Education and coronavirus: meeting the needs of deaf children in schools

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Introduction

Coronavirus restrictions continue to impose huge challenges on schools, which will have implications for how deaf children access specialist support. We acknowledge the significant steps that education professionals are taking to ensure continuity of learning. This briefing sets out a number of questions that settings will want to consider in terms of specialist support for deaf children.

Whilst it is not our role to give public health advice, it is our expectation that there will be a consideration around the risks to individual deaf children if they do not receive specialist support as usual, and that such risks are balanced against any public health issues. We believe that any reduction in specialist support should be a last resort, given that it may fundamentally undermine how deaf children are able to access learning in the classroom. It may also have a significant impact on the mental health of deaf children if they are unable to understand their teachers or peers whilst at school.

This briefing has been developed by the National Deaf Children's Society with support from the British Association of Teachers of the Deaf (BATOD) and the National Sensory Impairment Partnership (NatSIP). It focuses on support for deaf children in mainstream schools. However, many of the principles and suggestions may also help deaf children in other types of education settings.

Principles

Later in this briefing, we set out some specific questions that schools and colleges may want to consider. We do not provide any definitive answers, as this will depend on the individual context. However, there are a number of principles that we believe should be taken into account in making any decisions.

1. There should be no blanket policies (for example, a ban on all external visitors). Instead, we believe that any policies should take into account the individual needs of deaf children, and, as set out earlier, balance the risks to public health against the risks to individual children not getting the support they need.
2. Teachers of the Deaf should be involved in any decisions on how support will be provided.
3. Parents and deaf children should also be involved in any such decisions and kept fully informed. Parents and deaf children may have their own suggestions for how support could be provided, which should be taken seriously.
4. There should be a can-do approach. We encourage professionals to continue to be creative, pragmatic and flexible in ensuring that individual deaf children receive the support they need, as much as possible.
5. Any reduction in specialist support should be a last resort and with a full awareness of the impact that it will have on individual deaf children. Putting deaf children in a situation where they cannot understand their teachers or their peers should be seen as both unacceptable and untenable. It may also put schools at risk of legal challenge. Where a decision has been made there is no other alternative but to temporarily reduce some specialist support, we expect there to be a clear audit trail in place that sets out what mitigating actions are being put into place. Action planning should be SMART. We also

expect there to be a plan in place to ensure support is provided to enable deaf children to catch up. This might involve additional catch-up support or one-to-one tuition that is tailored to their individual needs.

Key issues and risks

The table below sets out some specific issues and risks, key questions to explore and possible mitigating actions. It is not intended to be exhaustive and it is hoped it will prompt discussion and collaboration between schools, Teachers of the Deaf, deaf young people and families. As set out earlier, we encourage professionals to be creative, pragmatic and flexible in ensuring that individual deaf children receive the support they need, as much as possible.

Issue/risk	Key issues and questions	Possible mitigating actions
Reduced access to specialist support where this is provided by any specialist staff visiting a school site (e.g. a peripatetic Teacher of the Deaf or a speech and language therapist)	What is the impact to the individual child if the Teacher of the Deaf or any other external specialist is not able to provide face-to-face support to an individual child and/or school staff? Is there a risk that reduced access will impede the child's ability to access learning? Note that, in England and Wales, government guidance explicitly states that peripatetic teachers can move between schools[i].	To carry out any meetings in the school in a well-ventilated room that can be easily cleaned afterwards. It should be noted that meetings outside may be problematic for deaf children unless the level of background noise is very low. To ask visitors to confirm they will follow social distancing requirements and provide records for any test and trace efforts that may be needed. As testing is rolled out, allowing visiting specialists to access any testing that may be in place within the school. To conduct meetings, including one-to-ones with pupils, virtually. This assumes that the child or school staff will be provided with the necessary IT equipment, time and space to be able to do this effectively. Any safeguarding policies should be followed but should be proportionate to the situation and balanced against the risk to individual children if they do not receive the specialist support they need. Safeguarding precautions that could be followed might include, for example, ensuring children are in a socially distanced 'shared space' for any virtual meetings. Ensuring Teachers of the Deaf or other external specialist staff wear a face covering as they enter and move through the school. The face covering should be removed when engaging with the deaf child.

