

# Getting it right from the start

Improving early years support  
for deaf children in Scotland



Our vision is a world  
without barriers for  
every deaf child.

# 1. Introduction

There are as many as 3850 deaf children in Scotland today and we believe that, with the right support and early identification, they can achieve anything other children can achieve.

In 2005 the Universal Newborn Hearing Screening programme was introduced in Scotland. This was a turning point in the early identification of deaf babies and over the last decade thousands of children and their families have benefitted. The early identification of deafness, and the right support from the start, can help deaf children access their rights, build confidence and increase the capacity of parents and carers to help children achieve their full potential in life.

In Scotland, the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act (2015), Getting It Right for Every Child and a strong attainment agenda all have the potential to drive positive outcomes for deaf children and their families. While this progress should be celebrated, there is still much work to be done to ensure that every deaf child in Scotland gets the support they need from birth.

In this report we will outline some of the opportunities that exist to build on this progress and bring about real change. In particular we are calling for continued investment into crucial services and a consistent multi-sector approach to delivering early years support for deaf children.

**We use the term deaf to refer to all types of hearing loss from mild to profound. This includes deafness in one ear or temporary deafness such as glue ear.**





## 2. Background

The Scottish Government identified in its Early Years Framework that, “it is during our very earliest years that a large part of the pattern for our adult life is set.”<sup>1</sup> The early years are a critical time in every child’s cognitive and language development.

Deaf children face a number of additional barriers at this time. The impact of childhood deafness on a child’s ability to reach their developmental and educational potential is significant.<sup>2</sup> Nine out of ten deaf children have hearing parents, many of whom have no previous experience of deafness. Communication is therefore a key barrier that can have a major impact on language and cognitive development.

Language is usually acquired through hearing and vision together and so deafness has the potential to delay development. As language provides the building blocks for many skills, these delays can impact more broadly on a deaf child’s life including their emotional and social development. Early Years Foundation Stage data shows that nearly three quarters of deaf children in England arrive at primary school having not achieved a good level of development in the early years. Deaf children are less likely to achieve the communication and language early learning goals of listening and attention (50%), understanding (46%) and speaking (42%) compared to children with no ‘special education need’ or equivalent<sup>3</sup>.

In Scotland, the challenges deaf children face manifest in a significant attainment gap which starts early and affects deaf learners through their school career and beyond. We know that with the right support, deaf children can achieve as much as their hearing peers. Despite this, evidence shows that pupils with any degree of deafness score below the academic average scores of the population, especially in English<sup>4</sup>. The latest Scottish Government data shows that last year 11.8% of deaf learners left school with no qualifications (compared with 2.6% of all pupils) and 38.7% obtained Highers or Advanced Highers (compared with 59.3% of all pupils). This gap in achievement at school goes on to affect deaf young people’s life chances, with 24.7% going onto university compared with 41.3% of those with no additional support needs.

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1. Scottish Government, 2008, The Early Years Framework

2. Marschark, M. & Spencer, P., 2009, Evidence of best practice models and outcomes in the education of deaf and hard of hearing children: an international review.

3. Data on all children and children with no identified SEN: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/eyfsp-attainment-by-pupil-characteristics-2013> Data for deaf children was not published but was made available by the Department for Education on request. Please contact NDCS at [professionals@ndcs.org.uk](mailto:professionals@ndcs.org.uk) for a copy of this.

4. Arshad, R., Marschark, M & O’Neil, R. Deaf Achievement Scotland Study.



The experiences of deaf learners were also closely examined during the Scottish Parliament's Education and Culture Committee Inquiry into the attainment of pupils with a sensory impairment in 2015. In their final report, the Committee stated:

*“We believe all children and young people with sensory impairments should receive the support they need to reach their full potential. While we were told about some examples where, with the right support, these pupils can achieve the same level as their peers, this is not the case across Scotland.*

*We therefore consider more work is needed to improve the prospects of pupils with sensory impairments and expect ongoing efforts and existing initiatives will be given greater impetus as a result of our inquiry.”*

(Education and Culture Committee, 10<sup>th</sup> Report, 2015, Session 4)

Closing the gap for the most disadvantaged groups of learners is high on the agenda of the Scottish Government and this is to be welcomed. Raising attainment for all has been at the heart of the new National Improvement Framework and the Education (Scotland) Act (2015). The Scottish Government have begun working to address some of the Committee's recommendations, and we welcome the collaborative approach being taken.

