

P-04-481 Close the Gap for deaf pupils in Wales, Correspondence – Petitioner to Committee, 14.05.19

Update from the National Deaf Children's Society Cymru

May 2019

Background



The National Deaf Children's Society Cymru first submitted this petition in May 2013, calling for urgent and clear action to address the attainment gap between deaf learners and their hearing peers. Deafness is not a learning disability, and with the appropriate support deaf pupils should be achieving on a par with their hearing peers.

We acknowledge that, over the six years since submitting the petition, there has been movement in the areas raised and we are grateful to the Petitions Committee for its continued support of this important cause.

However, there remains an unacceptable attainment gap between deaf children and their hearing peers. This briefing seeks to update the Committee on developments around the key issues raised within the petition and to highlight areas where further action is urgently needed to close the attainment gap. For ease of reference, this briefing is divided into the four key headings outlined within our original petition submission.

Latest Attainment Data

In 2018, the attainment gap remained significant with deaf pupils in Wales 16% less likely to achieve 5 GCSEs (including English/Welsh and Maths) than their hearing peers.

Worryingly, we have also seen the attainment gap widen at Foundation Phase. Last year, this attainment gap doubled and deaf pupils in the Foundation Phase were 20% less likely to achieve the Core Subject Indicator than hearing pupils.

In light of this, the National Deaf Children's Society Cymru would welcome continued support from the Petitions Committee. We wish to call on the Welsh Government to take firm action to *Close the Gap!*

1. We need appropriate support in school and college

Deafness is not a learning disability. However, being deaf does mean that learners require appropriate support and adaptations to ensure they can access the curriculum. The National Deaf Children's Society Cymru raised a number of concerns, including the need to address the shortage in numbers of Teachers of the Deaf.

Progress: The Welsh Government has allocated £239k of funding to assist local authorities in training Teachers of the Deaf.

The Welsh Government commissioned a Rapid Evidence Assessment into support available for deaf learners.

The new Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act places duties on local authorities to forward plan specialist provision.

However: While the National Deaf Children's Society Cymru welcomes the £239k invested in helping local authorities to train Teachers of the Deaf, this helps to address the present shortage, but does not address the longer term issue.

The National Deaf Children's Society Cymru welcomes many aspects of the new Additional Learning Needs reforms, but work is still needed to ensure that the reformed system and accompanying Code of Practice meet the needs of deaf learners and their families. In our response to the consultation on the draft Code we called for a number of improvements, such as the need for a strengthened responsibility for Sensory Impaired teachers to be involved in the assessment of a learner with a sensory impairment. Among other points, we were also concerned that the draft Code of Practice reduced responsibilities around specialist careers advice for ALN learners – an area of support that our Youth Advisory Board tells us needs to be increased, not reduced. Our full response to the Draft Code of Practice is available [here](#).

We were pleased that the Welsh Government commissioned a deaf specific REA. However, having seen a draft of this document, we have raised reservations that the literature review on which it was based was narrow. As a result, we are concerned that the guidance does not mention a number of valuable support interventions for deaf children. This could result in a reluctance for professionals to use such interventions.

We remain concerned that more action is needed to ensure that families of early years deaf children are provided with key technology, such as radio aids to assist their child's learning development.

The National Deaf Children's Society Cymru was pleased to have been invited to comment on draft Literacy, Language and Communication element of the new curriculum. We raised a number of points to consider to help ensure that it is accessible for deaf learners. We hope that these will be taken on board.

Recommendations: That the Welsh Government monitors the numbers and availability of Teachers of the Deaf and ensures that local authorities appropriately meet their new forward planning of responsibilities under the new Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act.

That the Welsh Government addresses issues raised by the National Deaf Children's Society Cymru in response to the consultation on the Draft Code of Practice, including the need to strengthen the section on responsibilities around specialist careers advice and the need to specify that sensory impaired teachers **must** be involved in the assessment of a learner with sensory impairment.

That the Welsh Government takes on board our comments on the draft REA for Hearing Impairment.

