

Covid-19 – Stakeholder Engagement

National Deaf Children’s Society Cymru

July 2020



About us

The National Deaf Children’s Society is the national charity dedicated to creating a world without barriers for deaf children and young people.

We represent deaf children and young people with all forms of hearing loss from mild through to profound, including temporary and unilateral deafness.

Response

The National Deaf Children’s Society Cymru welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Welsh Government’s call for stakeholder evidence on supporting future post-Covid recovery and reconstruction in Wales.

We appreciate that the pandemic has presented difficult times for everyone. For deaf young people and their families, the pandemic has also presented many other types of challenges, a number of which will continue to present barriers during the recovery period. We welcome this opportunity to highlight key points which we would like the Welsh Government to consider within its plans for future recovery to ensure that the needs of potentially vulnerable deaf children, young people and their families are met.

Please note that throughout this response, we have included quotes from a survey of our members during lockdown. While this survey was undertaken earlier in the pandemic, these experiences highlight the difficulties that deaf children, young people and their families have been facing and as such, their need for specific support as Wales prepares to recover from the wide-reaching implications of the pandemic.

Education

During lockdown many of our learners were not accessing/were accessing reduced levels of the specialist support they would usually receive. We are also aware that families may have faced accessibility difficulties with remote online learning. Welsh Government statistics demonstrate significant attainment gaps between deaf children and their hearing peers at every key stage (see [here](#)) and we are concerned that recent events may have exacerbated this. Indeed, many members have contacted our helpline concerned about the effect lockdown has had on their child’s education and development.

With this in mind, there is a real need to “build back stronger” and invest heavily in supporting vulnerable learners – including deaf learners. The National Deaf Children’s Society Cymru is keen to ascertain how recent Welsh Government announcements for funding and investment

in supporting learners to catch-up will be tailored to meet the specific needs of particularly vulnerable learners, including deaf children and young people.

In reopening schools in September, it will be crucial that schools consider how new safeguarding and operational measures will take account of the needs of ALN learners, including those who are deaf. The National Deaf Children's Society Cymru has produced a checklist to assist schools who may have a deaf child on roll, available at www.ndcs.org.uk/media/6009/meeting-the-needs-of-deaf-children-as-schools-reopen-final.pdf and in Welsh at <https://www.ndcs.org.uk/media/6020/meeting-the-needs-of-deaf-children-as-schools-reopen-ndcs-guidance-final-welsh.pdf>. We would welcome the Welsh Government's support in promoting and encouraging use of this document.

As identified elsewhere in this response, we are mindful that reprioritising of surgery post-Covid will mean that children are more likely to receive hearing aids than grommet surgery to assist with temporary hearing loss and glue ear. This will have a knock on effect for Teacher of the Deaf caseloads. It is important that this is acknowledged and that, wherever possible, efforts are made to increase capacity of sensory services to assist with this and to upskill frontline education staff to appropriately support these learners during their period of temporary hearing loss.

The National Deaf Children's Society Cymru would also like to take this opportunity to highlight anxiety around the future delivery of specialist services within the context of economic uncertainty. We are mindful of one service in Wales that is already considering permanent changes to service delivery following on from the pandemic – moving to a more consultative role. While we understand that there will be economic pressures on services, we believe that deaf children and young people will require more support as opposed to less post-Covid. Methods of delivery adopted during lockdown may have been applauded as ways to ensure some level of support could be provided within the constraints of the pandemic, but it is not a suitable long-term substitute for one to one and face to face support.

We are mindful that the pandemic is likely to change people's attitudes to hygiene and public health for the foreseeable future. For deaf learners, there are particular concerns that teachers may be reluctant to use equipment such as radio aids due to contamination concerns. We are keen to work with the Welsh Government to highlight the importance of this equipment for those who use it and that there are ways to safely clean these devices without damaging them. More information is available [here](#).

It is also worth noting that many deaf children and young people who are due to transition to a new education setting in September may not have received the support to prepare for this move that they would usually have done. It will be imperative that schools and colleges seek to reach out to these learners over the summer break and work closely with them to ensure a smooth introduction to their new setting in September.

