

BATOD and NDCS Consultation Response

Leading Together for Excellence: A TransformED NI Strategy for Teacher Professional Learning

About us

We are the British Association of Teachers of Deaf Children and Young People (BATOD), the only professional association for Qualified Teachers of Deaf Children and Young People (QToDs) in the UK. The Association represents the interests of QToDs and the children and young people (CYP) they teach with a range of governments and other agencies. We support QToDs and organise continued professional development (CPD) courses and national and regional meetings to provide relevant up to-date information and to disseminate good practice. Strong links are maintained between BATOD and the UK governments, as well as voluntary bodies, especially the National Deaf Children's Society, in order to contribute to policy development in this field.

We are the National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS), the leading charity for deaf children and young people. We are dedicated to creating a world without barriers for deaf children. We give expert support on childhood deafness, raise awareness and campaign for deaf children's rights so they have the same opportunities as everyone else. We are here for every deaf child who needs us – no matter what their level or type of deafness or how they communicate.

Question 1: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the overall vision set out in the strategy: “To build an expert, confident teaching profession through high-quality, career-long professional learning that drives system excellence”?

BATOD and NDCS strongly agree with the overall vision of building an expert, confident teaching profession through high-quality, career-long professional learning that drives system excellence.

We welcome the recognition that “Teachers must be supported as active agents in their own learning, within a system that provides clarity, coherence and equitable access” and the strategy's commitment to sustained evidence-informed professional learning throughout a teacher's career. The emphasis on professional standards, curriculum alignment, leadership development and system-wide improvement reflects many of the features associated with high-performing education systems internationally.

It is stated that “TransformED placed particular emphasis on strengthening teachers' understanding of how pupils learn”. Therefore, we believe the vision would be

strengthened by explicitly recognising the importance of reasonable adjustments to meet the needs of low-incidence cohorts within the Special Educational Needs population. Children who are deaf and/or have a vision impairment require teachers to understand how to make the curriculum and learning spaces accessible. Although these specific cohorts may be small in number, teachers can transfer learning from bespoke adaptations for these learners to strategies for children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), another population not explicitly recognised in the consultation documentation. BATOD and NDCS support RCSLT's view that communication underpins all aspects of teaching, learning, assessment, behaviour, inclusion and curriculum access. Teachers communicate knowledge and create learning spaces within social constructivist environments. Teachers enable learners of all abilities to express their current mental model of understanding through a range of communication formats as they progress towards the curriculum model within the respective framework. In addition, relationships within schools and preparation for adulthood are built through communication. Understanding how to create inclusive learning spaces is fundamental to educational excellence.

SLCN is one of the most prevalent special educational needs in Northern Ireland. Department of Education statistics show significant increases in the number of children identified with SLCN over recent years, particularly within post primary settings. Between 2019/20 and 2024/25, the number of pupils identified with SLCN increased from 7,080 to 9,306, with post-primary numbers increasing by over 80%.

In Northern Ireland, there are at least 1,527 deaf children aged 0–19 (CRIDE, 2025). Five percent of that population are educated in the only three specialist educational settings: one special school for children who are deaf and/or have a vision impairment, and two deaf resource provisions, all of which are based in the Belfast area. Eighty-seven percent are in educational settings across Northern Ireland. With 60% of the known deaf child population “identified as deaf outside of the newborn hearing programme and after they had started statutory education” (CRIDE, 2025), it is important to ensure that all teachers have a foundational understanding of communication development and the reasons for potential delays, alongside inclusive, child-centred, communication-supportive practice.(NDCS website)

At the 2026 Northern Ireland National Association for Special Educational Needs (nasen) conference, RCSLT NI presented their *We Are The Village* report, which identified significant demand from parents and practitioners for greater support and training in speech, language and communication. RCSLT also reported on the Department of Education-funded Language Launchpad project, which reinforced the importance of early identification, workforce development and communication-supportive environments in improving outcomes for CYP. The findings from these initiatives echo the findings from the NDCS-commissioned report on services for deaf children in Northern Ireland (NDCS, 2025). For cohorts of deaf children, including those with co-occurring needs, there is a significant need to ensure that

training on speech, language and communication needs, and on the impact of deafness, is embedded within teacher professional learning.