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Reduced access to specialist equipment that needs to be passed between individuals (such as radio aids)	What is the impact to the child, both in terms of access to education and their emotional wellbeing, if they are not able to hear their teacher clearly? Note that if there are any changes to the classroom acoustics and/or in light of social distancing requirements, the use of radio aids is likely to become more, not less, important, including among children who may not have previously used radio aids.	Emphasising usual hygiene requirements – i.e. regular handwashing. Providing hand gel with a radio aid so that a teacher can easily clean their hands each time they handle the radio aid. Providing wipes so that a radio aid can be cleaned before and after it is used. Note that this must be done carefully, following guidance provided by manufacturers, to avoid damage to the device. You should seek advice and support from your local specialist education service for deaf children on this. In addition, the British Association of Teachers of the Deaf (BATOD) has also provided guidance[ii]. Where practical, arranging for an adult, usually the teacher, to take responsibility for handling the radio aid and holding it towards another person if/when others are speaking. Some radio aids have a conference or 'pointing' functionality enabled. For older children, asking them to take responsibility for positioning any radio aids that have this functionality device in a way that it can pick up the teacher's voice clearly, as well as peers in any group discussions, without the teacher having to handle it may be an option. However: • This relies on the teacher staying close to where the radio aid is • It also assumes that the deaf young person is a confident user of the radio aid who can be relied on to move the radio aid to where it needs to be. Reminding teachers of the importance of revoicing or paraphrasing what other pupils have said in any classroom discussions, or allowing deaf pupils time to turn around and face the pupil speaking.

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Trouble-shooting technology issues	For younger children, what steps can be taken within the school to ensure that staff are able to troubleshoot any issues with the child's hearing technology (where they have already been trained to do so)? What is the impact to the child, both in terms of access to education and their emotional wellbeing, if their hearing technology stops working whilst at school?	Asking parents to carry out basic checks before the school day. The child's Teacher of the Deaf or audiologist should be able to provide advice on what this should involve for each child. Depending on their age, encouraging children to be as independent as possible in using their hearing technology. Where it is necessary for school staff to troubleshoot any issues during the day, ensuring that the usual hygiene requirements are in place – i.e. regular handwashing before and after handling the equipment. Providing parents with information on how they can trouble-shoot any basic issues with hearing technology if issues become apparent at home.

Issue/risk	Key issues and questions	Possible mitigating actions
Reduced access to specialist support within the school (e.g. teaching assistants or communication support workers)	It is acknowledged that some teaching assistants may be asked to lead small groups or 'bubbles' of children, under teacher supervision

What will the impact be on a deaf child if they do not receive the usual support from a teaching assistant or communication support worker? What is the risk that reduction in this support will result in the child not being able to understand or access learning?

In England, guidance explicitly limits the redeployment of teaching assistants for children with SEND[iii] | Our view is that, where teaching assistants or communication support workers have a specific role in directly supporting individual deaf children, they should not be redeployed to other roles. In many cases, the support from a teaching assistant or communication support worker may be listed in a child's statement or plan. Steps should be taken to ensure that any teaching assistant or communication support worker with responsibility for ensuring a particular deaf child can participate in school is in the same 'bubble' as the child.

Some teaching assistants have a more generic role that doesn't involve providing direct individual support to an individual deaf child. Depending on the nature of the task and individual needs it may be considered to be most beneficial to the child if they are put in the same group as their usual teaching assistant. This might involve grouping children who most benefit from teaching assistant support in the same bubble.

Additional flexibility with the curriculum to ensure targeted catch-up support or individual one-to-one tuition is in place. |

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Specialist support for children in resource provisions	Children in resource provisions traditionally receive specialist support in a range of different ways, between the mainstream classroom and in the resource provision. Support in the resource provision may be provided to deaf children of different age groups. In England, guidance allows for the intermixing of children of different age groups where needed[iv].	Schools with resource provisions will need to think carefully about how this specialist support can continue to be provided whilst adhering to social distancing principles as much as possible. Ensuring social distancing and hygiene principles are followed when deaf children enter the resource provision classroom. Considering timetabling of lessons to minimise changes and intermixing, where possible.

Issue/risk	Key issues and questions	Possible mitigating actions
Temporary learning spaces and changes to classroom layouts	We understand that, in some areas, consideration is being given to deliver teaching and learning in temporary learning spaces to create additional room, or to delivering lessons outside. We also know that in many areas classroom layouts are being changed so that all pupils face forward. This may make it harder for deaf pupils to lipread or understand their peers. What will the acoustic conditions be like in any temporary learning spaces used? Portakabins and village halls, for example, are known to be 'echoey' and difficult listening environments	Identifying which rooms have optimal learning conditions and ensuring that groups or bubbles with deaf children are prioritised for such rooms. Ensuring that children's listening, language and communication needs are taken into account when considering seating position, potential sources of background noise and how information is delivered and presented in any temporary learning spaces. Ensuring that radio aids are used effectively. Reminding teachers of the importance of revoicing or paraphrasing what other pupils have said in any classroom discussions, or allowing deaf pupils time to turn around and face the pupil speaking. Seeking advice on the acoustics of any temporary learning space from a Teacher of the Deaf or education audiologists. It should be noted that portable soundfield systems will not work well in any temporary learning spaces that already have poor acoustics and may make the situation worse.