That the Welsh Government proactively calls on local authorities to do more to meet the needs of deaf learners and their families in the early years. The National Deaf Children's Society Cymru believes that the time prior to implementation of the ALN reforms in 2020 is crucial in preparing services for delivery. We believe local authorities need to be doing more to prepare to provide appropriate support and technology to deaf learners in the early years. We would urge the Welsh Government to issue a directive to local authorities to this end.

That the Welsh Government ensures the new curriculum is accessible for deaf learners. Given the emphasis on teachers adapting the curriculum locally, we strongly recommend that ALN accessibility guidance (including deafness) is also produced to assist teachers in this regard.

2. We need all classrooms to have good acoustics

Many deaf children and young people use the sound they can access to help understand what is being communicated. This can be a difficult skill to develop, requiring a lot of concentration. In rooms where there are poor acoustics, it can be even more difficult for deaf children to access sound; so good acoustics in learning environments are imperative.

Progress: The National Deaf Children's Society Cymru has been pleased to work with the Welsh Government to ensure that schools funded through its 21st Century Schools Programme, and through its new funding programme for nursery buildings, are contractually obliged to meet baseline acoustic standards. This has been very positive.

However: The National Deaf Children's Society Cymru is aware that not all learning environments are due to be rebuilt or refurbished, and that other works may be completed outside of these funding programmes. Therefore, we have suggested the below recommendations.

Recommendations: That the Welsh Government takes steps to proactively promote guidance to schools about the benefits of improved acoustics for all learners (there are benefits for hearing children too) and the steps schools can take to improve acoustics within existing settings.

That the Welsh Government uses its power over building regulations to strengthen acoustic standards and monitoring of compliance with them more generally. This will ensure that building works outside of these particular funding programmes also benefit from acoustically inclusive learning environments.

3. Some of us use sign language. Help us encourage our hearing peers and teachers to learn sign

Many deaf children use sign to communicate. British Sign Language (BSL) is a language in its own right and was formally recognised by the Welsh Government in 2004. However, families still struggle to access opportunities to learn sign language, in order to learn to communicate with their child. This issue was also raised by the Children's Commissioner in her 2016-2017 annual report, *A Year of Change* ([see page 19](#)) and by *Deffo!* in its own petition to the committee (P-04-628).

Our Youth Advisory Board has also identified an appetite for a BSL GCSE in Wales, conducting a survey of both hearing and deaf young people, in which 82% said they would like a BSL GCSE.

We are aware of issues in the availability of Communication Support Workers with an appropriate level of BSL qualification to support deaf learners in school. This has knock on effects for the linguistic development of these pupils.

Progress: The National Deaf Children's Society Cymru is pleased that the Minister has committed to ensure the new curriculum is open to schools teaching a BSL GCSE. We are also pleased that Qualifications Wales has demonstrated willingness to adopt a BSL GCSE developed in England for Wales. As such, we are watching developments around a BSL GCSE in England with close interest.

We are delighted that the Welsh Government has committed to commission a review of opportunities to learn BSL in Wales and are due to meet with the lead official shortly to discuss this.

We are aware that in a few local authorities, the Welsh Government has provided a small amount of funding to assist with staff BSL training. Although this is to be welcomed, the number of staff benefitting from this small fund is limited to a few individuals. We would urge the Welsh Government to consider further action with broader scope.

However: We are disappointed that Welsh Government reviews of the specialist workforce have not included Communication Support Workers and their level of BSL.

The implementation of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal Wales Act in September 2020 and the availability of IDP support plans for 0-5 year olds presents an opportunity to help ensure families of young deaf children are supported to learn to communicate with their child. However, the National Deaf Children's Society Cymru is concerned that local authorities are not adequately preparing to facilitate this type of support following the introduction of the Act.

While the Welsh Government has stated that local authorities hold responsibility for ensuring BSL is available to children requiring it, we believe that the Welsh Government has a duty to encourage local authorities to meet this responsibility and hold them accountable to it.

