**Return to school – experiences of deaf children and young people so far**

**National Deaf Children’s Society briefing (October 2020)**

**Summary**

Our snapshot survey of parents suggests that specialist support for deaf children has been reduced in many schools, whilst the wider use of face masks/coverings is having a negative impact on deaf children’s learning and wellbeing.

Some parents acknowledged the efforts being taken my many staff to ensure a successful return to school and recognised there were ‘teething’ issues. At the same time, parent feedback indicates that too many schools/schools are setting blanket policies around specialist support in an inflexible way and that fail to take into account the individual needs of deaf children.

**Key findings**

We ran a snapshot UK-wide survey of parents of deaf children aged 4 to 19. The survey ran between 10 and 22 September and received 420 responses from parents in England. The following sections summarise the key findings.

**Teacher of the Deaf support**

Where a Teacher of the Deaf would normally visit the school/college to provide support to the child and/or to teachers, 51% of parents reported that this was not currently happening.

**Resource bases for deaf children**

Where their child was in a resource base, 23% reported that their child was not receiving the same support in class or from the resource base as before. 16% were unsure.

Reasons for not receiving the same support included:

* Children not allowed to leave their year-group bubble to attend classes in the resource base
* Specialist staff no longer moving across classes to provide one-to-one support for children who need it
* Resource base closed or operating at reduced capacity
* Increased use of video lessons or audio recordings

In some cases, it was clear that support was not being provided in line with a child’s Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan. Some parents reported that children were feeling more isolated from not being able to mix with their deaf peers in the resource base.

**Face masks/coverings in classrooms**

* 22% of parents reported that some (15%) or all (7%) teachers were wearing face masks/coverings in classrooms with their deaf child. 9% were unsure. This applied to deaf children in both primary and secondary schools.
* 66% of parents reported that there had been no discussion between the school and the family around this. Some parents reported that they were having to proactively ask the school to consider the impact on their deaf child.
* Where face masks/coverings are being worn in classrooms, parents reported a negative impact on their child’s learning (48%), on their child’s ability to communicate with their peers (49%) and on their child’s emotional wellbeing (46%).
* 44% of parents reported that clear face masks/coverings were being worn by teachers in the classroom.

**Face masks/coverings in communal areas**

* Separately, 42% of parents reported that face masks or coverings were being worn all the time (29%) or sometimes (13%) by staff or pupils in communal areas. 16% were unsure.
* Where face masks/coverings are being worn in communal areas, parents reported a negative impact on their child’s ability to understand teachers or other staff (62%), on their child’s ability to communicate with their peers (61%) and on their child’s emotional wellbeing (52%).
* 26% of parents reported that clear face masks/coverings were being worn some (22%) or all (4%) of the time.

**Other issues**

Of children who would normally use a radio aid in the classroom, 14% reported that teachers were not currently using the radio aid with the child. 10% were unsure. Some parents expressed concern that some teachers had not received training on how to use the radio aid properly. One parent reported that their child was unable to pick up their radio aid in the morning because it meant moving outside of their ‘bubble’.

96% of parents reported that their child has returned to school/college. Reasons given for having not yet returned included:

* Child and/or family member is vulnerable and still shielding
* School can’t manage the child’s needs effectively
* Local authority is not providing home to school transport
* Awaiting outcome of tribunal for secondary school placement
* Child did not receive expected exam grades
* Child has left school and is being home-educated

Other issues that were raised by parents in an open-ended part of the survey:

* Specialist therapies – a number of families reported that their child was not receiving the usual speech and language therapy support. Some had not received any support since the lockdown. One parent had been told that her child would no longer be eligible for support as the child doesn’t have an EHC plan.
* Reduced deaf awareness or INSET training, due to Teachers of the Deaf not being able to visit schools.
* Some parents felt there was reduced contact between the family and the school. Some expressed frustration that they were less able to ‘trouble-shoot’ simple issues around support directly with teachers.
* Some parents reported that assemblies were being recorded – with no steps being taken to make this accessible to deaf children.

