

Close the Gap Petition

Update from NDCS Cymru



November 2016

About us

The National Deaf Children's Society is the national charity dedicated to creating a world without barriers for deaf children and young people.

We represent the interests and campaign for the rights of all deaf children and young people from birth until they reach independence.

In referring to deafness, we refer to all levels of hearing loss, from mild to profound and including unilateral and temporary.

History of our Close the Gap Petition

In May 2013, we submitted our *Close the Gap!* petition to the Welsh Assembly's Petitions Committee. The petition highlighted **significant gaps in attainment between deaf pupils and their peers at every Key Stage in Wales**. It called for a strategy to address the barriers that deaf young people face in reaching their full educational potential and outlined key barriers as identified by deaf young people themselves. These barriers were as follows:

1. We need all classrooms to have good acoustics.
2. We need more teachers and pupils to be deaf aware.
3. We need appropriate support in school and college.
4. Some of us use sign language. Help us encourage our hearing peers and teachers to learn sign.

The former Petitions Committee asked NDCS Cymru to prioritise these four aspects of our petition. In consulting with the young people who submitted the petition, they told us that addressing barriers on acoustics and deaf awareness

would be their top priorities. The Petitions Committee subsequently decided to focus on acoustics.

Welsh Government statistics demonstrate that these barriers remain an issue as there is still a significant attainment gap between deaf pupils and their peers.¹ Following the appointment of a new Petitions Committee, NDCS Cymru wanted to take this opportunity to update the Committee on key developments in relation to each of the four areas.

In returning to the petition, we would urge the new Committee to consider whether it could assist with both of the young people's top priorities (deaf awareness and classroom acoustics.) Indeed, as outlined within this briefing, we feel that current policy developments would support this stance.

1. We need all classrooms to have good acoustics

Noisy, echoing school buildings create a barrier to learning for *all* children, but present a particular barrier for children with a hearing impairment (including those who use assistive listening devices). Although there are specific building regulations on acoustic environments in schools, these regulations are too easily ignored.

NDCS Cymru formerly worked with the Welsh Government to ensure that new school builds and refurbishments under its 21st Century Schools Programme were contractually obliged to meet acoustic standards. Following announcements that new funding is to be made available under this programme, we have been in touch with key officials. Although we are pleased to see that acoustics is specifically mentioned in the revised letters to grantees, we are in the process of liaising with officials and seeking assurances that the acoustics requirements have not been weakened in the latest funding tranche of the programme.

As previously identified, NDCS Cymru is keen for the Welsh Government to extend its commitment to good acoustics by strengthening the law. Upon the devolution of building regulations, 39 Assembly Members signed a New Year's

¹ For more details, visit http://www.ndcs.org.uk/professional_support/national_data/index.html

resolution to show their support for good acoustics in school and college buildings. A change to make the building regulations themselves stronger would address the problem at its root cause and could ensure all future school, nursery and college buildings meet acoustic standards regardless of how they are funded.

NDCS Cymru would also welcome the opportunity to work with the Welsh Government to raise awareness about some of the measures schools can take to improve acoustics in existing buildings.

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

A lack of deaf awareness among teachers and pupils remains a significant barrier for deaf young people, causing them difficulties in accessing the curriculum but also in relation to social isolation. Indeed, this was one of the areas that the young people involved in creating the petition identified as a top priority.

Ensuring that general teaching staff are deaf aware is of great importance since the vast majority of deaf children and young people attend mainstream schools. It is also of note that 80% of all children will experience glue ear before the age of ten which can cause extended periods of temporary hearing loss.

In light of recent policy developments around teacher training, we would urge the new Petitions Committee to consider whether it could assist us in ensuring that deaf awareness is on the wider agenda as teacher training is reviewed.