In response to this aspect of our petition, the Welsh Government has also stated that local authorities can use funding through the Families First programme to help support families of deaf children. However, the National Deaf Children's Society Cymru is mindful that this programme is not universally available. It is important that all families of deaf children are provided with the support they need to communicate with their child.

Recommendations: That the Welsh Government commits to take action to address gaps in provision identified by its review into opportunities to learn BSL.

That the Welsh Government takes action to ensure local authorities provide families wishing to learn to sign with their deaf child have the opportunity and support to do so.

That the Welsh Government takes on board recommendations made by the National Deaf Children's Society Cymru to ensure the new curriculum is accessible to BSL users.

That the Welsh Government review the qualifications of the existing Communication Support Worker workforce for deaf learners and consider how sign language qualifications among Communication Support Workers could be encouraged and improved.

4. We need more teachers and pupils to be deaf aware

Deaf children and young people often tell us that they need mainstream teachers to be more deaf aware. If teachers do not observe basic deaf awareness, their lessons become inaccessible and isolating for deaf learners. Given that the vast majority of deaf children attend mainstream education settings and that many children will experience temporary hearing loss through glue ear, we believe mainstream education professionals should have a basic level of deaf awareness training. This will be even more important given the key role frontline education staff will play in the new ALN system.

Deaf children and young people also tell us that they need their peers at school to be deaf aware. Without this, deaf learners can feel socially isolated and be more vulnerable to experience difficulties with emotional well-being.

Progress: While we are aware that professional learning offers for teachers and ALNCOs are being developed, we have yet to receive reassurances that this will specifically cover basic deaf awareness.

Recommendation: We strongly recommend that the Welsh Government ensures professional learning offers for teachers and ALNCOs specifically include a basic level of deaf awareness.

That the Welsh Government proactively encourage schools to teach pupils disability and deaf awareness. We strongly urge that this be covered within the curriculum reform.

That the Welsh Government supports and helps to promote free deaf awareness resources and lesson plans for schools developed by the National Deaf Children's Society.

Continued monitoring of situation

In light of the vulnerability of deaf learners; the continued significant attainment gap between deaf learners and their hearing peers; and the number of educational reforms currently underway – it is vitally important that the Welsh Government and other key partners monitor the attainment gap in the future.

Progress: The National Deaf Children's Society Cymru has worked with Estyn to develop deaf-specific inspection guidance and key questions for consideration where there is one or more deaf learner on roll. We hope that this will help to monitor the situation on a local basis.

However: The National Deaf Children's Society Cymru considers that a national overview of the attainment gap is required. **We are very concerned that proposals to move towards a random sampling method of collating attainment data jeopardises the future of attainment data by disability type.** Moving to a random sampling system would mean that there would not be enough statistically viable data to publish attainment data by disability type. This has implications for monitoring the attainment gap for a range of ALN learners, not just deaf pupils.

The National Deaf Children's Society has been raising this issue with the Welsh Government. While we have been informed that no decisions have yet been reached on random sampling, we are concerned that we still do not have reassurances on this important issue.

The National Deaf Children's Society is aware that Estyn is currently reviewing the inspection process with a view to moving towards a more self-assessment focussed model. We are keen to ensure that the new inspection model will have a clear and distinct focus on ALN learners and the new IDP process to help ensure that deaf learners are appropriately supported.

Recommendations: That the Welsh Government ensures future methods of collecting attainment data do not affect the availability of attainment data by disability type.

That the new Estyn inspection structure has a specific focus on quality assuring support for ALN learners and the new IDP process.

Summary

The National Deaf Children's Society Cymru is pleased that some progress has been made since our petition was first submitted and we have been grateful to the Committee for its support in this regard.

However, while some positive steps have been taken, much more action is required. The attainment gap between deaf learners and their peers remains significant, with particular concern that the gap has widened substantially within the Foundation Phase.

In light of this, we have made a number of recommendations throughout this briefing for next steps that the Welsh Government could take. We would welcome the Committee's support on these points.

Contact

If you have any further queries or would like to discuss any of these points in more detail, please do not hesitate to contact us.

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