We strongly believe that improved early years support for deaf children and families will help close the attainment gap and give every child the best start in life. We recommend the Scottish Government consider addressing this issue as key to achieving their National Indicator around attainment for all children and young people in Scotland.

## 3. Key areas for action

### 3.1 Getting it Right from identification

The Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) approach which was legislated for in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act (2014), offers real benefits for deaf children and their families. This early intervention and child centred approach should result in timely interventions of support and information which empowers parents and carers and helps them confidently make decisions about what is best for their child.

GIRFEC will improve delivery of the right support at the right time from the right people. It supports children and their parents and carers to work in partnership with the services that can help them. For deaf children, there is scope to improve how effectively services work together following the identification of deafness.

The primary aim of universal newborn hearing screening, which was introduced in Scotland in 2005, is to ensure a deaf child is supported to develop language<sup>5</sup>. For every child, parents and carers are at the heart of achieving a positive language outcome.

To empower, inform and enable parents to play this crucial role they require timely unbiased information, emotional support, practical help, language and communication advice and access to appropriate services at an early stage. From an early point, families should have the opportunity to meet a number of professionals who can provide a different aspect of this early years support, some of which will be overlapping.



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5. Dr Grigor, J. 2007, Universal Newborn Hearing Screening, A Report to the Scottish Executive

## Current guidance

Since the introduction of newborn hearing screening the Scottish Government has not published statutory guidance to outline expectations for subsequent service delivery. Other work has progressed in the absence of this. In 2011 the Scottish Sensory Centre, in collaboration with a number of partners, produced standards for deaf children aged 0 – 3 years<sup>6</sup>. These are a valuable resource for professionals however they are not mandatory.

In 2014, the Scottish Government published its See Hear sensory impairment strategy which acknowledges the need for sensory impaired children to receive appropriate and timely interventions in the early years and for as long as required<sup>7</sup>. Given that See Hear covers all sensory impairment and is a cradle to grave strategy, its purpose is not to contain detailed guidance about supporting deaf children in the early years. The Early Years Monitoring Protocol for Deaf Babies<sup>8</sup>, developed in England, again is another tool available to professionals to support the assessment and development of language, however this is also a non-mandatory resource.

There is therefore a lack of coherent and mandatory guidance from the Scottish Government about the early support and interventions that should be made available to deaf children and their families following screening or identification of deafness. As such early provision varies considerably across Scotland and deaf children experience a post code lottery of support.



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6. Scottish Sensory Centre, 2011, Scottish standards for deaf children (0-3): families and professionals working together to improve services
  7. Scottish Government, 2014, See Hear: A strategic framework for meeting the needs of people with a sensory impairment in Scotland.
  8. Early Support, 2004, Monitoring protocol for deaf children and babies



There are several areas of good practice, where strong partnership working across all services is well embedded into local ways of working. In other areas however there is an inadequate level of support for children and families in the early years, lack of clarity about the responsibilities of health, education and social care services to provide this support, and the lack of a holistic approach with joint planning.

To improve consistency a strong collaborative, and Scottish Government endorsed, approach to developing a set of guidance for deaf children in the early years is required. This guidance would help professionals and families feel empowered to know what good practice looks like and encourage services to improve. NDCS welcomes and is keen to support any work underway to achieve this.

## Parent feels supported in early years by effective local support

Sam\* is three years old, and started attending their local mainstream nursery in autumn 2015. Sam has a moderate hearing loss caused by a genetic disorder that can often result in progressive loss.

Since Sam's deafness was identified they have been supported by two Teachers of the Deaf, who visit weekly, along with regular support from a Speech and Language Therapist. The consistent and joined up approach by professionals has helped Sam's speech and signing skills to develop, with Sam using new signing and spoken vocabulary which hasn't been taught at home. The consistent use of sign and speech at home and at nursery has allowed Sam to move between both approaches depending on the environment and situation.

