

Cross Party Group on Deaf Issues | Minutes

Tuesday, 12:15pm, 17th November 2020 – Via Zoom

Attendees

Dai Lloyd AM – Chair

Mark Isherwood - AM

Callum Mclean – Wales Council for Deaf People (Secretariat, Minute taker)

Debbie Thomas - Head of Policy and Influencing, National Deaf Children's Society Cymru

Karen Robson – Director, RNID

Michael Britland – Community Services Manager, Hearing Link/ Hearing Dogs for Deaf People

Michelle Fowler – Advocacy Co-ordinator, British Deaf Association

Miriam Grimshaw – Personal Assistant, Deaf Hub Wales

Nicola George – Hearing Therapist, Cardiff & Vale LHB

Nigel Williams – South Wales Cochlear Implant Support Group

Steven Emery – Manager, Deaf Hub Wales

Tracey Bancroft – Fundraiser Support, Deaf Hub Wales

Communication Support

Hilary Maclean – Speech to Text Reporter

Cathryn McShane – BSL interpreter

Apologies

Louise McGrath – CEO, Wales Council for Deaf People

Sarah Thomas – Head of Service, COS

Anthony Evans – Interpreter, Visual Language Professionals

Chair welcomed all to the meeting and apologized for needing to leave during it as he had a meeting with the health minister at 12:30pm. He then invited Debbie Thomas to present the first agenda item.

Update from National Deaf Children's Society – Additional Learning Needs Reforms & Covid-19

Debbie began by reporting the Welsh Government plans on launching the ALN reforms in September 2021. Potential issues were then discussed relating to this such as a draft of the reforms having been seen last by NDCS during March 2019 when it was released for consultation, yet the issues raised during that time have yet to be responded to. Other issues included details of eligibility, as the letter of the law states that anyone with a disability which hinders or prevents access to an education would be eligible for an Individual Development Plan, however Debbie has heard from regional transformation leads and others that they foresee IDP's will only be given to those with complex needs, as they believe those who have reasonable adjustments made under the Equality Act would not be eligible for an IDP. The NDCS has sought legal advice from multiple sources and

have been told that these are indeed separate things, and that any child with a hearing loss should have access to an IDP, regardless of any reasonable adjustments made.

They have raised this with the ALN Branch however they have yet to receive a proper response, possibly due to the pandemic. Debbie offered to draft a letter to be sent on behalf of this group to the ALN branch as they fear the responses to the draft code will not be changed in time.

Debbie also updated the group regarding the NDCS' new toolkit launching soon by the name of 'my futures' which will be focused on aiding Deaf young people into the workplace, and being informed on their workplace rights, they also mentioned their helpline is still available during this time.

Lastly, Debbie raised concerns regarding the possibility of face masks being made mandatory in secondary schools, and notes whilst they appreciate the public health concern, an emphasis needs to be pushed on individual assessments & how reasonable adaptations can be made in classes that include deaf children.

Face Covering Guidance – Karen Robson, RNID

Karen introduced herself as the interim director of RNID (formerly Action on Hearing Loss) and discussed the organisation's recently changed name to better reflect their purpose.

They began by mentioning a meeting the previous day with Welsh Government officials, in which one of them had put forward some amendments to the Welsh Gov's facemask guidance. Clarity has been added to the section of mask exemptions, such as if you were communicating with somebody who needed to lipread, and no clear face coverings were available, also noting that clear face coverings were being acknowledged, whilst having their limitations, are proving to be useful for people with additional communication needs. They also made note of an additional section that will be created in the guidance which includes health and social care staff & the use of clear face coverings, which Nicola will later expand upon. It was also added that the UK Government has purchased a bulk of clear facemasks which were distributed in August 2020 across the 4 nations. In Wales these were allocated to NHS providers, social care & local authority workers. It was noted such masks would likely only be available in professional settings for now, due to their cost and safety testing.

