

Carolyn Thomas MS
Chair - Petitions Committee
Senedd Cymru
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff CF99 1SN



23.10.2024

National Deaf Children's Society response to the Petitions Committee

Dear Carolyn,

Thank you for your communication of 18.10.24 regarding Petition P-06-1430 and sight of the letter you have received from Lynne Neagle, the Cabinet Secretary for Education, dated June 2024. On behalf of the National Deaf Children's Society, we are concerned the response from the Cabinet Secretary for Education does not adequately address the petition call for financial commitment to restoring Teacher of the Deaf numbers.

We would urge the committee to keep the petition open and ask further questions of the Welsh Government about how they intend to maintain an adequate supply of specialist qualified teachers to support deaf children in Wales. A Wales-wide workforce strategy will be vital in ensuring deaf children's right to access an education is upheld and we are keen to work with Welsh Government to achieve this.

The number of qualified Teachers of the Deaf (ToD) in Wales working in a peripatetic role has fallen by 17% since 2011. Furthermore, 36% of peripatetic TODs are aged 50 or over, hence are likely to retire (fully and/or phased retirement) over the next decade or so (CRIDE report, 2023-24)ⁱ. The investment in 2018 of £300,000, mentioned by the Cabinet Secretary in her communication whilst most welcome and valued, was relevant to an operating context 6 years ago and assumed a workforce analysis approach to support succession planning. This plan has not even sustained the status quo and has burdened individual local authorities to deal with their workforce challenges in silos. We believe it is essential a national specialist teaching workforce strategy is now developed to sustainably restore and grow this workforce to meet the demands of the current operating context.

There are at least 2,260 deaf children in Wales and 81% of school-aged deaf children attend mainstream schools. The success of their education placement relies heavily on the support of peripatetic qualified Teachers of the Deaf, who are teachers with an additional qualification to offer direct teaching interventions with deaf children according to their mode of communication (English, Welsh, BSL or a combination of all) and to maximise their use of assistive listening technology where appropriate. Qualified ToDs plan and oversee bespoke intervention strategies both at school and with families of deaf children, support with the assessment of learning and progress via specialist and/or differential assessments and offer tailored advice to schools to use technology and help build capacity on the ground.

Therefore, mainstream class teachers, ALNCo's, deaf students and their families alike rely heavily on the skills, knowledge and expertise of the Teacher of the Deaf to ensure their local

education offer is inclusive and supportive of individual deaf children's learning. However, challenges continue for families of deaf children in Wales. Parents/carers tell us;

- Their deaf child is experiencing delays in their development, specifically concerned with language, communications, social development, making friendships and with family relationships.
- Parents tell us their deaf child is always playing catch up in school: ...'*Socially xy finds it hard to play with friends her age and gets very shy. Since having her Cochlear Implants I have seen an improvement in her confidence, but this is not on par with other peers her age. She is also educationally well behind her peers so she has the added element that she has to try and catch up, if she can...*'
- Families tell us they need more help to develop and support communication in their home. Siblings cannot communicate with their deaf sibling. Some families are paying to learn how to communicate with their deaf child. ...'*We have ongoing challenges with xy regarding communicating with him. I (Mum) had to learn BSL very quickly and undertook a year's course to complete some more learning of this. This was extremely hard for us as a family, and xy depended on me every night for bed but when I was not there at bed time he would get upset. I also had to pay for this myself until I got a grant...*'
- For others, delays to accessing free BSL support is costing their deaf child and denying their human right to develop language (oral and/or signed) at the earliest stage.
- One family with deaf twins have developed multiple language modes in their home. This include BLS for one twin and oral Welsh for the other twin. However, the QToD support is delivered in English.
- Parents seek NDCS support as some deaf children feel so lonely and isolated in school, they have developed mental health problems and are at risk of becoming school refusers. Some deaf children are giving up on their education before age 16 years old.
- Families tell us about the lack of suitably qualified support in school, e.g., teaching assistants with BSL level 1 are requested to work with a deaf child who communicates using BSL level 3. This equates to communicating with a secondary school age pupil, using infant-age sign language. Often deaf learners must go without adequately qualified communication support, meaning they miss out on the more academic and challenging aspects of the curriculum, thus limiting their life chances.

We believe deaf children need increased amounts of support from their specialist ToD. We've submitted evidence to the CYPE Inquiry '*Do disabled children have equal access to education and childcare?* (July 2024) and were instrumental to the development of the MS's recommendation 32 that states: '*The Welsh Government sets out a clear delivery plan for addressing gaps in specialist teaching posts, for Teachers of the Deaf, and Teachers of the Visually Impaired, to ensure that all children and young people can access this support when needed. This delivery plan should have clear targets, deliverables, and timeframes so it can be monitored and scrutinised*'. However, we learned earlier this month of the Welsh Government's rejection to this recommendation, citing the same reasons that have been used to inform this response to the Petitions Committee.

We suggest the approach shown by Welsh Government is in danger of letting deaf children down. Coupled with the recent withdrawal of the Welsh BSL GCSE, the emerging narrative suggests deaf education is not making headway and is at risk of falling behind other developments in education. Ultimately, we're concerned that deaf children will pay the long-term price for any short-sighted decision making.

We believe with the right support local authorities can be enabled to cohesively meet the education needs of all deaf learners. In her communication, the Cabinet Secretary mentions there is opportunity to align ALN reform investments and LAEG monies into supporting the professional training of specialist teachers where this addresses additional pressures. We suggest the current operating context reinforces the benefits of a national workforce strategy which is supportive of all local authorities and integral to the delivery of an inclusive education system in Wales. For example,

- ToDs in training currently access both study and placement experience in England or Scotland, however the development of a new training pathway in Wales could bridge this gap and introduce efficiencies.
- Additionally, in line with the aspirations of the Welsh Language and Education Bill it is essential the Welsh speaking ToD workforce is grown (currently only 25% representative) to ensure support for deaf children can be delivered in the Welsh medium.
- Furthermore, planned changes in health services will incrementally increase the demand for more ToDs. The approved policy change to the NewBorn Hearing Screen Wales (NBHSW) programme will achieve earlier identification across all thresholds of deafness, prompting an increased demand for peripatetic ToD support at pre-school age, working across more Early Years settings and the home environment.
- Additionally, current work to include paediatric audiology in the *Future Approach* framework is underway, highlighting unacceptably long waiting times in paediatric audiology. In some cases, young deaf children are waiting for an appointment for half of their current lifetime. Suggested ways forward include increasing the workforce, expanding the offer of clinic appointments into the community and integrated working across health and education systems. A fault line in the number of QTODs will inevitably negatively impact on these plans and intentions, and ultimately fail deaf children.

We would be keen to work with the Welsh Government to consider and develop the elements of a national workforce strategy, to maximise the intentions and aspirations of the ALN reform and Curriculum review. We would proactively seek to achieve synergy with planned changes in other parts of the system, seeking to ensure no deaf child is left behind.

We urge for the Petitions Committee to commit to keeping this petition open and to commit to monitoring closely the changes across the systems that will impact deaf children, alongside the response in education to ensure an adequate Teacher of the Deaf workforce is in place to meet the learning needs of all deaf children.

Yours sincerely

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ⁱ <https://www.ndcs.org.uk/information-and-support/professionals/research-and-data/cride-reports/>