The National Deaf Children's Society Cymru is also mindful of the planned ALN Reforms. We understand that the Welsh Government is keen to press ahead with its timescale of introducing these reforms in September 2021. We are concerned that there has been limited communication about how the Welsh Government plans to address the issues identified within the March 2019 consultation on the draft Code which accompanies this legislation. We are also concerned about the ability of schools and local authorities to appropriately prepare for the

reforms during these difficult times. Indeed, we are aware that plans for Estyn to visit all schools and talk about their preparation for the ALN reforms and curriculum reforms will now instead shift focus to the response to Covid19. Prior to the pandemic, we had been concerned by conversations with professionals which implied that schools would only seek to provide those currently in receipt of Statements with an IDP (an approach which is entirely divergent from the legislation, which seeks to provide all ALN learners – including those currently on School Action or School Action Plus with an IDP). We are concerned that, without sufficient direction, this situation could be further exacerbated as schools struggle with capacity while they recuperate from the pandemic. Further consideration will be needed of how schools are informed of and prepared for the ALN changes.

Comments from members earlier in the pandemic:

“She used to have weekly visits from specialist speech and language as well as a teacher of the deaf, she also visited a deaf preschool once a week and had a one to one support in a mainstream preschool twice a week. Now the services can’t visit face to face, her progress has massively declined. Her profound hearing loss means she gets next to no benefit from hearing aids, and we are praying that Covid-19 doesn’t affect her development too much by the services being on hold.” (Parent of a deaf child, Wales)

“I have received no communication from my Teacher of the Deaf and was meant to be seeing her this term to plan University applications and how to ensure the Unis I pick will be able to support me. My 6th form will be doing our UCAS application with us online but they don't have the specialist knowledge about disability support.” (Deaf young person)

“My main concern for [child] is that these last few months of primary school were crucial and part of her transition to secondary. We were due to meet her support staff in secondary etc. I am also concerned that her statement hours are not going to be sufficient. [child’s] ToD has already raised this as a concern and is planning on discussing with the appropriate officer in access and inclusion re increasing [child’s] allocated hours”. (Parent of a deaf child, Wales)

“Our daughter has received support from teachers of the deaf since she was 11 weeks old she is now 11 years old and in her transition year to secondary school. She is struggling without her daily structure and routine of school. She dislikes change and is finding home schooling difficult[...] She misses her one to one support along with her ToD and specialist communicator.” (parent of a deaf child, Wales)

*“We are very proud of the support we have here in South Wales and hope that after this pandemic that cochlear assessments are hurried and seen as absolute priority, particularly to children under five who are at the vital time of development. My daughter’s frustration is terrible as she cannot communicate, BSL needs to be more widely taught to children and young adults to stop communicate problems, if I was taught basic BSL I would know basics to help teach and communicate with my daughter. I also hope that SenCom has **the financial support to provide extra support to children after this crisis to make up for time lost.**” (Parent, Wales).*

“She used to have weekly visits from specialist speech and language as well as a teacher of the deaf, she also visited a deaf preschool once a week and had a one to one support in a mainstream preschool twice a week. Now the services can’t visit face to face, her progress has massively declined. Her profound hearing loss means she gets next to no benefit from hearing

aids, and we are praying that Covid-19 doesn't affect her development too much by the services being on hold." (Parent of a deaf child, Wales)

"Helping with school work as I don't want him to fall behind however I am also a single parent working from home so it's difficult trying to be mum and teacher too as my sons needs a lot of support when it comes to school work which he's not able to get now he has to work from home." (Parent of a deaf child, Wales)

Support to families

We know there will be cases where diagnosis or support has been delayed for newly identified deaf children, because of the pandemic. Research clearly demonstrates the importance of early intervention in a deaf child's linguistic, educational and social development. As such, families who have experienced delayed diagnosis during the pandemic will now require swift and more intensive support. These families may have missed out on vital information and support such as information on how to develop communication with their child and access to hearing technology. Families will also have missed out on vital peer to peer support through groups and opportunities to meet other families with deaf children.