Sam lives in a rural area of Scotland, where Hearing Impairment services are expected to cover a wide geographical area. Sam's nursery had very limited signing experience, but through a collaborative approach from education professionals, a full-time Learning Assistant with experience of signing has worked with early years practitioners to develop their signing skills and raise their awareness of how to work with a deaf child. This has led to a fully inclusive environment at nursery. Mum has felt supported by professionals in the local area and has valued how they have helped her support Sam's language development and learning.

\*Name has been changed to protect privacy.



### 3.2 The future of British Sign Language (BSL) in Scotland

*“It is the starting point for a continuous cycle of improvement in access to services for BSL users. It aims to raise awareness of the language, highlight gaps in provision and identify and enable the sharing of good practice.”*

Mark Griffin MSP, Scottish Parliament Official Report, British Sign Language (Scotland) Bill, Stage 3, 17 September 2016

The passage of the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act (2015) was a historic moment for Scotland and a turning point in the promotion of the language. As the first legislation of its kind the UK, Scotland is now leading the way in raising awareness of the language. The Scottish Government’s first National Plan and the plans public bodies will subsequently produce have the potential to become drivers for change and improvement.

These plans have great potential to address key challenges for deaf children and their families in the early years. In particular, NDCS welcomes setting out the aspiration that families with deaf children will receive information about BSL and Deaf culture and be offered support to learn to sign. From our family membership, we know that many parents and carers feel they did not receive enough information about signing when their child was identified as being deaf.

An NDCS survey of 75 parents of deaf children illustrated that only half received information about learning BSL at the point they found out that their child was deaf or in the early years. 15% received this information when their child started school, and 35% had never received any information about using BSL with their child. This lack of information limited their knowledge and options at a time when they were faced with important decisions about their child’s future.



## **Supporting families to learn to sign with their child**

The first Scottish BSL National Plan offers the opportunity to embed support for families to learn to sign with their child. Opportunities for parents and carers to learn to sign with their child are limited and inconsistent in Scotland. In some areas, BSL tutors are available to families in the early years which provides real opportunities for families to pursue a bilingual approach to developing language. In other areas however this support is not available, and families miss out on opportunities to learn sign language. This is detrimental given that evidence shows that use of signs allows early communication between parent and child and helps the child build conversational skills and have access to information about the world around them<sup>9</sup>.

The National Deaf Children's Society welcomed the Scottish National Party's 2016 manifesto commitment to ensure that families had opportunities to learn to sign with their deaf child. The Scottish Government's National Plan provides not only an important opportunity to achieve this commitment and set the strategic direction for early years support for deaf children, but also to bring about real tangible change on the ground for families. By encouraging local authorities to provide this vital support into the future, BSL could be a real language option for every family with a deaf child.

The National Deaf Children's Society is committed to supporting the Scottish Government in achieving these aspirations and sharing the learning from our Family Sign Language programme which has been delivered in Scotland since 2012 (see chapter five for more information). The programme has offered parents, carers, deaf children, siblings, extended family and early years' professionals the chance to learn to sign with deaf children.

This work will continue for the next three years through funding from Big Lottery Scotland. While the project cannot reach every deaf child in Scotland, over the funded term we will work with a significant number of families. The evidence and learning that will emerge from this work will help shape the future of BSL in the early years for deaf children and we hope that it can inform future local and national conversations about the effective commissioning of this vital service.

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9. Marschark, M. & Spencer, P., 2009, Evidence of best practice models and outcomes in the education of deaf and hard of hearing children: an international review.

## Family benefits from taking part in Family Sign Language course

The Smith\* family lives in a remote and rural part of Scotland. The family were referred to NDCS to access Family Sign Language by a local Teacher of the Deaf due to extremely limited communication in the home with one of their deaf children, Cassie\*. She had not developed an age appropriate level of speech and struggles to communicate in a meaningful way with her parents. Mum was becoming increasingly concerned about this and had noticed Cassie was very unhappy at her local school.

It was challenging for the family to learn sign language, and Cassie did not start using signs straight away which was at first disheartening for Mum. However, by the end of the course Cassie had started using signs frequently and Mum felt that communication in the home had much improved and that Cassie was happier as a result of feeling more involved and understood at home.