NDCS Cymru recently responded to the Welsh Government's consultation, *Draft Criteria for the accreditation of Initial Teacher Education programmes in Wales and the proposal for the Education Workforce Council to accredit initial teacher education*. This consultation indicates that course providers must provide details of "meeting the needs of pupils with additional learning or other special needs" in presenting their programmes for accreditation. However, we are concerned that this requirement is broad in nature and will not, by any means, ensure that deaf awareness is covered within training programmes.

NDCS Cymru is also aware of developments around training for ALNCos as part of the wider ALN reforms. We are keen to ensure that this training covers basic

deaf awareness and an awareness of the different specialist professionals available to work with deaf children and young people.

NDCS Cymru has previously worked with a local authority on a factsheet about deafness to provide Newly Qualified Teachers with key information. The project was funded by the Welsh Government but has, unfortunately, not been widely used. We would welcome moves to further utilise this resource.

In addition, deaf young people have helped NDCS to create teaching resources and lesson plans that can be used to raise deaf awareness among hearing pupils. We would welcome the Welsh Government's support in encouraging schools to use these resources.²

3. We need appropriate support in school and college

Accessing appropriate support in school and college remains an issue for many deaf children and young people.

NDCS Cymru has been closely watching the development of the proposed Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Bill. We welcome aspects of the proposed reforms but do have some serious reservations about how it will work in practice for deaf children and young people. We have met with the Minister and with key officials to highlight these concerns and suggest ways in which they might be overcome. We have also played a key role within TSANA (Third Sector Additional Needs Alliance) and its response to the reforms. We hope to continue to cooperate with leading officials and with the Children, Young People and Education Committee as the Bill progresses through the legislative process.

There are problems with the availability of specialist teachers of the deaf, specialist speech and language therapists and communication support workers with an appropriate qualification in BSL. We hope to work with the Welsh Government as it moves forward with its work on reviewing the SEN workforce in Wales.

² For more information on these resources, please visit <http://youngpeople.ndcsbuzz.org.uk/looksmilechat/>

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

NDCS Cymru is pleased to be working with the WJEC with a view to create a fingerspelling community challenge option for the Foundation Welsh Baccalaureate.

Our NDCS Youth Advisory Board is also in the process of developing materials to help deaf young people to teach others to sign.

NDCS Cymru would welcome any other moves to promote opportunities to learn to sign.

Conclusion

All four of the key points identified within our original *Close the Gap!* petition remain relevant today. Although some positive steps forward have been taken, a significant attainment gap between deaf pupils and their hearing peers remains.

NDCS Cymru would urge the Petitions Committee to revisit the two top priorities identified by the young deaf people who originally submitted our petition. While the other two issues remain relevant, NDCS Cymru is currently engaged in work with the Welsh Government in these areas. The top two priority areas are better classroom acoustics and raising deaf awareness among staff and pupils.

In order to help address these barriers, NDCS Cymru suggests that the following actions should be taken:

Improve classroom acoustics by:

- Strengthening Building Regulations on school acoustics to ensure that flimsy alternative standards are avoided and that teaching spaces are appropriately tested for compliance with standards. Regulations could also be extended to cover colleges and nurseries.

- Ensuring that the grantees receiving funding under the latest version of the 21st Century Schools programme will be contractually obliged to meet rigorous acoustic standards.
- Promoting the importance of good acoustics among head teachers and ALNCos as well as some of the measures that can be taken to improve acoustic environments in existing school buildings.

Raise deaf awareness among teachers and pupils by:

- Ensuring that the current revisions to initial teacher training take account of the need to cover basic deaf awareness.
- Ensuring that the development of a training course for ALNCos covers basic deaf awareness.
- Utilising NQT factsheets developed by a local authority, covering various disabilities including deafness.
- Encourage schools to utilise the free NDCS resources to improve deaf awareness among pupils.

Contact

NDCS Cymru would be happy to assist the Petitions Committee in its further consideration of our petition. For more information please contact campaigns.wales@ndcs.org.uk or call 029 20373474.

Thank you.