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Accessibility of remote education	Where remote teaching is in place, what steps will be taken to ensure that any teaching is 'deaf-friendly' and can be followed by deaf children? Where children are being directed to online resources, has the school checked that the resources are accessible to deaf children? For example, have captions been provided, can the speaker be seen on screen, and is the content appropriately visual and easy to follow? In England, guidance sets out the need to provide additional support for children with SEND[v] for any remote learning.	Seeking advice from Teachers of the Deaf on the accessibility and appropriateness of any remote education offer, drawing on advice from UK Governments, the British Association of Teachers of the Deaf and the National Deaf Children's Society. For example, the National Deaf Children's Society has produced a remote teaching [checklist](#)[vi] for teachers. Close liaison with families, as appropriate, so that they are able to support their child's learning as much as possible. Ensuring that children can take radio aids home to use to access any remote learning opportunities. Ensuring that deaf children have any necessary additional equipment (for example, leads to connect the radio aid to a laptop). Asking families and deaf young people to sign an agreement to ensure that radio aids are brought back to school. Arranging for specialist support to be provided remotely (e.g. from a communication support worker or Teacher of the Deaf). Steps should be taken to ensure that both parties have robust IT equipment in place to allow this and any other necessary equipment, for example headphones that fit over hearing aids. Any safeguarding policies should be followed but should be proportionate to the situation and balanced against the risk to individual children if they do not receive the specialist support they need. Safeguarding precautions that could be followed might include, for example, ensuring children are in a 'shared space' for any virtual meetings. Where remote teaching is in place, funding additional communication support (such as remote speech-to-text reporter) and/or ensuring that existing support (such as a BSL interpreter or communication support worker) can be easily seen. Alternatively, some platforms have speech-recognition technology enabled. These are not always 100% accurate, however, so ongoing feedback from the student will be needed. A range of education providers - for example, Oak National Academy and BBC Bitesize – have taken steps to improve the accessibility of their content. Whichever online resources are being used, schools should check that these are accessible to deaf children. At the minimum, we

would expect subtitles to be provided and, where deaf children use sign language, for there to be an interpreted version. The National Deaf Children's Society has also produced [guidelines on accessible content](#)[vii] which may also be helpful.

Where online content is being created by the school, it is relatively straightforward to add captions to this independently.

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One-to-one tuition and catch up programmes	Many deaf children will be eligible for formal tuition and catch-up programmes of the kind that is delivered to all children. What steps will be taken to ensure that the person delivering tuition or catch-up is deaf aware and that any such intervention is tailored to the needs of deaf children?	Providing tutors with deaf awareness information and training, as well as clear advice on the impact that deafness has on individual children's learning. Advice from a Teacher of the Deaf should be sought to support this. School catch up programmes and interventions need to be accessible to deaf children. Advice from a Teacher of the Deaf should be sought to support this.

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Emotional wellbeing of deaf children	Deaf children are already known to be at risk of lower emotional wellbeing. Lockdown is likely to have had a negative impact on many children's emotional wellbeing. Deaf children may have felt particularly isolated and lonely during this time Is there a need to carry out an assessment and/or to amend the child's statement or plan?	Establish peer support programme for deaf children, as appropriate and in line with social distancing requirements Where classes are broken up into smaller groups or 'bubbles', ensuring that a deaf child is in a group with one or two friends who the child can easily understand or who can provide peer support. Ensuring that any pastoral/support programmes or interventions take into account the needs of deaf children. Similarly, ensuring that any school counsellors are deaf aware and are able to meet the needs of deaf children. Some interventions such as 'virtual circle time' may be inaccessible to deaf children and risk causing distress. Advice from the child's Teacher of the Deaf should be sought. Where deaf children are being signposted to online resources, checking that these are accessible and appropriate to deaf children. Considering if the school or service needs to make a referral to further support, including from deaf CAMHS (England) or any nominated contacts for mental health support for deaf children in your area.