Evidence demonstrates that speech, language and communication skills are strongly associated with literacy, educational attainment, wellbeing and future life outcomes. Language development at age two is a strong predictor of later literacy and educational attainment (Snowling et al., 2011). For deaf children, missed incidental learning, delayed access to suitable early intervention, late identification of deafness and other factors can affect literacy (Mayer & Trezek, 2015), educational attainment (NDCS, 2023), wellbeing (Byrne and McNamee, 2025) and future life outcomes (Young et al, 2023).

The professional learning continuum should recognise an understanding of speech, language and communication development as a core component of teacher expertise.

Question 2: To what extent do you agree or disagree that professional learning should be viewed as a career-long continuum?

Response: Strongly Agree

BATOD and NDCS strongly agree that professional learning should be viewed as a career-long continuum.

Teachers play a critical role in educating CYP and preparing them for both the world they live in now and the world they will enter as adults. Teaching is therefore a complex profession that requires continual reflection on practice. We would refer to recommendation 6 of Next Steps:

Recommendation 6 Workforce planning and enhancing training for Teachers of Deaf Children and Young People (ToDs). The need to explore training and development pathways for other deaf specialist roles, such as communication support workers and specialist classroom assistants, to support service sustainability and succession planning.

Initial Teacher Education provides new teachers with opportunities to engage with theory and apply it in practice. However, qualified practitioners also require regular access to professional learning spaces where they can engage with up-to-date, evidence-informed and peer-reviewed research to inform adaptations to their practice. Given the diverse and changing needs of CYP, teachers should also be supported to engage in practitioner inquiry and action-based research, enriching practice-informed evidence with their peers across the education community.

Professional learning should support teachers to continually develop their knowledge, skills and confidence in identifying and responding to communication needs throughout their careers.

Teachers require an understanding of typical communication development during Initial Teacher Education, practical communication-supportive strategies during induction and early career development, and more advanced understanding of identification, intervention and inclusive practice as their careers progress.

The BATOD statement on inclusion states: “All deaf children and young people (CYP) should be supported to become independent and valued members of society, where they can contribute and fully access services. There are a range of needs in the ‘deaf population’. Therefore, certain environments will be more compatible to effective learning than others, but inclusion is not a placement or a state, but where attitudes align to foster a sense of belonging for all.” Thus, a continuum approach is particularly important in supporting the inclusion of CYP with any level of deafness.

Deaf CYP are a low-incidence, heterogeneous population with high needs profiles. Their needs, regardless of level or type of deafness, can be complex and wide-ranging. Often, a deaf child may be the only deaf learner in a mainstream setting. To support the class teacher, wider school workforce, child and family, the Education Authority provides centrally employed specialist teachers through the Sensory Support Service (DE Circular 2007/22). These specialist teachers, known as Qualified Teachers of Deaf Children and Young People (QToDs), are experienced teachers with an additional mandatory qualification in childhood deafness. They have the skills, knowledge and expertise required to provide high-quality support to deaf babies, CYP from 0 to 25 years and their families, in the home and in mainstream and specialist educational settings.

The premise of the QToD role is to share specialist understanding of the needs of deaf CYP and of how those needs can be met. BATOD is aware BATOD members in their employed capacity have been invited to present to ST Mary’s Irish Medium PGCE students and student on the Stranmillis teacher training SEN module. BATOD recommends these training opportunities are encouraged and supported as long-term practice.

This specialist sensory support focuses on two key outcomes as a route to social inclusion: ensuring that all deaf CYP, including those with complex profiles where deafness may not be seen as their primary need, have fair and optimised access to education; and ensuring that all deaf CYP have opportunities to develop their own agency, voice and independence.

QToDs have experience and expertise in these areas:

- Impact of deafness on all aspects of life
- Social, emotional, and mental health needs (SEMH)
- Language acquisition
- Specialist assessment

- Policy and practice – legislative frameworks
- Facilitating inclusion
- Communication
- Literacy
- Habilitation – independent living skills
- Social, sports, and leisure – supporting deaf CYP to have opportunities to participate in these areas
- Preparing for adulthood.

Professional learning should also be accessible to teachers who themselves are deaf and/or disabled. Professionals with lived experience bring valuable expertise. Their access needs should not create barriers to teaching in any classroom, nor to gaining further expertise through leadership and specialist pathways.