**Recommendations**

Whilst we acknowledge that the return to school/college has been challenging, particularly in areas where the coronavirus risk is higher, we remain concerned there has been an insufficient focus on the individual needs of deaf children and young people in too many areas. As a result, deaf children and young people are not receiving the specialist support they need. They are also being left isolated by the wider use of face masks and coverings. Below, we set out a number of solutions to address this.

**Strengthening government guidance**

There seem to be a number of areas where, we feel, government guidance is not being followed or there is low familiarity with it. For example, guidance already makes clear that peripatetic Teachers of the Deaf can visit schools, that specialist SEN equipment can be shared between children/staff if cleaned properly, and that children/staff can move between ‘bubbles’ where needed to access specialist provision. **We believe it would be helpful to remind schools/services about this. We also believe it would be helpful to highlight the fact that any blanket policies in this area are unlawful and that the individual needs of deaf children and young people should always be considered.**

Parents also reported that communication between schools and families was not always happening. This applied to the use of face masks/coverings but also more widely in terms of specialist support. **We believe it would be also be helpful to reiterate the importance of coproduction and sharing of information with families at this time.**

**Monitoring and intervention**

Deaf children and young people in resource bases will likely have an Education, Health and Care plan. Reports that some resource bases are, in effect, closed suggests that some children’s statutory needs are not being met. **This suggests a need to closely monitor and, where necessary, intervene in this area.**

**Face masks/coverings – clear messages on the need for reasonable adjustments**

We were surprised by the extent to which face masks/coverings are being used in classrooms, particularly in some primary schools. This goes against government advice. Whilst we were encouraged by the use of clear face masks, and the fact this was helpful in many areas, it was clear that this is not a silver bullet.

**We believe it would be helpful to highlight the importance of risk assessments and the need for reasonable adjustments in schools where face masks are being worn or permitted.** Depending on individual circumstances, these reasonable adjustments are likely to include increased provision of clear face masks, radio aids and communication support (such as remote speech-to-text reporting). More detail on possible reasonable adjustments can be found in our separate [position paper](https://www.ndcs.org.uk/media/6209/face-covering-in-education-position-paperdocx.pdf)[[1]](#endnote-1) on face masks/coverings in education. **Government intervention is likely to be needed to drive a step-change in the availability of clear face masks in education.**

**Radio aids – funding**

Radio aids transmit the teacher’s voice directly to the child’s hearing aid or cochlear implant. We know that radio aids are helpful where there is increased background noise. Recent research also suggests that the use of a lapel microphone can be effective in improving verbal communication when the speaker is wearing a face mask.[[2]](#endnote-2)

In light of wider changes to the learning environment, it seems clear that many deaf children may now require a radio aid in the classroom for the first time. **We call on the Department for Education to ensure schools and local authorities are able to access additional funding for this. This could be achieved through the existing Get help with technology programme.**

**Teachers of the Deaf**

It is clear that Qualified Teachers of the Deaf and local authority specialist education services for deaf children have a key role to play in advising on reasonable adjustments and mitigating steps, providing advice on the individual needs of deaf children. **We call on the Department for Education to continue to highlight the important role these specialist staff and services play and, over the longer-term, ensure these services are sufficiently funded and staffed.**

1. [www.ndcs.org.uk/media/6209/face-covering-in-education-position-paperdocx.pdf](http://www.ndcs.org.uk/media/6209/face-covering-in-education-position-paperdocx.pdf) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Acoustic effects of medical, cloth, and transparent face masks on speech signals<https://arxiv.org/abs/2008.04521>

The Effects of Face Coverings and Remote Microphone Technology on Speech Perception in the Classroom <https://amandarudge.com/the-effects-of-face-coverings-and-remote-microphone-technology-on-speech-perception-in-the-classroom/> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)