Karen has also asked that the Welsh Government raises patient awareness of the availability and option to request a clear face covering to be worn during their appointment. It was added that many patients are likely unaware that such masks exist in the first place and Karen believes there is a government communication issue. An example of this would also be, for example, if a Deaf individual was shopping and a shop assistant had their mask on, the Deaf person may ask for the mask to be lowered for a moment whilst they communicate, which would be a reasonable adjustment, however as this has not been stated clearly in the guidance, it is causing problems and disruptions amongst hospitality workers and deaf people.

(Chair Dai Lloyd had to leave the meeting – rest of meeting was chaired by Callum Mclean)

Nicola introduced herself, and added that Audiology of the NHS were given 88 free masks, and further purchased 432 masks (18 boxes, 24 masks per box). The masks are £80 per box and are single use. Nicola then demonstrated to the group a clear mask (the protective film coating on the mask was not removed so it could be used in future as to not be wasted). She also noted that the masks are not on an NHS contract and have to be purchased from the supplying company directly, which in turn means each clinic besides the cochlear implant team would need to assess a patient's hearing levels and deem if a clear mask should be used due to their high cost and low availability. Nicola also added they are receiving feedback and collating it as patient's have had a positive response to said masks. Nicola is hoping this would add much needed weight on the government to look into lowering the cost of the masks which would in turn make the masks available in all other NHS departments for patients who have appointments for everything unrelated to their hearing too. The hopes would then be for the mask availability to be advertised and patients to be able to request that staff wear one if needed.

Karen thanked Nicola for her input as being a direct user & experiencing the clear masks & communicating with deaf people.

Nigel commented that he attended the Cochlear Implant Clinic recently in the University Hospital of Wales in Cardiff and the clear masks were in use by staff then, he added they were extremely helpful, and added that he had purchased some clear masks himself online.

Karen replied stating that we must be mindful of what clear masks are being purchased by individuals, as some have a similar appearance but do not have the approval to be distributed to a medical clinical environment, and added there will potentially be a FAQs section added to the clear face covering section of the government guidelines.

Debbie thanked Nicola for the demo and Karen for her points. They then added that the NDCS's position on the clear masks is that they are not in a position to endorse any brand or type in particular, but urge the Welsh Government to continue looking into all of the available options, as the more grade appropriate masks available, the better.

Debbie then added she would email Callum with points she would like to be mentioned in this new guidance, such as education and the use of clear facemasks there as well as the importance of an assessment & working with teachers of the deaf, deaf children and their families. She also added that in certain circumstances they have also been made aware that the clear masks may still need to be lowered for communication as they can muffle sound, but would still like to promote the use and overall availability of said masks.

Michelle introduced herself and questioned the use of masks with BSL interpreters in hospital settings and what the guidelines are for them.

Nicola answered by stating the government guidelines' mandatory use of a face covering inside public buildings, and so any interpreter should have a facemask on their person either way, however if an interpreter did attend and a clear mask was still needed, the department could provide one for the interpreter, however this will vary from individual to individual and would not be a clear cut solution for all. They also mentioned that the mask design causes discomfort for some and the possibility to fog up the mask depending on cheek size. She implores the government to support entrepreneurial opportunities for alternative mask designs.

Mark Isherwood AM made the group aware that he had raised this in the chamber on September 15th 2020 and referred to a response from Health Minister Vaughan Gething, which stated that each health board would be receiving 13 boxes of 24 masks and they would then be asked to provide feedback to the Department of Health & Social Care in England. There was also supposedly a survey in October of this year which included the feedback received. Mark added it may be wise for the group to write to the minister asking for an update. He added that health and education settings are a priority as the face masks are more for the people that individuals with a hearing loss communicate with more so than the individuals themselves.

Covid - 19 Briefings & Access – Anthony Evans, BSL Interpreter

Callum received a message from Tony stating he would be unavailable for the meeting as he had a booking last minute, however we had emailed across his points to Callum, which he read verbatim to the group.

The message noted how the Welsh Government responded quickly to his request that the coronavirus briefings included a BSL Interpreter, and whilst there were some initial issues due to the number of people allowed in the room and multiple broadcasters using the same feed, however overall it has been a success.