Professional learning should also be viewed as a career-long continuum for the specialist QToD workforce. Classroom practice, technology, evidence-informed research and resources such as the Specialist Deaf Curriculum Framework (SDCF) continually evolve. QToDs are crucial to delivering the government's commitments to supporting deaf children and upholding their rights under legislation, policy and international conventions. This includes ensuring that deaf children's rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), including Article 23 (support for disabled children), Article 28 (right to education) and Article 30 (minority language rights, including BSL/ISL), are upheld in the teaching of deaf CYP.

Question 3: Based on your experience, what are the most significant gaps in current professional learning provision?

Selected responses:

- Professional learning is too generic and not sufficiently tailored to classroom practice.
- Limited coherence across career stages.
- Insufficient time and protected space for high-quality professional learning.
- Limited access to high-quality research-informed practice.
- Gaps in SEN-related professional learning.
- Insufficient opportunities for collaborative, school or cluster-based professional learning.
- Limited support for leadership preparation and development.
- Limited clarity about entitlement to professional learning across the system.
- Fragmentation across providers, with no single source of coordination or oversight.

Additional comments:

BATOD and NDCS consider that the most significant gaps in current professional learning provision relate to the limited, inconsistent and often overly generic treatment of special educational needs, disability, deafness, speech, language and communication needs, and inclusive classroom practice.

The strategy rightly states that effective professional development should enhance teachers' knowledge and skills, lead to changes in classroom practice and result in improved outcomes for pupils. However, current professional learning provision does not always give teachers and leaders the depth of practical, evidence-informed knowledge needed to identify and remove communication, access and participation barriers for learners with low-incidence and specialist needs.

A key gap is the lack of explicit professional learning on deafness and communication access. Deaf CYP may be educated in mainstream schools, specialist provision or resource bases, and many teachers may only teach one or two deaf pupils during their career. This means that deafness can be overlooked within generic SEN training. Yet the impact of deafness on language development, incidental learning, listening fatigue, literacy, curriculum access, social inclusion, wellbeing and attainment can be significant.

There is also a wider gap in professional learning on speech, language and communication. Many teachers will encounter CYP with speech, language and communication needs throughout their careers, but training in this area is often limited, inconsistent or embedded within broader SEN provision. This can result in communication difficulties being overlooked or misunderstood, despite communication underpinning every aspect of classroom learning, assessment, behaviour, inclusion and wellbeing.

BATOD and NDCS would particularly highlight the need for greater professional learning in:

- typical speech, language and communication development;
- the identification of speech, language and communication needs, including where pupils also have another identified disability or primary need;
- the educational impact of deafness, including listening fatigue, reduced access to incidental language, and barriers to classroom discussion and peer interaction;
- communication-supportive classroom practice;
- inclusive use of spoken language, signed language, visual communication and augmentative or alternative communication where appropriate;
- explicit vocabulary teaching and language for learning;
- the relationship between communication, literacy and attainment;

- the relationship between communication, behaviour, attendance, emotional wellbeing and social inclusion;
- classroom acoustics, seating, sightlines, captioned materials, assistive hearing technology and staff communication behaviours;
- when and how to seek specialist advice from QToDs, speech and language therapists, educational audiologists, SENCOs and families.

There is currently no Northern Ireland-specific published attainment data for deaf pupils. This makes it harder to monitor whether professional learning and wider system reforms are improving access, participation and outcomes for deaf learners. The NDCS 2025 Next Steps report recommends an evidence-based, outcomes-focused approach to service delivery.

An evidence-based, outcomes-focused approach to service delivery and evaluation is recommended. This involves tailoring outcomes to the specific context and needs 12 of each child, which can include broad goals like ensuring appropriate educational placements, as well as specific objectives like developing age-appropriate communication skills. Agreed and consistent data should be used to identify deaf children and monitor, track and report outcomes. Planning and evaluation should include the views of deaf children, young people and their families, and regular feedback from children and families should be developed. [Recommendation 8]

Evidence from other jurisdictions, however, continues to show attainment gaps between deaf pupils and their hearing peers. For example, in England, 34% of deaf children achieved at least a grade 5 in both English and maths in 2025, compared with 45% of all children.

