

Education and Skills Committee inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable children

National Deaf Children's Society submission, May 2020

1. About us:

- 1.1. We are the National Deaf Children's Society, the leading charity for deaf children. We give expert support on childhood deafness, raise awareness and campaign for deaf children's rights, so they have the same opportunities as everyone else. There are over 3,000 deaf children in Scotland. We are here for every deaf child who needs us – no matter what their level or type of deafness or how they communicate. We support deaf children, young people, and their families. We work with decision-makers and professionals to overcome the barriers that hold deaf children back.

2. Introduction:

- 2.1. Deaf children and young people already face significant educational barriers in life. The effects of the Covid-19 situation and 'lockdown' measures are presenting additional significant barriers for this group.
- 2.2. We know that, with the right support, deaf children and young people can achieve just as well as any other child or young person. Yet, action will need to be taken to ensure that deaf children and young people, as much as possible, continue to receive the support they need and are not further disadvantaged in the longer term.
- 2.3. The evidence in this submission has been gathered from: our members, who are families of deaf children, deaf young people in our Young Campaigners group, and experts working with deaf children across our organisation.

3. Evidence:

- 3.1.1. In the following sections, we list our evidence of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and 'lockdown' measures on the education of deaf children and young people.

3.2. Impact of late diagnosis of deafness:

- 3.2.1. The new-born hearing screening programme is still operating, however we are aware of health boards who have temporarily suspended this service. We are keen to understand the monitoring process being undertaken by the National Services Division in terms of identifying and resolving issues in health boards.
- 3.2.2. We are also aware that routine audiology appointments have been cancelled in most cases. This means that audiology services are unable to formally diagnose whether a child is deaf, following a referral from the new-born hearing screening or elsewhere. There is likely to be a significant backlog once services return to normal. This will then

have a knock-on impact for specialist education services that support deaf children in the home throughout the early years stage.

*“Audiology is closed and we were due a visit and there were some things we wanted to discuss.”
(Parent of deaf child)*

“Not being able to get his hearing aid batteries. I have had to actually purchase them if I can find them. It’s frustrating.” (Deaf young person).

3.2.3. There will be a cohort of deaf children who will be diagnosed later than they would be usually. Depending on how long the wait is, this brings a risk that these deaf children won’t have the same opportunities for early intervention. They may be going without vital support. This can then result in language and communication development being delayed.

Recommendation:

The Scottish Government will need to urgently oversee the development of an action plan to address this backlog of children awaiting a diagnosis of deafness, once the crisis has passed. Emergency funding should be provided as needed, particularly to ensure that intensive early intervention support can be provided to ameliorate the effects of late identification.

3.3. Issues around lack of specialist support:

3.3.1. Deaf children of all ages rely on support from specialist professionals such as Teachers of the Deaf, communication support workers, specialist teaching assistants, speech and language therapists and deaf role models. In addition, families also rely on support and advice around language and communication from Teachers of the Deaf, particularly in the early years. Most, if not all, of these professionals have stopped routinely meeting with deaf children, young people and their families.

3.3.2. Whilst many local authority specialist education services for deaf children are continuing to provide support remotely, this is not available consistently across Scotland. This is for a range of reasons – including redeployment of key staff, staff having to self-isolate, or issues around IT infrastructure. Less than 1% of children are accessing local authority education hubs in Scotland, with 86% of those being children of key workers and only 14% are vulnerable children (as at Wednesday, 22nd April 2020).

3.3.3. In addition, where support can be provided remotely, this may not be accessible to some deaf children unless additional communication support is provided – e.g. remote speech to text or sign language interpreters. Some families may not have computers/tablets to be able to access remote support.

3.3.4. The lack of specialist support for deaf children and the wider family is one of the most concerning issues for our members.

3.3.5. Deaf young people who need support with transitions and moving into the next phase of education or employment may be affected and not be receiving the support required at this time. Deaf young people have told us that, before Covid-19, there were significant challenges in receiving specialist and tailored careers advice. There is therefore a risk that the crisis will make a bad situation worse, resulting in many deaf young people falling through the net and significant future disadvantage for this cohort.

3.4. **Issues around lack of specialist equipment:**

3.4.1. Deaf children may use specialist equipment – such as radio aids – in education. Radio aids are used with hearing aids and cochlear implants and help to amplify sound so that deaf children can hear speech more clearly, without background noise.

3.4.2. We believe that deaf children should be able to use radio aids at home. Some deaf children may benefit from the opportunity to use their radio aids to access online lessons (by connecting their radio aid to a computer) or to connect with family members.

3.4.3. Despite this, some local authorities have a policy of not allowing deaf children to take radio aids home and do not appear to have relaxed this policy in the current crisis. In our CRIDE 2018 survey, 67% of local authorities reported that they do not allow equipment, such as radio aids, to be taken home.

“I think all children should have access to radio aids especially for use at home.” (Parent of deaf child)

Recommendations:

The Scottish Government has issued guidance on vulnerable children, including children with CSPs. However, only a small minority of deaf children are issues with a Coordinated Support Plan. We recommend that the Scottish Government should publish separate guidance on support for disabled children. This guidance should:

- set out expectations for how disabled children and their families should still be supported and have their needs met. This should include support for pre-school deaf children and support around transitions;
- be clear on what ‘so far as reasonably practicable’ means in practice if CSPs are suspended;
- require local authorities and schools to make radio aids and other specialist equipment available to families to use at the home; and
- ask local authorities and schools to fund additional communication support if needed to access online teaching or learning.