Missing out or experiencing delays in accessing this type of support can have a negative effect on the emotional health and well-being of families as well as the child's linguistic development.

While the new Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act seeks to support learners with ALN from the age of 0, this legislation is not due to come into force until September 2021. In light of this and the fact that, historically, local authority support for ALN learners has often been limited for the 0-5 age range, direction from the Welsh Government on expectations of local authorities to support this vulnerable group as part of the recovery from Covid19 would be much appreciated.

Some comments from our members during lockdown:

"Mostly missing the face to face rehab sessions with our Teacher of the Deaf. XXX was implanted 9 months ago, and early rehab is so important to help develop speech. She's also missing nursery for interaction with other children of the same age." (Parent of a deaf child, Wales)

"My daughter is 3 with bilateral implants and also has selective mutism but was making good progress before the pandemic happened. I worry with her no longer getting any therapy all the progress she has made is going to be lost. She gets frustrated at the videos from nursery as she struggles to lipread the videos and understand. We sign and talk at home so I keep it going but she is struggling to understand why she can no longer go out, go to the park etc." (Parent of a deaf child)

Audiology and Cochlear Implantation

We know that many audiologists and new-born hearing screeners worked hard to try and deliver as much as possible during the pandemic. However, inevitably given the situation, there have been delayed appointments and missed screenings.

As such, in the wake of the pandemic, audiology services will be facing severe backlogs. And these backlogs are coming through to audiology departments which, in many parts of Wales, were overstretched and under staffed prior to the pandemic. As the paediatric audiology audits revealed, many of these services were also facing difficulties in meeting waiting times before Covid19. It will be imperative that these services are supported to work through backlogs and that services receive appropriate funding to address the knock-on effects of the pandemic both in terms of staffing and equipment. For example, the reprioritisation of surgery means that many more children will be receiving hearing aids as opposed to grommet surgery.

Inventive and flexible ways of working may also be required to ensure that children are supported as quickly as possible during these difficult times – knowing that without the appropriate support their education, social and emotional needs will suffer.

Quick support will be needed for those who are potentially delayed in diagnosis as we know the great importance of early diagnosis and support in assisting children with language development. Health professionals will need to link closely with local authority sensory services and specialist speech and language therapy to help children who would usually have been diagnosed earlier had it not been for the pandemic.

We are also aware that, during lockdown, cochlear implant surgery was delayed for many. The Royal College of Surgeons recently produced guidance recently around how they will clear the backlog of patients on waiting list. This effectively seeks to prioritise different types of surgery. Priority 1 is most urgent. Cochlear implantation for children who've become deaf through meningitis has been labelled priority 2, meaning it should take place in less than a month. Cochlear implantation for children with pre-verbal profound hearing loss where delay will impact on long term outcome has been given priority 3 meaning it should take place in less than 3 months. Cochlear implantation for other children and also grommets for children with glue ear has been labelled priority 4, meaning they can wait for more than 3 months. In reality, they may be waiting much longer than that.

The National Deaf Children's Society Cymru, of course, understands the difficult situation in backlog of surgery and the need to prioritise. However, it is important to acknowledge the very real concerns and emotional impact these delays are having on families (see below comments from our survey). It will be imperative that these families are seen as quickly as possible and that, in the meantime they are able to access key multiagency support.

Comments from our members during lockdown:

"I am writing to you about my 8-month old daughter. She was born with bilateral profound hearing loss, currently wearing hearing aids. She... was going to be implanted bilaterally this month (April). She is showing absolutely no response with the hearing aids and we are going through an extremely stressful and worrying period, knowing how time sensitive a CI operation is and not knowing when operations will resume. We are wondering if there is anything we could do to try and get those time-sensitive operations restarted as soon as possible. Also, if you

*have any information on how long it will take for operations to resume after lockdown is lifted.”
(Parent of a deaf child)*

*“My child has issues with one of his cochlear implants he will only wear one and not together as it’s making strange noises and is uncomfortable to wear. He is due a tuning session to check his hearing levels. This had been cancelled because of the coronavirus. He is only able to wear one cochlear implant until we are able to get an appointment, we don’t know how long this will be.”
(Parent of a deaf child, Wales)*

Emotional Wellbeing

The National Deaf Children’s Society is mindful that lockdown has presented many emotional challenges for the whole population. For deaf children and young people, there may have been other unique challenges (for example, learners who use BSL/sign language at school may have faced increased feelings of isolation if family members are not signers).