Professional learning also needs to address the links between communication access and wellbeing. CYP with speech, language and communication needs, including deaf learners, are more likely to experience social, emotional and mental health difficulties where their communication needs are not identified, understood or supported. BATOD and NDCS support RCSLT's view that communication is often absent from wider professional learning relating to behaviour, attendance, inclusion and wellbeing, despite strong evidence that communication difficulties frequently underpin challenges in these areas.

Another significant gap is the lack of coherence across career stages. Initial Teacher Education, induction, Early Professional Development, continuing professional learning and leadership development should build progressively. At present, opportunities to develop understanding of deafness, communication access and inclusive practice can depend too heavily on local provision, individual school

priorities or whether a teacher happens to work with a deaf learner. This creates inequity for teachers and pupils.

There is also insufficient protected time for professional learning and too few opportunities for collaborative, school-based or cluster-based learning with specialist input. Teachers and leaders need practical opportunities to apply learning to classroom contexts, reflect on impact, work with specialist professionals, and share effective practice across settings.

BATOD and NDCS therefore recommends that the strategy addresses these gaps by ensuring that professional learning on deafness, communication access, speech, language and communication needs, and inclusive practice is explicit, practical, evidence-informed and embedded across the full professional learning continuum. This should include clear entitlement, quality assurance, specialist involvement, protected time and mechanisms to evaluate impact on pupils' access, participation, wellbeing and outcomes.

Question 4: To what extent do you agree or disagree that implementation of the Initial Teacher Education Curriculum Framework will enhance coherence and consistency across all Initial Teacher Education courses in Northern Ireland?

Response: Agree

BATOD and NDCS agree that implementation of the Initial Teacher Education Curriculum Framework has the potential to enhance coherence and consistency across Initial Teacher Education courses in Northern Ireland. A shared framework can establish a common entitlement for all student teachers and support a clearer professional learning continuum from initial training through induction and continuing professional development.

However, BATOD and NDCS considers that the framework should be strengthened by making speech, language and communication development, including communication access for deaf CYP, explicit within the core content for all trainee teachers. Communication is central to learning, literacy, social inclusion, wellbeing and participation. Where children cannot access classroom communication effectively, this can lead to gaps in learning, social isolation, frustration and reduced confidence.

Speech, language and communication as a core teaching responsibility

All trainee teachers should understand that speech, language and communication underpin learning across all subjects. This should not be treated solely as specialist SEN content. Teachers are often the first professionals to notice when a pupil is

struggling to follow instructions, retain information, access vocabulary, participate in discussion or demonstrate what they know.

The framework should therefore ensure that trainee teachers develop a foundational understanding of typical language development, Developmental Language Disorder (DLD), speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), and the ways in which deafness can affect incidental language learning, vocabulary acquisition, listening fatigue, social communication and access to the curriculum.

For deaf learners, language and communication development may require explicit, repeated and meaningful teaching across the curriculum. New vocabulary, concepts and classroom routines may need to be taught in more than one context, with visual, signed, spoken, written and/or augmentative supports used appropriately. Trainee teachers should learn how to build communication-rich classrooms where pupils have real opportunities to take turns, ask questions, rehearse language, use subject-specific vocabulary and participate in structured dialogue.

In addition, deaf learners and learners with vision impairment require access to a specialised curriculum framework designed to help improve the outcomes for the specific low incidence population across the whole range of abilities and needs. Facilitated by the specialist qualified teacher, the respective curriculum frameworks; specialist deaf curriculum framework and curriculum framework for children with vision impairment can make a positive contribution to their long-term emotional wellbeing by helping to ensure that they progress into adulthood with the appropriate skills and that they achieve in line with their underlying cognitive ability and fulfil their potential.

High expectations and accessible communication

BATOD and NDCS would welcome explicit recognition that high expectations and accessible communication are not competing priorities. Trainee teachers need to understand how to maintain ambition for all pupils while adapting teaching, resources and assessment so that communication barriers do not prevent pupils from showing their knowledge, skills and understanding.

This includes recognising that language development may be uneven with cognitive ability. A pupil may understand complex concepts but be unable to express their thinking verbally, follow multi-step instructions, or access abstract vocabulary without support. Trainee teachers should therefore be taught to offer multiple ways for pupils to demonstrate understanding, including spoken language, signed language, visual responses, practical demonstration, written work, AAC or supported discussion.