3.5. **Accessibility issues in terms of online and remote learning:**

3.5.1. Where children and young people are being provided with home learning materials, there are issues around whether they can access this content without their usual specialist support (e.g. communication support worker or specialist teaching assistant). The content is not always being differentiated for their specific learning needs. 75% of Scottish respondents to our survey said they were having issues with the accessibility of resources.

“School haven’t sent back appropriate work for our son’s learning disability. Only work for his class has been sent home.” (Parent of deaf child)

3.5.2. Where children and young people are being asked to engage in online teaching or learning, there are significant issues around accessibility. For example, not all video content has subtitles or is translated into British Sign Language.

3.5.3. There is concern that accessibility continues to be an afterthought. As far as we can tell, the importance of accessibility is not highlighted on government webpages for parents or professionals in Scotland on home learning at this time.

Recommendations:

We recommend that Scottish Government widen the criteria for its equipment fund so that deaf and other disabled children can be provided with laptop/tablets and 4G routers where needed, enabling them to access any online learning and remote support.

We recommend that the Scottish Government produce guidance for online education providers on accessibility for deaf and other disabled children and/or signpost to resources produced by others. Additional funding should be considered to ensure existing content is accessible if capacity prevents them from doing so quickly. They should also ensure that accessibility is not an afterthought in any future commissioning of online resources.

3.6. Concerns around education plans:

3.6.1. The Coronavirus (Scotland) Act gives the Scottish Government the power to issue a notice that would effectively suspend the requirement on local authorities to provide any support set out in an Coordinated Support Plan. Instead, local authorities and schools would apply duties ‘as far as reasonably practicable’ to ensure that any required support is provided.

3.6.2. We believe it would be helpful for the Scottish Government to set out clear guidelines of what ‘as far as reasonably practicable’ might look like in practice, and how these powers should be used.

3.7. Issues in higher education:

- 3.7.1. We are aware that many universities are still continuing remote lessons (e.g. online lectures). There is a concern around the accessibility of any online teaching. Deaf students are likely to be disadvantaged by any online teaching unless proactive reasonable adjustments are made. Some students may require more communication support from Disabled Students Allowance. It is unclear how flexible and responsive this will be.
- 3.7.2. A similar issue applies with the accessibility of any online assessments or exams. Whilst exams have been cancelled for schools and colleges, we understand that some universities are continuing some remote assessments in a way which isn't accessible for deaf young people. This presents them at a significant disadvantage – we believe it should be seen as unlawful under the Equality Act.

“I had a young deaf person on a chat last week about problems with her dissertation advisor. No communicating, no organising meetings...She told me she received an email from said dissertation advisor, telling her that she was going to have a facetime or skype assessment conversation (counting towards her dissertation). The young person told him that she can't hear properly via skype or facetime, but he insisted that they have to do it this way due to corona virus.” (Staff member at the National Deaf Children's Society)

Recommendations:

The Scottish Government should also publish guidance on support for disabled students in higher education. This should remind higher education institutions of their duties under the Equality Act to make reasonable adjustments, including in any online teaching or remote assessments

The Scottish Government should make clear that additional funding can be provided through Disabled Students Allowance if additional communication support, beyond what is normally provided, is required.

3.8. Cancellation of examinations:

- 3.8.1. This year's National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher exams have been cancelled with schools and colleges required to calculate student grades and ranking using prelim or mock papers, additional tasks or assignments, performance or practical evidence. Estimates will be moderated by the SQA. We are concerned that deaf young people may be disadvantaged by this due to reliance on evidence that may have been collected for situations where deaf students did not have fair access. The consequences of not having full access to an assessment would not have been known to a deaf student at the time it took place. There is no student appeal process available and there appears to be little accountability in place for the type of evidence used by schools and colleges.
- 3.8.2. For some vocational qualifications, calculated grades will also be used and the above concerns will apply. For other qualifications, it is expected an adapted assessment will take place. We are concerned that in the haste to create adapted, online/remote

assessments awarding bodies will not consider the accessibility of these for all learners. Any video materials will need to be subtitled and some students will require additional time.

Recommendations:

The SQA should seek evidence from specialists that work with the student, such as a Teacher of the Deaf. This could help determine how well the student would have performed in an exam where access arrangements and reasonable adjustments were in place.

The SQA should publish an equality impact assessment on the decision to use a school's previous exam results to moderate individual pupil grades.

The SQA should be required to be transparent about the evidence they have used to calculate grades and ranking.

There should be a meaningful and timely appeals process for students with disabilities.

Data should be collected by the SQA which evaluates the calculated grades given to deaf candidates and compares those with outcomes from previous years. If there is disparity in outcomes then we believe remedial action must be taken.

Clear guidance should be published for vocational qualification awarding bodies on developing adapted assessments which outlines practical steps that they should take to avoid disadvantaging groups at risk.

4. Face masks and coverings in education

4.1. It should be noted that the use of face masks and coverings by in education would present very significant challenges to how deaf children and young people access learning. In some cases, there may be little point in deaf children attending school. Requiring them to do so, when they cannot understand their teachers or peers, could do significant harm to their wellbeing. At the time of writing, it is unclear if this option is being considered. If it is, we would urge the Scottish Government to seriously consider the practical implications of this for deaf children and young people. We would be happy to work with Scottish Government colleagues on this issue.

5. Contact for more information:

5.1. If you would like additional information from deaf young people and families on how Covid-19 is affecting them please contact campaigns.scotland@ndcs.org.uk.