Lockdown aside, research suggests that the barriers deaf young people face can make them more vulnerable to experience difficulties with emotional wellbeing (research suggests this incidence may be 60% more likely than among hearing young people). We are concerned that the emotional strain of lockdown may have exacerbated this.

The National Deaf Children’s Society Cymru has recently welcomed the opportunity to work with the Welsh Government to highlight accessibility requirements for school counsellors in both the generic toolkit for school counsellors and the guidance for school counsellors during the coronavirus. We would wish to continue to highlight these points in any support systems moving forward.

Previously, health boards were directed by the Welsh Government to establish a lead for deaf CAMHS and a referral route into specialist CAMHS in England. Our understanding is that, as staff movement has occurred, in many cases this lead post has been lost. In light of the particular risk to emotional wellbeing in the aftermath of Covid19, we would urge the Welsh Government to act swiftly to re-establish these lead roles and ensure that referral routes are operating as is appropriate.

Comments from members during lockdown:

“Being deaf is already very lonely and isolating. Being taken away from peers etc. is just very difficult for my son.” (Parent of a deaf child)

“My daughter’s frustration is terrible as she cannot communicate, BSL needs to be more widely taught to children and young adults to stop communicate problems. If I was taught basic BSL I would know basics to help teach and communicate with my daughter.” (Parent of a deaf child, Wales)

Social services

Social services have a crucial role to play in supporting many deaf children and their families. In the context of post Covid19, this role is likely to be increased for many families of deaf children, who may have experienced greater emotional strain during the pandemic as outlined above. Other families may have experienced a delayed diagnosis for their deaf child as a result of the pandemic and may now require more intensive support in learning to communicate with their child and coming to understand more about their child's deafness. As is recognised by the Social Services and Wellbeing Wales Act, the importance of early intervention and support is imperative.

We know also that many families and deaf young people have faced particular barriers with isolation throughout the pandemic. For example, this may be because remote learning and remote socialising opportunities have not been accessible. The National Deaf Children's Society is aware of a case where a social worker struggled to access specialist community support for a deaf young person who had to leave their residential school at short notice due to Covid19.

It will be important that both deaf children and their families who have been facing difficulties such as these during the pandemic are supported to assist with their longer term emotional wellbeing.

Concerns around the pandemic exacerbating difficulties with abuse are well documented. Research demonstrates that deaf children are more vulnerable to experience abuse (see Sullivan and Knutson, 2000) and bullying. Supporting vulnerable young people in such situations needs clear consideration in moving forward from the pandemic.

The National Deaf Children's Society Cymru is aware that in many parts of Wales, local authorities do not have a specialist children's social worker with knowledge of deafness/sensory loss and that there can be a general lack of awareness of how to support deaf children and their families. Prior to lockdown, we worked with the Welsh Government and Action on Hearing Loss Cymru to draft guidance for social workers. We believe that, given the vulnerability of this group, it will be important to press ahead with rolling out this guidance. The National Deaf Children's Society Cymru would be happy to work with the Welsh Government to achieve this.

The National Deaf Children's Society also offers free specialist advice to social workers on supporting deaf children and their families. More information is available at [here](#). We would be happy for the Welsh Government to share details of this with services across Wales.

Comments from our members during lockdown:

"I am finding it really hard being away from my friends, and it is hard to speak to people using facetime when I need subtitles so it is harder to keep in touch." (Deaf young person)

"My son not being able to attend the deaf youth theatre which is a massive help with building his confidence especially when it comes to him using his sign as he's around other deaf young children."

Further and Higher Education

We are mindful that following on from the pandemic, colleges and universities are likely to move towards increased online learning. It will be imperative that, in doing so, accessibility needs are met and that institutions are held accountable to this.