The framework should make clear that signed languages, visual communication and AAC are valid means of communication. British Sign Language, Irish Sign Language,

visual supports, objects of reference and other communication approaches should be understood as part of inclusive practice, not as lower expectations or substitute provision.

Planning, curriculum access and adaptive teaching

Trainee teachers should learn practical planning habits that make learning accessible for pupils with SLCN and deaf learners. These include identifying key vocabulary in advance, considering the language demands of each subject, building in pre-teaching and post-teaching opportunities, breaking tasks into manageable steps, using clear and explicit instructions, and providing visual prompts, models and sentence starters where appropriate.

Lesson planning should also consider how individual language targets are addressed and how support staff can be prepared to reinforce communication access without replacing teacher responsibility. Where possible, planning should be shared in advance with pupils and support staff so that new vocabulary and concepts can be introduced before the lesson.

Structured talk activities should be designed carefully so that pupils are included rather than overwhelmed. This may involve adult modelling, carefully considered grouping or pairing, clear roles in group discussion, rehearsal time, visual prompts and predictable routines. These approaches benefit many learners and are particularly important for pupils who do not have full access to incidental spoken language.

Behaviour, wellbeing and communication access

The framework should help trainee teachers understand that unmet speech, language and communication needs can present as behaviour. Pupils may appear distracted, interrupt, withdraw, ask to leave the room, become frustrated, fall out with peers or avoid participation when the underlying issue is difficulty accessing language, instructions, classroom dialogue or social communication.

Clear routines, consistent expectations and accessible instructions support both behaviour and language development. They help pupils understand what is happening, what is expected, how to participate and how to seek help. For deaf learners, this should include consideration of classroom acoustics, seating, sightlines, use of hearing technology, captioned audiovisual materials and staff communication behaviours.

Assessment and demonstrating learning

BATOD and NDCS recommend that the framework include explicit content on how language needs can affect assessment. Trainee teachers should be supported to distinguish between a pupil not understanding the curriculum content and a pupil being unable to access or express learning because of language, communication or listening barriers.

Low-stakes assessment approaches, alternative response formats, visual prompts, practical demonstration, structured questioning and appropriate access arrangements can help pupils show their learning more confidently. This is particularly important for deaf learners and pupils with SLCN, for whom assessment language can become an unintended barrier to demonstrating subject knowledge.

Working with specialists and families

Trainee teachers should understand their role in supporting communication development as part of inclusive practice, while also recognising when to seek specialist advice. Quality-first teaching and classroom adaptation are essential, but trainee teachers should not be expected to replace the expertise of SENCOs, QToDs, speech and language therapists, educational audiologists, BSL/ISL specialists or other professionals.

Early referral and timely specialist involvement should be presented as good professional practice, not as failure. Where specialist support is delayed, unavailable or inconsistently commissioned, pupils may experience avoidable language delay, reduced curriculum access, social isolation and poorer wellbeing. The framework should therefore support trainee teachers to monitor progress, raise concerns appropriately, work collaboratively with families and professionals, and implement agreed strategies consistently.

Recommended additions to the framework

BATOD and NDCS recommends that the Initial Teacher Education Curriculum Framework explicitly includes:

- typical speech, language and communication development, including Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) and speech, language and communication needs (SLCN);
- the impact of deafness on communication access, incidental language learning, listening fatigue, vocabulary development and social inclusion;
- communication as a foundation for literacy, learning, behaviour, wellbeing and participation;
- inclusive communication approaches, including spoken language, signed language, visual communication and Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC);

- practical classroom strategies such as pre-teaching, explicit vocabulary instruction, visual supports, clear routines, accessible instructions, modelling and structured dialogue;
- the role of specialist professionals, including QToDs, speech and language therapists and educational audiologists, and how trainee teachers should work effectively with them and with families;
- the need for timely escalation where communication barriers persist or where pupils are not making expected progress.

In summary, BATOD and NDCS support the proposed framework and agrees that it can improve coherence and consistency across Initial Teacher Education in Northern Ireland. To achieve its full potential, the framework should make communication development and communication access explicit, practical and assessable within the entitlement for all trainee teachers. This would help ensure that newly qualified teachers enter the profession better prepared to identify communication barriers, make reasonable adjustments, maintain high expectations and work collaboratively to secure better outcomes for deaf CYP

and pupils with wider speech, language and communication needs.

