENCOs had improved and that there had been closer working.

8. Newly identified deaf children

- 8.1 We asked services for feedback on how newly identified children and their families were being supported. The picture was mixed.
- 8.2 Some indicated that referrals were still coming in as usual, meaning that the service could offer the usual support, albeit through virtual means. One service stated that face to face support being provided to families with PPE being used if required, following a risk assessment.
- 8.3 However, a number of services indicated that they had received fewer referrals than normal. Two stated they hadn't received any for four weeks.

- 8.4 In particular, services raised concern about late-onset referrals – for children who acquire deafness – during childhood. They stated that as audiology appointments were less able to carry out routine hearing tests, the number of late-onset referrals had dried up.
- 8.5 One service also raised concerns about issues in newborn hearing screening in their area whilst another service also raised concerns around a backlog of children awaiting cochlear implants, stating that the backlog had grown during the lockdown.
- 8.6 One service was particularly concerned about a flurry of new referrals once lockdown eased and how this would be managed alongside business as usual.

9. Education Health and Care (EHC) plans

- 9.1 Services reported that they were supporting schools in carrying out risk assessments for deaf children with EHC plans, providing evidence for those undergoing EHC needs assessments and continuing to attend annual review meetings.
- 9.2 In terms of changes to support, many indicated that support was now being provided virtually than before, with ongoing monitoring.
- 9.3 One service reported that records being kept of what reasonable endeavours were being made. Another indicated that they were sharing information with families about recent temporary changes to SEND laws in light of coronavirus.
- 9.4 One reported that they were inputting more into the drafting and review of EHC plans, helping to drive up the quality.
- 9.5 In terms of concerns, one service indicated that EHC needs assessment had been “delayed until September” – one family was insisting on this going ahead earlier.

10. Emotional wellbeing

- 10.1 Emotional wellbeing of deaf children and families was a key ongoing priority for many services.
- 10.2 Schools and colleges reported that they were continuing to offer sessions with emotional wellbeing officers. One special school was emphasising the need for students to ‘stay healthy’ with messages and activities being coordinated by the mental health and wellbeing officer at the school.
- 10.3 Services reported that greater pastoral support was being provided as needed and were referring families on to more support as needed. In a couple of cases, this was to support with bereavement. Some services told us they were providing emotional wellbeing activities for deaf children. One service told us how deaf children experiencing high levels of anxiety were receiving video calls with Teachers of the Deaf and, in some cases, additional support within the school.
- 10.4 One service told us how staff in a resource provision had created videos of themselves walking around classrooms and corridors at the school to show children that life would return to normal and to provide encouraging messages from familiar faces.
- 10.5 The emotional wellbeing of deaf children during lockdown where deaf children used sign language as their first language but the wider family didn’t was cited as a specific concern.

11. Supporting with transitions

- 11.1 We asked services how deaf young people due to leave school were being supported.
- 11.2 Services generally reported that they were continuing to support transitions planning including, for example, making contact with college staff and developing training packages and individual reports on deaf students. Staff carrying out virtual meetings as needed. Some supporting deaf young people with applications and funding for Disabled Students Allowance in higher education.
- 11.3 One service reported that, following the cancellation of a meet and greet at colleges, they had developed online virtual tours of new colleges. Taster sessions at prospective colleges were still going ahead virtually, with communication support workers on hand.
- 11.4 One service had set up a virtual group for students set to make transitions. They were particularly positive about this as it allowed students to bounce ideas off each other and provide peer support. Students going to the same college were also able to meet virtually beforehand.
- 11.5 A few services referred to challenges around uncertainty and not knowing where students are likely to be going. This makes it difficult to develop a plan for their transition.

12. Examinations

- 12.1 Ofqual guidance states that schools should draw on support from Teachers of the Deaf in considering exam gradings. Of the services that commented on this:
- 3 had provided advice whilst 1 indicated that classroom teachers would be approaching Teachers of the Deaf.
 - 12 indicated that (at time of reporting) they had not yet heard from schools. Of these, 7 specifically said they had reached out to schools.
- 12.2 Teachers of the Deaf in resource provisions were more directly involved.
- 12.3 One service felt that mock results were in line with abilities and that deaf students would not be disadvantaged. However, another service was concerned that a student would not get the necessary grades because of the lockdown and reduced support.

13. Safeguarding

- 13.1 Schools and services highlighted increased vigilance around safeguarding concerns, suggesting they were keeping in close touch with families and working with other professionals in response to specific issues. Onwards referrals to safeguarding leads were continuing to be made. One service indicated that additional training on safeguarding during lockdown had been provided. As set out earlier, a few services reported more co-working and closer contact between Teachers of the Deaf and social care in monitoring how particularly vulnerable children were doing.
- 13.2 Safeguarding protocols around virtual meetings had been introduced in a number of places – in some cases, to prohibit the use of software such as Zoom or WhatsApp. One service had developed a parental consent form that parents must sign before any online virtual support is provided.

14. Other issues and concerns

- 14.1 Small services reported that they were vulnerable to staff shortages if Teachers of the Deaf had to shield, or became unwell. Another service reported they were 'snowed under' keeping up with changes and new ways of working. Another service indicated concerns around SEND budget for the local authority.
- 14.2 One service indicated that the crisis had thrown up issues around contact details for many families – suggesting they were reliant on schools for this.
- 14.3 One service was concerned about a potential mixed economy approach with some children in schools and settings, but the rest at home. The service is concerned that to deliver to this mixed economy with many in settings but also maintaining remote delivery for all the others, the demands upon the team could become too much.
- 14.4 One service indicated the crisis had been an opportunity to reflect on their role and opportunities for new ways of working – e.g. more direct contact with families of school-aged children, instead of just with teachers.