Employment

As we already know, Wales has the highest proportion of disabled people in its population, the largest number of disability related benefit claimants and the widest employment gap with non-disabled people of anywhere in the UK . Coronavirus only risks widening this schism, especially for young people, with evidence from the Institute for Student Employers (ISE) highlighting how almost a quarter (23%) of entry level jobs had been cut across Britain as a result of COVID-19. Furthermore, recently published research from Wales Fiscal Analysis reveals that:

“...shutdown measures have hit the youngest workers the hardest. For instance, 35.9% of all the employees under the age of 25 worked in a sector that is currently in shutdown. In contrast, on average only 13.3% of all the workers aged 25 and over were employed in shutdown sectors. It follows from the above that employees aged under 25 were almost three times as likely to work in a sector that is now shut down as other employees.”

For deaf young people, shrinking job opportunities coupled alongside employers' misconceptions about accommodating deafness in the workplace (for example, a lack of understanding and knowledge about what provisions the Access to Work fund can cover), COVID-19 presents an even bigger challenge.

The National Deaf Children's Society Cymru is pleased to have been invited to join the Welsh Government's new advisory group on disability and employment. It will be imperative to ensure that swift action is taken to ensure:

- Employers and apprenticeship providers are aware of the support available to them to meet the needs of disabled young people, such as the Access to Work Scheme.
- Employers and apprenticeship providers are aware of how working measures in a post Covid19 context (for example an increase in home working) can be adapted to be accessible.
- Employers are encouraged to undertake deaf awareness training
- Schemes to boost apprenticeships and employment opportunities following on from Covid19 specifically consider the needs of deaf and disabled young people.
- Consideration is given as to how data can best be collated to track employment rates among young deaf and disabled people.
- That the final version of the Additional Learning Needs Code reinstates duties to ensure that learners with ALN are provided with specialist Careers Advice. Before the pandemic, our research indicated that deaf young people were often unaware of how technology and funding could help them to pursue their desired careers. Post-Covid19, the challenges that young people face in seeking employment will mean that receiving appropriate advice will be even more crucial for deaf young people.

Face-coverings and deaf awareness

The National Deaf Children's Society Cymru understands that following on from lockdown, face coverings are likely to remain within our society for some time. It is important to acknowledge that face coverings present significant barriers for deaf children and young people.

Communication for virtually all deaf people, including those who use sign language, relies in part on being able to see someone's face clearly – whether this is for lip-reading, understanding facial expressions or for understanding non-verbal communication more widely (e.g. seeing whether someone is smiling or looks upset). An obstruction to the mouth makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for a deaf person to understand what is being said. Face masks also have the effect of obscuring and muffling speech, making it harder for deaf people to make use of any residual hearing that they have.

We are pleased that the Welsh Government has been looking into the supply of clear facemasks within the NHS. We would welcome further work in this area to ensure that they are made more widely available – both in the NHS and in public services more generally.

We would also urge the Welsh Government to provide greater clarity on how face coverings affect the deaf population in future. While we know that the mandatory requirement to wear face coverings on public transport allows for people to remove masks in order to communicate, this exemption has unfortunately not been widely communicated. This places deaf people in a very difficult position. They may not be aware of the exemption, and even if they are, they may be concerned about the reception they could receive from fellow passengers who do not understand the exemption – as was the case recently on a Liverpool train (see <https://www.theguardian.com/society/video/2020/jul/25/so-offensive-deafblind-woman-and-sister-verbally-abused-after-lifting-mask-on-train-video>).

Further information

The National Deaf Children's Society Cymru welcomes the opportunity to have contributed to this stakeholder consultation on supporting future post-Covid recovery and reconstruction in Wales. As is illustrated throughout our response, we are concerned that deaf children, young people and their families may have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic and its wide-reaching longer-term effects. We are keen to work with the Welsh Government to “build back stronger” and ensure that plans for recovery take account of this group. We would welcome the opportunity to further discuss any of the points raised within this response. For more information, please contact Debbie Thomas, Head of Policy and Influencing, Wales at the National Deaf Children's Society, Debbie.Thomas@ndcs.org.uk.

Thank you.