Question 5: The strategy proposes modernising the current Teacher Competences. To what extent do you agree or disagree that this is necessary to support professional growth and clarity of expectations?

Response: Strongly Agree

BATOD and NDCS strongly agree that modernising the current Teacher Competences is necessary to support professional growth, professional identity and clarity of expectations across the teaching profession.

The role of teachers has evolved significantly, reflecting developments in inclusive education, digital technology, curriculum reform, children's rights, safeguarding, wellbeing and understanding of the diverse needs of learners. Modernised competences provide an important opportunity to ensure that professional expectations are relevant, evidence-informed and aligned with contemporary educational priorities.

BATOD and NDCS particularly welcomes the intention to create competences that support a coherent professional learning continuum from Initial Teacher Education through induction, early professional development, experienced practice and leadership. Clear, progressive competences can help teachers identify development needs, guide professional learning and strengthen consistency across the education system.

As part of this review, BATOD and NDCS recommends that the revised Teacher Competences explicitly recognise communication access as a core component of

effective teaching. Communication is central to teaching, learning, assessment, relationships, wellbeing and participation. For deaf CYP, access to classroom communication cannot be assumed. It may be affected by hearing levels, listening environments, language development, use of hearing technologies, availability of signed language, listening fatigue, classroom acoustics, pace of interaction and the communication behaviours of adults and peers.

All teachers should therefore be expected to have a foundational understanding of how deafness and wider speech, language and communication needs can affect learning, social inclusion, literacy, behaviour and wellbeing. This does not mean that every teacher should become a specialist teacher of deaf CYP. Rather, all teachers should have sufficient knowledge to recognise communication barriers, make reasonable adjustments, use inclusive communication strategies and work effectively with specialist professionals.

BATOD and NDCS recommend that the modernised Teacher Competences include expectations that teachers can:

- understand the central role of language and communication in learning, literacy, behaviour, wellbeing and participation;
- recognise that deaf CYP may not have full access to incidental spoken language, peer interaction or classroom discussion;
- adapt teaching to support communication access, including through clear instructions, visual support, explicit vocabulary teaching, structured dialogue, captioned audiovisual materials and accessible classroom routines;
- understand the importance of classroom acoustics, seating, sightlines, assistive hearing technology and adult communication behaviours;
- support inclusive use of spoken language, signed language, visual communication and augmentative or alternative communication where appropriate;
- work collaboratively with families, SENCOs, QToDs, speech and language therapists, educational audiologists, communication support workers and other specialist staff;
- seek timely specialist advice where pupils are not making expected progress or where communication access remains a barrier.

BATOD and NDCS also recommend that the revised competences make clear that inclusion is not simply about placement in a mainstream classroom. Deaf CYP require meaningful access to teaching, learning, social interaction, the curriculum and the wider life of the school. Teachers should be supported to understand that high expectations must be accompanied by appropriate communication access and specialist support.

Modernising the Teacher Competences is therefore necessary and timely. To be effective, the revised competences should embed communication access, deaf awareness and inclusive teaching practice throughout the professional expectations for all teachers, while also recognising the essential role of specialist teachers and services in supporting deaf CYP.

Question 6: The strategy proposes introducing distinct Leadership Standards for Northern Ireland. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this proposal?

Response: Strongly Agree

BATOD and NDCS strongly agree with the proposal to introduce distinct Leadership Standards for Northern Ireland.

Educational leadership requires a specific set of knowledge, skills and responsibilities that extend beyond classroom teaching. Clear leadership standards can support leadership development, strengthen consistency across the system and help ensure that leaders are equipped to create the conditions necessary for high-quality teaching, learning, inclusion and communication access.

BATOD and NDCS welcome the recognition that leadership development should be deliberate, coherent and evidence-informed. Strong leadership plays a critical role in shaping school culture, workforce development, school improvement priorities and the effective implementation of inclusive practice. For deaf CYP, inclusive leadership is particularly important because access to learning, communication, social interaction and the wider life of the school cannot be assumed.

BATOD and NDCS recommend that the proposed Leadership Standards include explicit reference to deaf awareness, communication access, inclusive practice and the creation of communication-supportive learning environments. School leaders have a significant influence on whether communication access is prioritised, resourced, monitored and embedded across the school.