Cassie's experiences of learning to sign were used to inform the family's decision to request the children attend a different school with a deaf resource base. This was achieved through partnership working with local services.

Following the course Mum feels more confident about Cassie's future and is a more confident parent as a result of learning to sign.

\*Names have been changed to protect privacy.



### **3.3 Improving data on deaf children**

There is currently no complete national data set on numbers of deaf children and young people in Scotland. While information collected through the Pupil Census has improved over the years, this only records information about school-age children and there are still gaps in how it captures those with mild or temporary hearing loss or with no formal education plan in place. Without a basic understanding of the numbers of deaf children and their needs, it is difficult for national and local government to effectively plan service delivery.

Under the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act (2014), authorities and health boards must ensure that an understanding of their population, their characteristics and needs, informs their Children's Services Plans. With the current gaps in data, it will be challenging for authorities to appropriately reflect the needs of deaf children within these plans or identify and act on the attainment gap they experience.

While universal newborn hearing screening has allowed for earlier diagnosis of childhood deafness, the improvement of data collection and sharing has not necessarily followed. In 2011, two pilot projects explored how local records of deaf children could be maintained to collate information about deaf children and ensure this data was shared effectively with relevant local partners in health, social care and education. These pilots were successful, and the final report recommended that local records of deaf children are desirable, have operational and strategic benefits and are achievable. The report recommended rolling out these initiatives nationally.

The Scottish Government have recognised this system of data collection as the best way forward and their support in bringing key partners together to deliver on these recommendations would be welcome. This work would vastly improve data collection about deaf children and help service providers improve their understanding of how to meet the needs of this population locally.



## 4. How we support deaf children and their families in the early years

The National Deaf Children's Society is the leading charity dedicated to creating a world without barriers for deaf children and young people. We want to work with Government, local authorities, health bodies and other third sector partners to ensure they can effectively support deaf children and their families. In Scotland we offer a range of services to help ensure deaf children get the support they need, right from the start.

We provide free targeted, timely information to support families at every stage of their deaf child's life. This includes resources on childhood deafness, communication, technology and developing language and communication.

We also:

- Provide a Freephone helpline for any queries parents may have – available at 0808 800 8880, by email at [helpline@ndcs.org.uk](mailto:helpline@ndcs.org.uk) or through live chat at [www.ndcs.org.uk/livechat](http://www.ndcs.org.uk/livechat).
- Run a range of events for parents, including weekends for those families with children who have been newly identified as deaf.
- Provide access to a technology loan service and an extensive range of information and resources for professionals and families.
- Provide support to local groups which are independent local deaf children's societies run by volunteers. They run social events and activities and provide peer support by bringing families with deaf children together. There are nine local groups in Scotland.





## NDCS Early Years Programmes

*“It was a brilliant course and the teacher was amazing. The good thing about it was we learnt about functional, practical words that help a child’s communication”.*

Your Child Your Choices Project Evaluation Final Report,  
National Deaf Children’s Society, 2015

Since 2011, the National Deaf Children’s Society has had a strong focus on delivering early years support to parents and carers of deaf children. NDCS’ Family Sign Language curriculum equips families with visual communication skills and an age appropriate British Sign Language vocabulary for use with deaf children in the early years.

In recognition of the early years as a critical period in the development of deaf children, we expanded our service provision for families through our Your Child Your Choices project. This work was funded through the Scottish Government’s Early Years Early Action Fund (managed by Inspiring Scotland and Big Lottery Scotland) from 2011 until 2015.

By improving access to Family Sign Language and parenting courses and by training professionals, the Your Child Your Choices project aimed to help families improve language and communication skills, become more confident and create more nurturing environments for deaf children.

An independent evaluation of the project showed that the project was highly successful in its approach towards helping families learn to sign with their deaf child. Its evidence shows that the Family Sign Language approach, where families are introduced to visual communication skills and British Sign Language in a child-centred and family-friendly way that is focused on storytelling and play, led to improved outcomes for both the child and parents. This included improved vocabulary and positive family relationships as a result of better communication skills.

