

Health and Social Care Committee request for written evidence on the Welsh Government's plan for transforming and modernising planned care and reducing waiting lists

National Deaf Children's Society Cymru Response

June 2022

About Us

The National Deaf Children's Society is the national charity dedicated to creating 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.

Introduction

We understand that the NHS has faced unprecedented pressure over the course of the pandemic and that staff have been working hard under very difficult circumstances. However, in many areas children are waiting long periods of time for a paediatric audiology appointment.

The National Deaf Children's Society Cymru welcomes the Welsh Government's commitment to prioritise children in early diagnosis and treatment and to assess children's waiting times differently to that of adults. It is important that target waiting times are not extended. We know how important early diagnosis can be for deaf children and young people. Delays in diagnosis can have significant impact on deaf children's language development, as well as their educational and social opportunities. The significant impact of delayed diagnosis has been recently highlighted within the BAA report into failings of audiology services in Lothian, Scotland.

Audiology

The National Deaf Children's Society Cymru is aware of significantly increased waiting times in many of our paediatric audiology services across Wales. Some are waiting well over a year to be seen. While there are certainly some underlying staffing shortages, the pandemic has further exacerbated these waiting times.

We note that the plan emphasises the need to focus on the clinically urgent and, while we understand and appreciate this, we would also emphasise that we also need to recognise the importance of not allowing long waiting times for review paediatric audiology appointments to continue. Indeed, access to review and routine appointments in paediatric audiology can be important in ensuring that a child has the appropriate support in place and that changing needs are met. Without this, children can be vulnerable to difficulties in their learning and social development as well as feelings of isolation and difficulties with emotional wellbeing.

In noting the emphasis within the plan on patient initiated follow-up, we would highlight the importance of ensuring that patients are aware of accessible means for contacting services across the board. We would also highlight that the context of an emphasis on patient initiated follow-up is different in different types of health services. For services such as paediatric audiology, patient initiated appointments are important, but routine appointments are also important and should not be discarded. They play a significant role in ensuring ongoing accessibility and picking up changing

needs. This is particularly important in paediatric audiology where parents may not always be able to accurately pick up how a child's hearing is changing.

We would like to see Welsh Government prioritise paediatric audiology as an area for investment during covid recovery. Given the difficulties with staff shortages and room availability, this may require some creative “out of the box” thinking and solutions.

In addition to addressing the immediate and pressing waiting times in many departments, we are mindful that there are longer term issues with staffing shortages that need to be resolved. As such, we were pleased to see the plan refer to looking at planning for a sustainable workforce. The National Deaf Children's Society has been delighted that the Welsh Government has recently established a Task and Finish Group to look into the findings of the recent report on failings in audiology services in Lothian in order to see whether there are learnings from this report in Scotland for Wales. As part of this work, consideration is being given to the audiology workforce in Wales. We urge that the Welsh Government takes on board the findings of this group and considers how to address these matters in the longer term.

Digital Working

We are mindful of increasing moves towards remote appointments and digital working. It is important that in making such moves, thorough consideration is given to access requirements. For example, for deaf patients, picture and audio quality as well as captioning or BSL interpretation could be important in order to access such an appointment. It is also important to consider patient preference and whether remote appointments are always an appropriate format. For example, it might be difficult to engage a young child in an assessment remotely.

The National Deaf Children's Society Cymru would welcome a clear caution within the plan regarding the above.

The NHS Estate

We welcome that the Welsh Government recognises the need to better utilise the healthcare estate. Availability of rooms for audiological testing can be an issue for services looking to provide extra clinics in order to reduce waiting times.

Mental Health

Research suggests that deaf young people are 60% more likely to experience mental health problems than other children.¹ It is not deafness itself that increases the incidence, but rather the barriers faced from living in a hearing-orientated world.

Previously, the Welsh Government called for all health boards in Wales to appoint a lead to assist with general awareness of the increased incidence of emotional wellbeing difficulties among the young deaf population and to aid referrals through to specialist deaf CAMHS in England. Unfortunately, the National Deaf Children's Society Cymru understands that these posts are no longer in place across many of our health boards. We would welcome moves by the Welsh Government to ensure that these roles are re-established and to again consider the support needs of deaf young people across Wales who require access to mental health support.

¹ Department of Health and National Institute of Mental Health. Towards Equity and Access. 2005.

This is particularly timely as deaf young people and their families have told us that the pandemic has taken a further toll on emotional well-being for many deaf young people. During the pandemic, deaf young people have faced increased barriers such as communication difficulties as a result of facemasks and an inability to access usual levels of learning support.

Social Care

In 2020 we worked alongside RNID Cymru and the Welsh Government on developing guidance for social care workers. Knowing that the number of specialist social workers has been in decline and that the pandemic has impacted on social care needs, we are keen to see the publication of this guidance.

Speech and Language Therapy

With the introduction of the Additional Learning Needs Reforms in Wales and the availability of Individual Development Plans to children in the early years, specialist deaf speech and language therapists will be in even higher demand than previously. The early years play a significant role in a child's development and access to speech and language therapy early on can be crucial.

We understand that access to such specialist professionals can already be a postcode lottery and would be keen for the Welsh Government to give further consideration to this matter.

More information

The National Deaf Children's Society Cymru would welcome the opportunity to discuss these points further and receive some clarifications. Please do not hesitate to contact us at campaigns.wales@ndcs.org.uk for further information.

Thank you for taking the time to read our response.