Leaders should be expected to understand that deaf CYP may face barriers linked to listening environments, classroom acoustics, use of hearing technology, availability of signed language, incidental language access, concentration and listening fatigue, peer interaction and staff communication behaviours. These factors can affect learning, literacy, wellbeing, behaviour, attendance, relationships and participation.

BATOD and NDCS recommend that Leadership Standards should support leaders to:

- create communication-accessible and deaf-aware school environments;
- ensure that deaf CYP have meaningful access to teaching, learning, assessment, social interaction and the wider life of the school;

- promote inclusive communication practices, including spoken language, signed language, visual communication and assistive technology;
- recognise that communication barriers can affect attainment, behaviour, attendance, wellbeing and social inclusion;
- ensure that reasonable adjustments are planned, implemented, reviewed and resourced;
- prioritise classroom acoustics, seating, sightlines, captioned materials and effective use of hearing technologies;
- work effectively with families, SENCOs, QToDs, educational audiologists, speech and language therapists, communication support workers and other specialist staff;
- ensure that staff have access to appropriate professional learning in deaf awareness, communication access and inclusive teaching practice;
- include communication access and deaf learners' outcomes within school improvement planning, policy development and quality assurance.

BATOD and NDCS also recommend that the Leadership Standards recognise the importance of specialist services and workforce capacity. Inclusive leadership requires not only positive attitudes but also systems that enable timely access to specialist advice, assessment, training and intervention. School leaders should understand when and how to seek support from QToDs and other professionals, and should ensure that specialist recommendations are implemented consistently.

BATOD and NDCS strongly support the introduction of distinct Leadership Standards for Northern Ireland. To achieve their full potential, these standards should embed inclusive leadership, deaf awareness and communication access throughout, ensuring that leaders are equipped to create schools in which deaf CYP can learn, communicate, participate and thrive.

Question 7: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to make induction mandatory for all newly qualified teachers in Northern Ireland?

Response: Strongly Agree

BATOD and NDCS strongly agree with the proposal to make induction mandatory for all newly qualified teachers in Northern Ireland.

The transition from Initial Teacher Education into professional practice is a critical stage in a teacher's career. A structured and mandatory induction programme can help newly qualified teachers consolidate learning, build confidence, develop inclusive practice and establish effective professional habits from the outset. It can also support retention by ensuring that early career teachers are not left to navigate

complex classroom, pastoral and inclusion responsibilities without consistent guidance.

BATOD and NDCS particularly welcome the opportunity for induction to strengthen newly qualified teachers' understanding of inclusion, special educational needs, disability, communication access and evidence-informed practice. These areas should not be left to chance or dependent on the setting in which a newly qualified teacher begins their career.

For deaf CYP, access to teaching, learning, peer interaction and the wider life of the school cannot be assumed. Newly qualified teachers may be teaching deaf learners in mainstream, resource base, specialist or other settings, and need to understand how deafness can affect communication, language development, literacy, listening, social inclusion, wellbeing and participation.

BATOD and NDCS recommend that mandatory induction should include explicit content on:

- deaf awareness and the educational impact of deafness;
- communication access as a core part of inclusive teaching;
- the impact of classroom acoustics, seating, sightlines, lighting and staff communication behaviours;
- listening fatigue and the additional cognitive load experienced by some deaf learners;
- the role and effective use of hearing technologies, captioned materials and visual supports;
- inclusive communication approaches, including spoken language, signed language, visual communication and augmentative or alternative communication where appropriate;
- how language and communication needs can affect literacy, behaviour, wellbeing, assessment and participation;
- when and how to seek advice from QToDs, SENCOs, educational audiologists, speech and language therapists, communication support workers and families.

BATOD and NDCS also recommend that induction should help newly qualified teachers understand that inclusion is more than physical placement in a classroom. Deaf learners require meaningful access to instruction, discussion, incidental learning, social interaction, curriculum content and school life. High expectations must be supported by reasonable adjustments, specialist advice and effective communication strategies. The NDCS publications are a valued and popular source of free professional material that support induction in the area of deaf education.

Mandatory induction should also reinforce the importance of collaborative practice. Newly qualified teachers should understand that they are responsible for inclusive classroom teaching, while also knowing when to seek specialist guidance and how to implement recommendations consistently. This is particularly important where deaf learners have individual support plans, audiology needs, communication plans or specific language targets.

