

National Deaf Children's Society Cymru response to the Health and Social Care Committee's consultation on the impact of the waiting times backlog on people in Wales who are waiting for diagnosis or treatment

January 2022

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 aged 0-25 with all levels of deafness, from mild through to profound, including those with temporary hearing loss and a unilateral loss.

Audiology waiting times

We wish to draw the Committee's attention to the urgent action required to address exceptionally long waiting times in paediatric audiology services in parts of Wales. We are aware that in some areas, deaf children are waiting months over the target times – **many are waiting well over a year to be seen.**

We appreciate the difficulty the NHS has faced in meeting the needs of patients during the pandemic and that many audiologists across the country are working hard under difficult circumstances. However, some of these difficulties stem from staffing shortages that pre-date the pandemic and audiology services do appear underfunded in comparison to other services. Audiology services in many parts of Wales were already under pressure and have been placed under further pressure as a result of Coronavirus.

Such significantly long waiting times cannot continue. Waiting on audiology support places deaf children at significant risk as changes in hearing loss are not supported accordingly. This can have a significant detrimental impact on a child's access to language, as well as their educational and social development. In addition, the social barriers that may also arise can lead to feelings of isolation and take a strain on emotional wellbeing.

Such extortionate delays can have a lasting impact on the lives of children and their families for many years to come. This will, in turn, also vastly increase the public cost of support for children as their needs would likely be greater without timely audiological support.

It is our understanding that audiology services struggling with waiting lists have sought to prioritise urgent cases. However, we know of one service that is also facing significant backlogs with urgent referrals. As a result children in this region are facing significant delays in an initial diagnosis and accessing support. The impact of later diagnosis and interventions can have wide ranging and long - lasting effects for children's development and emotional wellbeing.

The National Deaf Children's Society Cymru is well aware of examples of positive work in Wales which seek to consistently drive service quality forward – for example, the national Paediatric Audiology Quality Standards and the Welsh Government's Hearing Well Project Board. However, without addressing staff shortages and the issues behind the capacity of a number of our services in Wales to deliver target waiting times, the ability of services to meet patient needs are greatly diminished.

The National Deaf Children's Society considers emergency funding would help to alleviate these urgent backlogs in the short term and urges that paediatric audiology services are clearly identified as a priority area for such funding. However, an additional commitment to longer-term investment and a detailed plan for addressing the underlying capacity issues in many of our services is also essential.

Given that the interventions provided by paediatric audiology services hold such impact for the wider health, education and social outcomes of children, we would urge the Welsh Government to highlight paediatric audiology as a priority area for resource allocation by health boards. We would also call on the Welsh Government to ensure that waiting times across our paediatric audiology services are thoroughly considered when reviewing health board backlog and recovery plans.

Deaf Children Today Survey

Findings from the National Deaf Children's Society's Deaf Children Today 2021 Survey Report supports our concerns that, in many parts of Wales, audiology services are struggling with significant backlogs.

The survey results showed that families in Wales have found it more difficult to access audiology services throughout the pandemic. Previously around 80%+ of our survey respondents reported finding accessing audiology services easy. This dropped to 58% in 2020 with 42% our respondents finding accessing audiology difficult.

Average parent satisfaction of the audiology service also declined. Typically, our survey has shown that families hold audiology services in high regard. However, between 2019-2021 we saw the approval rate drop by almost 25 percentage points.

More information

The National Deaf Children's Society has highlighted the above points in a letter to the Health Minister and is due to meet with government officials.

However, given the magnitude of these backlogs, the significant impact that it can have for deaf children for years to come, and the urgency of the need to address the matter, we felt it was important to draw this to the Committee's attention as part of this inquiry.

Please do not hesitate to contact us at campaigns.wales@ndcs.org.uk for further information. Many thanks for taking the time to read our response