Issue/risk	Key issues and questions	Possible mitigating actions
Face masks and coverings	The use of face masks or coverings in classrooms will have a very significant impact on the ability of deaf children to communicate, to the extent that attendance at school or college may be redundant.	If a decision was made for teachers to wear face masks in classrooms, it will be important that a meeting take place between the education setting, the family and a Teacher of the Deaf to identify the risks to deaf children's access to learning and emotional wellbeing, and to identify what reasonable adjustments should be introduced. Depending on the individual needs of the child, these reasonable adjustments may include, for example, wearing clear face masks or shields, increased use of radio aids technology, additional deaf awareness training. Schools should also be aware of the exemption in place that allows face masks and coverings to be temporarily removed if needed to communicate with someone who relies on lipreading. More information is available in the National Deaf Children's Society position paper[viii] on face masks and coverings in education and in the document produced by BATOD.[ix].

More information

The National Deaf Children's Society [coronavirus blog for professionals](#)[x] provides more information on coronavirus and support for deaf children and is regularly updated, in response to any changes in government guidance and/or feedback from professionals.

You can also contact the National Deaf Children's Society [helpline](#)[xi] if you would like further information, advice or support. You can also [refer families](#)[xii] to them if they would benefit from their support.

A range of coronavirus-related resources are also available through [BATOD](#)[xiii] and the [National Sensory Impairment Partnership](#)[xiv].

Endnotes

References to government guidance correct as of 2 February 2021

[i] England: *"Supply teachers, peripatetic teachers and other temporary staff can move between schools. They should ensure they minimise contact and maintain as much distance as possible from other staff. They should also participate in schools' rapid testing programmes where these have been established. Specialists, therapists, clinicians and other support staff for pupils with SEND should provide interventions as usual."*
"Schools should ensure that appropriate support is made available for pupils with SEND, for example by deploying teaching assistants and enabling specialist staff from both within and outside the school to work with pupils in different classes or year groups."
[www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak](#)
Wales: *"Supply teachers, peripatetic teachers and/or other temporary staff can move between schools. They should ensure they minimise contact and maintain as much distance as possible from other staff. Specialists, therapists, clinicians and other support staff for learners with SEN should provide interventions as usual. Schools should consider how to manage other visitors to the site, such as contractors and ensure site guidance on social/physical distancing and hygiene is explained to visitors on or before arrival. Where visits can happen outside of school hours, they should. A record should be kept of all visitors."*
[https://gov.wales/new-guidance-support-september-schools-return](#)
[ii] [www.batod.org.uk/resource/uk-assistive-listening-technology-working-group-and-batod-joint-advice/](#)

[iii] "Where support staff capacity is available, schools may consider using this to support catch-up provision or targeted interventions. Teaching assistants may also be deployed to lead groups or cover lessons, under the direction and supervision of a qualified, or nominated, teacher (under the Education (Specified Work) (England) Regulations 2012 for maintained schools and non-maintained special schools and in accordance with the freedoms provided under the funding agreement for academies)."
Any redeployments should not be at the expense of supporting pupils with SEND." *(bold text added for emphasis)*
[www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak](#)
[iv] *Both the approaches of separating groups and maintaining distance are not 'all-or nothing' options and will still bring benefits even if implemented partially"*
[www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak](#)
[v] "We expect schools to consider these expectations in relation to the pupils' age, stage of development or special educational needs, for example where this would place significant demands on parents' help or support…We also recognise that some pupils with Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) may not be able to access remote education without adult support and so expect schools to work with families to deliver an ambitious curriculum appropriate for their level of need."
[www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak](#)
[vivi] [www.ndcs.org.uk/blog/deaf-friendly-remote-learning-a-checklist-for-teachers/](#)
[vii] [www.ndcs.org.uk/documents-and-resources/how-to-make-your-resources-accessible-to-deaf-children-and-young-people/](#)
[viii] [www.ndcs.org.uk/media/6209/face-covering-in-education-position-paper.pdf](#)
[ix] [www.batod.org.uk/batod-update-in-relation-to-face-coverings-in-education-settings/](#)
[x] [www.ndcs.org.uk/blog/coronavirus-and-support-for-deaf-children-information-for-professionals/](#)
[xi] [www.ndcs.org.uk/helpline](#)
[xii] [www.ndcs.org.uk/our-services/services-for-families/helpline/referral-form-for-professionals/](#)
[xiii] [www.batod.org.uk/resource/suggested-resources-from-batod-members/](#)
[xiv] [www.natsip.org.uk/coronavirus-advice-and-resources](#)