Tony had also noticed that dependant on if you are watching the coverage via BBC, ITV or Social Media etc. once the slides and statistics are shown, the interpreter is no longer on screen and so there is no context for deaf people watching what the images are depicting, also on some occasions the journalists speaking are not made visible to the camera and so it would be unknown to the deaf people watching who would currently be speaking. Tony invited the group in his message for any suggestions on how broadcasters can improve upon this issue.

Callum invited any comments or questions

Michelle noted that some of the aspects mentioned have indeed been improved, such as reporters asking questions and the interpreter still being visible, however she highlights the issue of whenever graphs or statistics are shown on screen, the presentation makes the interpreters invisible to the viewers, leaving many deaf people to miss out on a lot of the information presented, and suggested that a feed of the interpreter be present in the corner of the screen as it is when journalists are speaking and have the camera focused on them.

Steve introduced himself and commented that when watching the news himself, he finds it much better when an interpreter is physically there live with the speaker whenever possible.

Callum invited further questions or comments from the group and actioned that he would raise the broadcasting accessibility issue with Dai/ those involved as well as reply to Tony updating him on the group's comments/observations, as well as missing information when transitioning to graphs on screen.

Michelle made the group aware that the BDA have done regular translations aimed at the deaf community across all language levels, as some grassroots deaf people may not understand the information directly, and having access to the important information in small, summarised into 5 minute videos has proven very useful.

Callum expressed the usefulness of this and asked if WCDP could help advertise the existence of said videos, to which Michelle responded stating these summaries are uploaded to the Deaf Information Group Cymru on Facebook, as well as a WhatsApp group for those who do not use Facebook.

Any Other Business

Debbie thanked Callum for arranging the meeting, and asked when the next virtual meeting would be taking place, as there is a lot of new things affecting deaf individuals and our organisations' members and queried on if it would be possible to have meetings in a quicker succession/ shorter gap than usual to be able to discuss all of the ever changing points and now that it does not require a physical space to book or meet at, as she is aware some other cross party groups are meeting more frequently during this time.

Callum agreed, auctioning that he would contact Dai's office to get the next two to three meeting dates booked in advance within the span of two months or so instead of the usual every quarter, as things would need to be discussed sooner rather than later with how quickly the environment is changing at the moment.

Michelle added that the use of Zoom was very useful as she finds it to be more Deaf friendly than Microsoft Teams which she has used in the past.

Karen asked as a new member to the group, what the process would be following the closing of the meeting, to which Callum explained the process of the minutes and actions being taken and passed to Dai on behalf of the group. Callum also actioned that Karen would be added as a permanent member of the group and would receive notification of new meeting dates as well as copies of the minutes.

Michael introduced himself and shared with the group a situation in which his parent was in a residential home recently, to which Michael was allowed to visit, and the parent was a lipreader so Michael himself was using a clear mask. He was however concerned with the space at the sides of the mask and the lack of protection that may be offering to others in the room. As he noted his wife has a smaller face to him and so the space between the mask was larger for her. However, before they were allowed to visit his parent, they felt isolated in the residential home as the staff, whilst very caring, had to wear face masks that were not clear, leaving them unable to communicate, however the clear masks did help during the individual's final few weeks.

Karen commented that she had asked the minister initially where the batches of clear masks were going, and if any were being allocated to care homes/ what the criteria for allocation was. As she understands it, none were trialled in care homes. As an organisation they currently have care & support services working with deaf people that are in residential care, and the sense of isolation is a very big factor and a critical issue.

Callum thanked the group for their attendance and the meeting was concluded.

ACTIONS from today's meeting:

➤ **Callum Mclean:**

- Contact the Health Minister re: clear facemask feedback & survey on behalf of CPGDI
- Contact Tony/Dai re: BSL interpreter on Covid briefings – visibility during slides etc.
- Share Deaf Information Group Cymru's Page to WCDP'S Facebook
- Contact Dai's office re: book future CPGDI dates via Zoom & increase frequency to every 2 months
- Add Karen to mailing list for all future CPGDI dates

➤ **Debbie Thomas:**

- Email a draft ALN letter on behalf of group. Send to Dai to sign & forward to relevant minister
- Email points they would like added to new guidance re: facemasks & use in education to Callum