## Everyone Together

We have secured funding for a further three years from Big Lottery Scotland which will allow us to expand and build on the legacy of the Your Child Choices Project by supporting 350 families over three years. The new project, Everyone Together, will provide support to families and professionals supporting deaf children in the early years. Its Family Sign Language element will offer families (including deaf children and their siblings) and early years professionals the chance to take part in Family Sign Language courses in group and one to one settings. The project will start in September 2016 and will be complimented by our national Child and Family Support Service which is underpinned by the principles of GIRFEC.

Moving forward this year we will also be carrying out development work, funded by Scottish Government, to explore the additional resources that may need to be developed to support families to learn BSL. As a member of the Deaf Sector Partnership<sup>10</sup> we will work closely with the Scottish Government and other deaf sector colleagues to support the implementation of the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act (2015). Funding from the Scottish Government's Children and Young People Early Intervention Fund will enhance our capacity to deliver services for deaf children and their families and ensure this work contributes effectively to key national agendas around wellbeing and attainment.



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10. For more information about this partnership please visit the website:  
<http://deafsectorpartnership.net/>



## 5. Policy recommendations

**5.1 Continued investment into specialist services** which support deaf children and their families in the early years is critical to ensuring positive outcomes. We are increasingly concerned about the provision of hearing impairment education services. These concerns have come directly to us from our family members or from education practitioners. Data from the Consortium on Research into Deaf Education suggests overall reductions in numbers of Teachers of the Deaf in education authorities between 2014 and 2015<sup>11</sup>. This is of urgent concern and requires further review.

While we appreciate the significant challenges facing local authorities, we believe these changes are of urgent concern, and will undermine the Scottish Government's ambition to close the attainment gap and ensure every learner reaches their fullest potential. We would welcome the Scottish Government's consideration of how education authorities can continue to ensure that the additional support needs of learners are fully addressed and the outcomes of the Curriculum for Excellence are being achieved for every learner.

**5.2 Scottish-Government endorsed guidance** should be developed to inform the early years support and multi-agency provision that should be available to deaf children and their families. A collaborative approach is required to develop this, involving key partners in government, education, health, social care, third sector as well as parents and carers of deaf children. We are keen to support and endorse any work to build on current non-mandatory guidance to achieve this.

The guidance should set out an approach to early years support which is rights based, child and family centred and be underpinned by a principle of informed choice. It should also take full account of current legislative framework and cover areas such as:

- Provision of accessible information
- Effective practice for local pathways and joined up working between vital services
- Assessing and supporting deaf children's language development
- The availability of information about/in BSL and support for families to learn to sign with their child

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11. Consortium for Research into Deaf Education, 2015, CRIDE report on 2015 survey on educational provision for deaf children in Scotland

- Training and qualifications for professionals working with deaf children (such as appropriate BSL qualifications and deaf awareness training for early years practitioners and Named Persons)
- Effective listening conditions in early years settings
- Social and emotional support for deaf children and their families

**5.3 Monitoring and accountability:** During its development, consideration should also be given to how public bodies will be supported to implement the guidance and their progress on this monitored with involvement from agencies like Education Scotland and the Care Inspectorate. Involvement from these agencies will also be valuable in relation to sharing effective practice from across Scotland. It will help quality assure services for deaf children and ensure public bodies are monitoring the outcomes from these services effectively. The inspection of peripatetic services for deaf children will also be critical to achieving this.

**5.4 The first Scottish BSL National Plan** should include a strong strategic ambition for support in the early years for families. We welcome the strong commitment the Scottish Government has shown towards addressing the gap in early years by funding Family Sign Language and endorse the approach that the Plan is used to build on this commitment by including both the provision of information about BSL and provision of support for families to learn to sign with their deaf child.

Given that local authorities will be required to develop their local BSL plans based on this national strategic direction, going forward the Scottish Government should also explore how best to commission this kind of support at national and local levels to advise public bodies on how to meet this expectation.

**5.5** The Scottish Government should assist in ensuring that the **Local Record of Deaf Children Pilot is rolled out** in order to improve the understanding of the needs and characteristics of this population to inform service design and delivery.





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

**National Deaf Children's Society's Freephone Helpline:  
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