

# Children, Young People and Education Committee

## Sixth Senedd Priorities Consultation

July 2021

In order to help inform our strategic planning and forward work programme, we are asking for your views on what you think, at this stage, our **main priorities should be during the Sixth Senedd (2021-2026)**. Where overlaps between committee remits exist, we will ensure that relevant issues are shared with other committees.

**5. What do you consider to be the main priorities or issues that the Committee should consider during the Sixth Senedd? Where possible, please set out your view about how the Committee could address them.**

### About Us

The National Deaf Children's Society seeks to create a world without barriers for deaf children, young people and their families. We support children and young people with all levels of deafness, from mild through to profound, including those with temporary hearing loss and a unilateral loss.

### Theme 1: School-age education

**Additional Learning Needs Reforms:** A new [system](#) for planning support for disabled learners has begun to come into force this September 2021. Unfortunately, we have grave concerns that there has been much confusion among professionals around when the reforms come in and who is eligible for a support plan.

In particular, we are extremely disappointed that lead officials have presented professionals with incorrect information around eligibility for a support plan. While we are currently working with the Welsh Government to resolve some of these issues in a technical note, discussions around other aspects of mis-messaging (specifically around incorrectly classing targeted support provided by specialist sensory services as "universal learning provision" which does not qualify for an IDP) are still ongoing. This is presenting difficulties since the reforms are already in force for some groups of learners.

We are mindful that mis-messages have been spread far and wide and are having a significant impact on the implementation of the legislation, undermining the ethos of providing a support plan for learners with a range of levels of need and leading the way for exacerbating a post-code lottery of support as well as a likely increase in the number of appeals to Education Tribunal. We would welcome the Committee's support both in seeking urgent clarification on these matters and in the ongoing monitoring of the implementation of the reforms, given the widespread nature of this misinformation.

**Coronavirus:** We would welcome the opportunity to support the Committee in investigating the ongoing issues Covid is creating for ALN learners, including deaf children and young people, as a specific group. While many professionals have worked very hard during the pandemic, and everyone has faced difficulties, deaf children and young people have faced a number of specific challenges such as restrictions on access to remote learning/specialist support and peripatetic teachers of the deaf during the pandemic. Deaf students have also experienced difficulties due to

the barriers face coverings present to communication, and difficulties with isolation and emotional wellbeing through not being able to access their usual support networks in the same way.

We are grateful that the Welsh Government has consistently acknowledged the barriers face coverings present for deaf learners in its guidance. However, on the ground, this guidance as well as other guidance on specialist support has not been consistently followed.

As the pandemic continues, we are keen to increase understanding of accessible adaptations that can be made and to ensure that deaf learners are provided with support to address gaps that may have occurred in their learning. In addition, we are mindful of the longer-term changes we may see as a result of Covid. In some areas, there are early discussions about changing service delivery to online only on a permanent basis. Such changes need to be approached with caution – while remote service delivery has been useful during the pandemic, it is not necessarily an appropriate substitute for face to face support in the longer term. Suggestions to change services on a permanent basis must not be overly focused on cost saving and must look at effectiveness of delivery.

## Theme 2: Further and higher education

**Universities:** The National Deaf Children's Society Cymru is keen to ensure that universities across Wales support the access needs of deaf students with the return of the academic year. Universities will be implementing coronavirus guidance which could involve the use of face coverings and home working, measures which we know have presented significant challenges for deaf students. We would welcome support from the Committee in supporting universities to ensure such measures are inclusive of deaf students, so they do not negatively impact deaf students.

The National Deaf Children's Society recently ran a UK wide survey of deaf students in Higher Education. The majority of respondents said working from home worsened their mental health, left them feeling lonelier and that online lectures were inaccessible in many cases. If left unaddressed, we will continue to see deaf students face barriers both academically and within their wellbeing. This will leave deaf students unable to achieve their goals and aspirations. With the right support, deaf students can achieve on par with their hearing peers both academically and within the world of work.

**Further Education:** We are mindful that implementation details of the ALN reform roll out for post 16 learners have yet to be published. As highlighted in discussion with the previous Committee, we feel there is potential for a conflict of interest in the new funding arrangements for post 16 ALN support and would welcome careful consideration of relevant checks and balances.

**Careers Advice:** The development of the new ALN Code saw the downgrading of the former duty to invite a careers advisor to be involved in reviews of support plans as learners reach key transition stages. Our concern was shared by the former Children, Young People and Education Committee, which made a clear recommendation on the matter in its reports to the Minister on the ALNET Act and the development of the Code. Despite this, the duty to involve careers advisors was not enhanced in the final Code. We are aware that many deaf, and indeed ALN learners generally, feel they would benefit from more tailored careers advice. As such, we would welcome the Committee's support to consider this matter further as part of the monitoring of the implementation of the reforms.

### Theme 3: Health and well-being, including social care (as they relate to children and young people)

**Coronavirus:** The majority of deaf young people who responded to our survey in Wales reported a decline in their mental health due to social isolation. Some of this social isolation is down to the widespread use of face coverings in social settings which makes lip reading, seeing facial expressions and understanding visual cues difficult. Many support services have also moved online, which has not been without difficulties. Indeed 63% of parents we surveyed said their deaf child finds it difficult to follow services such as online teaching.

**Health:** We have highlighted a number of priorities to the Health Committee. This includes the need for health professionals to understand their duties under the Additional Learning Needs Code and for investment in audiology to reduce waiting times.

### Theme 4: Children and young people

**Close the Gap:** National Deaf Children's Society Cymru is working to close the attainment gap in education between deaf and hearing students. Deafness itself is not a learning disability. With the right support, deaf students can achieve on a par with their hearing peers. However, Welsh Government statistics [shows](#) deaf students are less likely to reach their potential than their hearing peers.

This gap exists at all stages of education between deaf and hearing students with a shocking 20% gap at the foundational learning phase. For this reason, we are keen to see more investment in specialist support during the early years. While the early years are encompassed within the new ALN reforms, the National Deaf Children's Society is not aware of increased investment in specialist sensory services in order to match the increased age range under the new ALN legislation.

**Access to British Sign Language:** In 2004, the Welsh Government recognised British Sign Language (BSL) as a language in its own right. However, work to improve access to the language for learners must go further. A Welsh Government [review](#) of access to British Sign Language for adults revealed that families of deaf children are often unable to access opportunities to learn BSL. We need to see a continued commitment to address this issue in the sixth Senedd.

We know that both deaf and hearing children are keen to learn BSL. From our survey, four out of five young people in Wales want to see more opportunities for them to learn the language. We are pleased to see an emphasis within the BSL guidance for the new curriculum on encouraging the teaching of BSL in schools. We believe that the next step is to now review the infrastructure to support this, particularly with the upcoming development of a BSL GCSE.

In addition, we would welcome moves to review the availability of Communication Support Workers with an appropriate level of BSL to support BSL users in our schools.

**Service Cuts:** Deaf children are at risk of seeing local authorities across Wales cut funding and restructure vital support services. As Wales comes out of the pandemic, it is vital to protect these essential services and ensure that any permanent changes to the delivery of services are given thorough consideration. For example, while accessing a Teacher of the Deaf remotely has been better than losing the service altogether during the pandemic, many families have commented on how difficult it is for their child to engage in this way – especially younger children.