

National Deaf Children's Society Cymru Response to the Health and Social Care Committee's Mental Health Inequalities Inquiry

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.

Which groups of people are disproportionately affected by poor mental health in Wales? What factors contribute to worse mental health within these groups?

Deafness and Emotional Wellbeing

Research indicates that deaf children and young people can be more vulnerable to experiencing difficulties with emotional wellbeing – previously, [UK government research](#) suggested that over 40% of deaf children experience mental health difficulties compared to over 25% of hearing children.

Deafness itself does not increase the risk of mental health difficulties, but rather the impact of being deaf in a hearing-orientated world and the challenges deaf young people face therein can increase the incidence. Without appropriate support, deaf children and young people can be vulnerable to isolation, abuse, bullying, poor self-esteem and lower levels of achievement; all factors that can contribute to problems with anxiety and emotional wellbeing.

Covid-19 Impact on Mental Health

The pandemic has presented challenges to emotional wellbeing for many. However, deaf young people have faced particular challenges, such as widespread communication difficulties as a result of the use of facemasks and a lack of access to usual specialist support. Nearly 60% of deaf young people who responded to the National Deaf Children Society's UK-wide *Are You Ok* survey indicated that their mental health was worse during the period of lockdown.

This was echoed in other research and feedback we have received from our members during the pandemic.

"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)

"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)

"He is 14, is oral only, and would feel even more isolated if he had no hearing aids. It's awful, it's having a major impact on his mental health." (Parent of a deaf child on the impact of extended waiting times for audiology appointments during the pandemic.)

For the groups identified, what are the barriers to accessing mental health services? How effectively can existing services meet their needs, and how could their experience of using mental health services be improved?

Leads for deafness in CAMHS and pathways to specialist services

Formerly, the Welsh Government called for all health boards to assign a lead to help champion the need for accessible mental health support for deaf young people, raise awareness of the increased vulnerability for this group, and assist with referrals through to specialist and specific Deaf CAMHS support across the border in England, where appropriate. There was also a need identified for clear referral pathways for such services.

Unfortunately, we are concerned that these lead roles no longer appear to be in place/are not easily identified in most of the health boards. Given the vulnerability deaf young people face and the increased pressure of the pandemic, we would be keen to work with the Welsh Government to look at how these roles could be rejuvenated. We are also keen to seek assurances that clear pathways to specialist deaf CAMHS are sufficiently in place, and to consider whether further specialist deaf CAMHS provision is required.

Online Services

We understand that many different types of services are considering the extent to which they may be able to deliver online in the future. While there are benefits to delivering services online, there can be access difficulties for deaf young people too. For example, video quality can make lip-reading difficult and automatic subtitling programmes are not always accurate, and some platforms are easier than others for pinning interpreters.

Wherever mental health support services may be considering delivering aspects of its services online, it is important to consider access and communication needs and to liaise with individual patients around whether remote sessions work for their individual needs and, if so, whether any support is needed.

Accessible services

It is imperative that mental health services are easily accessible for deaf people. This involves ensuring that those operating our mental health services are aware of and [meeting](#) the All Wales Standards for Accessible Communication and Information for People with Sensory Loss. It also involves making sure that there are accessible ways to contact a service. The National Deaf Children's Society Cymru would welcome moves to emphasise the importance of these standards and to review compliance.

Furthermore, given the increased vulnerability of deaf young people to experience mental health difficulties, it is important to encourage services to undertake deaf awareness training.

Emotional Wellbeing support within education

The National Deaf Children's Society ran a UK wide survey of deaf students in Higher Education. The majority said the pandemic worsened their mental health, left them feeling lonelier and that online lectures tended to be inaccessible. We would welcome the Committee's support in encouraging universities to ensure that wellbeing and counselling services offered by universities are appropriately accessible.

The National Deaf Children's Society runs Healthy Minds, a CPD accredited [training course](#). This course helps professionals to develop strategies alongside deaf young people for dealing with change, managing deafness and developing confidence. We would welcome any support in sharing details of this training.

To what extent does Welsh Government policy recognise and address the mental health needs of these groups? Where are the policy gaps?

Programme for Government

The Welsh Government's recent programme for government recognises the impact of Covid-19 on the mental health of children. It goes on to state that detrimental mental health has a negative impact on learner attainment. The National Deaf Children's Society Cymru understands that deaf children and young people are vulnerable in this way.

We are pleased that the Welsh Government has previously worked with us to emphasise the need for deaf accessibility within some of its mental health initiatives. For example, there is a section on deafness in the Welsh Government toolkit for school counsellors as well as reference to deaf access needs in government Covid-19 guidance for school counsellors issued during lockdown.

It is imperative that, as the Welsh Government continues to look at ways to address ongoing mental health difficulties, the specific needs of deaf children and young people across Wales are considered within such initiatives.

In addition to ensuring that mainstream and wider initiatives are accessible to and inclusive of deaf young people, we also feel that consideration is needed of specialist support for deaf young people. Indeed, some deaf young people may require access to CAMHS that specialises in deafness, such as those across the border in England. As outlined above, we feel it is important that the Welsh Government ensures leads on deafness and mental health are active across our health boards and that clear pathways are in place for accessing CAMHS specialising in deafness where this is appropriate.

Wellbeing Support

In addition to looking at mental health, we are keen that Welsh Government has a cross-governmental approach to maintaining positive wellbeing. In recognising that accessibility to general services such as education and leisure play a significant role in promoting positive emotional wellbeing, we feel it is also important to ensure that groups vulnerable to mental health difficulties also have good access to such services.

What further action is needed, by whom/where, to improve mental health and outcomes for the groups of people identified and reduce mental health inequalities in Wales?

Summary

The National Deaf Children's Society is delighted to have had the opportunity to respond to this inquiry as many deaf young people tell us that accessing support for emotional wellbeing is an important issue that they are keen to see addressed.

In particular, the National Deaf Children's Society Cymru recommends:

- That the Welsh Government seeks assurances that clear pathways are in place for deaf young people in Wales to access to specialist deaf CAMHS services (currently in England)

where needed. We would also welcome consideration of whether further specialist support services are required.

- That the Welsh Government seeks to reinstate designated leads/champions on deafness and mental health in each of the health boards.
- That services are reminded of the need to carefully consult with individuals whenever considering moving to remote service delivery. Where services are remote, they must meet individual access needs.
- That the Welsh Government seeks to ensure the All Wales Standards for Accessible Communication and Information for People with Sensory Loss are being utilised and met by mental health services across the country.
- That universities are encouraged to ensure emotional wellbeing support is accessible for deaf people.
- That in all general initiatives to improve emotional wellbeing, the access needs of deaf children and young people are emphasised and considered.
- That mental health support services across Wales are encouraged to undertake deaf awareness training.

More information

The National Deaf Children's Society Cymru would welcome the opportunity to discuss these points further and to feed into the discussions around these developments. Please do not hesitate to contact us at campaigns.wales@ndcs.org.uk.

Many thanks for taking the time to read our response.