

Education support for deaf children and coronavirus (England)

A National Deaf Children's Society briefing



Summary:

Deaf children and young people already face significant social and educational barriers in life. Coronavirus has created a number of significant additional challenges. 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 they continue to receive, as much as possible, the support they need, and are not left at further disadvantage in the longer term.

This briefing sets out six key issues around education support for deaf children and young people at this time.

1. Reduced access to specialist education support, equipment and therapies

Whilst some local authority specialist education services for deaf children are continuing to provide early years and home learning support to deaf children and families, this is not available consistently across England. Many deaf children have not received the specialist support they need in the past few months to support home learning or to access the curriculum. Similarly, there have been gaps in the specialist support provided to families around language and communication in the early years.

Where support or teaching 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. Many families may not have the necessary IT equipment for this kind of virtual support.

In addition, some deaf children have been told they can't take their radio aids hearing technology home from school at this time, even though this could support home learning.

As nurseries, schools and colleges start to prepare for a phased re-opening, there are also concerns around how, in practice, deaf children will receive specialist support in the classroom (such as from teaching assistants or from visiting Teachers of the Deaf) in light of proposed social distancing rules.

Whilst government guidance documents have made some brief references to key issues affecting deaf children (such as the need to involve sensory impairment teachers), we believe there have been a number of omissions and a lack of direction in other areas, including around the availability of specialist technology to use in the home. We also feel that the Department has failed to consult with organisations representing children with sensory impairments when seeking out feedback on draft guidance.

2. Inaccessibility of online learning materials

Parents continue to tell us that they are being signposted to online home learning resources that are not accessible to deaf children. This includes a lack of subtitles, sign language content or even just ensuring that speakers can be seen clearly on screen. We believe it's unacceptable that accessibility continues to be an afterthought and would like to see a much stronger lead and encouragement from the Department this area. In particular, we'd like to see action to ensure that accessibility is embedded into any future commissioning decisions for online resources and initiatives (such as the new online school accreditation scheme). We also recommend that the Department produce guidance for online education providers on accessibility for deaf and other disabled children.

3. Exams

There is a risk that deaf students may be unfairly disadvantaged by new processes for calculating grades in light of exams being cancelled, and the lack of a robust appeals process around this.

Whilst we don't yet know what impact this will have on deaf young people's overall grades, some students have told us they are worried that they may be graded based on their performance in situations (for example, mock exams) that were not fully accessible to them. Others have told us that they fear their teachers might have limited expectations for them.

Schools and colleges should have asked for advice from a pupil's Teacher of the Deaf before determining the student's grade, taking into account the reasonable adjustments that should have been made. However, our sense is that this has been relatively rare.

Whilst students are being told they can take written exams in the autumn if they are not happy with their results, the results would not be available until December. This means that many deaf young people may not be able to start with the education provider of their choice in September, potentially missing out on a year of education.

We understand that it will be possible for a young person or their family to complain to their school or college on the grounds of discrimination or malpractice if they believe they have not been graded fairly. Alternatively, they can complain to the exam board if they believe the school has not followed the correct processes. However, we remain concerned that many may feel reluctant to do so.

4. Transitions support

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

The Treasury has announced a package of measures to support young job-seekers which include a new Kickstart scheme for work placements, an expansion of traineeships and more careers advisors. However, we do not yet have the detail on how the needs of deaf young people will be considered as part of these initiatives. For example, what communication support will be available in any new schemes and how this will be funded, and whether the National Careers Service will ensure they can provide tailored and specialist careers advice to deaf young people.

5. Early intervention support

The cancellation of routine audiology appointments for deaf children is likely to have a knock-on impact for deaf children insofar as it leads to delays in some children being diagnosed as having a hearing loss. For children affected, this may lead to delayed early intervention by Teachers of the Deaf which is likely to have a critical impact on their later language and communication development.

We recommend that the Department of Health and the Department of Education review the scale of this risk and urgently oversee the development of action plans to address a likely backlog of children whose diagnosis of deafness has been delayed. The Government should provide emergency funding as needed, particularly to ensure that intensive early intervention support can be provided to ameliorate the effects of late identification.

6. Recovery plan

In the short-term, we believe the Department for Education should set out how disabled children will benefit from the recently announced plan for catch-up support and formal one-to-one tuition, and how the expertise of specialists such as Teachers of the Deaf, will be mobilised as part of this. We have seen virtually no reference to disabled children in any of the information published so far. A national plan that doesn't meet the needs of disabled children is not a national plan and will not succeed.

Over the longer-term, we believe the Department needs to carry out a full assessment of the impact of coronavirus on disabled children, along with a clear action plan in response. We are particularly concerned about the risk of significant future disadvantage brought about by, for example, late diagnosis for many deaf babies and children, reduced access to specialist support and a lack of support with transitions.

It is also clear that coronavirus has exacerbated existing challenges around specialist support that need to be addressed in any recovery plan. In particular, we continue to face a crisis in the falling number of qualified Teachers of the Deaf – a 15% decline since 2011. The coronavirus pandemic has shown the important role that Teachers of the Deaf have been playing in engaging with families at home and continuing to support home learning. There remains a need for urgent short-term action to fund the training of the next generation of Teachers of the Deaf.

We understand that officials have been continuing to work on the SEND review during the last few months. We are concerned about the lack of transparency over this work and engagement with others. We are also aware that the Department has yet to respond to the recommendations set out in the Education Committee SEND inquiry report.

Other issues affecting deaf children and young people:

Please note that this list is not exhaustive.

- Concerns around the temporary suspension of Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans. Whilst we welcome the announcement that the suspension will be lifted at the end of July, we are concerned about the lack of clarity on how the Department has been monitoring how the new reasonable endeavours duty is being used in practice. We are concerned that some families are being given messages implying that their EHC plan can be 'ignored'.
- Communication barriers imposed by widespread use of face masks/coverings. Whilst face masks are not recommended in education (except in limited circumstances). However, were this advice to change, this would have very significant implications for how deaf children learn at school.
- Use of online assessments in higher education without any reasonable adjustments being made for deaf students.
- Impact of school closures and social distancing on emotional wellbeing of deaf children. Resources on emotional wellbeing are not always accessible to deaf children and young people.
- Safeguarding risks from greater time spent online. Resources on online safety are not always accessible to deaf children and young people

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