BATOD and NDCS therefore strongly support mandatory induction for all newly qualified teachers. To realise its full potential, the induction programme should include explicit, practical and assessable content on deaf awareness, communication access, language development, inclusive teaching and collaborative working with specialist professionals. This would help ensure that newly qualified teachers are better prepared to meet the needs of deaf CYP and to contribute to inclusive, communication-accessible schools across Northern Ireland.

Question 8: To what extent do you agree or disagree that Early Professional Development beyond induction should be strengthened and more clearly defined as a distinct career phase?

Response: Strongly Agree

BATOD and NDCS strongly agree that Early Professional Development beyond induction should be strengthened and more clearly defined as a distinct career phase.

While induction provides an important foundation, teachers continue to develop significantly during the early years of practice. This is often the point at which they take on greater classroom responsibility, encounter a wider range of learner needs, refine their professional judgement and begin to embed inclusive approaches consistently. A clearly defined Early Professional Development phase would support professional confidence, improve retention and strengthen the quality and consistency of teaching across Northern Ireland.

BATOD and NDCS particularly welcome the opportunity for Early Professional Development to deepen teachers' understanding of inclusion, communication access and the needs of deaf CYP. Initial Teacher Education and induction cannot reasonably cover all aspects of specialist practice in depth. However, early career teachers need structured opportunities to move from awareness to confident implementation of evidence-informed inclusive practice.

For deaf learners, access to learning, social interaction and the wider life of the school cannot be assumed. Early career teachers may need support to understand how deafness can affect incidental language learning, vocabulary development, literacy, listening, peer interaction, wellbeing, behaviour, attention and participation. They also need opportunities to develop practical skills in adapting teaching, assessment and classroom environments so that deaf learners can demonstrate their knowledge and engage fully.

BATOD and NDCS recommend that Early Professional Development should include progressive learning on:

- deaf awareness and the educational impact of deafness;
- communication access as a core component of inclusive teaching;
- classroom acoustics, seating, sightlines, lighting and staff communication behaviours;
- listening fatigue and the additional cognitive load experienced by some deaf learners;
- explicit vocabulary teaching and support for subject-specific language;
- use of visual supports, captioned materials, assistive hearing technology and accessible classroom routines;
- inclusive communication approaches, including spoken language, signed language, visual communication and AAC where appropriate;
- how communication barriers can present as difficulties with learning, behaviour, engagement, emotional regulation or peer relationships;
- working effectively with families, SENCOs, QToDs, educational audiologists, speech and language therapists, communication support workers and other specialist staff.

BATOD and NDCS also recommend that this phase should help teachers develop confidence in implementing specialist advice. Teachers should be supported by the specialist professional workforce ie the centrally employed Sensory Support Service Qualified Teachers of the Deaf to understand communication plans, audiology recommendations, individual education plans, reasonable adjustments and access arrangements, and to review their impact in practice. This should include knowing when to seek further specialist advice where progress, wellbeing or participation remains a concern.

A strengthened Early Professional Development phase would also provide an important opportunity to support teacher retention. Early career teachers are more likely to remain in the profession when they have access to high-quality mentoring, specialist guidance, collaborative professional learning and practical strategies that help them meet pupils' needs effectively. This is particularly important in relation to low-incidence needs such as deafness, where teachers may otherwise have limited experience or confidence.

BATOD and NDCS therefore strongly support strengthening Early Professional Development beyond induction and recognising it as a distinct career phase. To realise its full potential, it should include explicit, progressive and practical content on deaf awareness, communication access, language development, inclusive teaching

and collaboration with specialist professionals. This would help ensure that early career teachers are better equipped to support deaf CYP and to contribute to inclusive, communication-accessible schools across Northern Ireland.

Question 9: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the strategy's proposal to establish a Northern Ireland Centre for Educational Excellence and Improvement as a central agency to work with the education system to improve learning, teaching, curriculum, leadership and professional learning?

Response: Agree

BATOD and NDCS agree with the proposal to establish a Northern Ireland Centre for Educational Excellence and Improvement as a central agency to work with the education system to improve learning, teaching, curriculum, leadership and professional learning.

BATOD and NDCS welcome the ambition to provide greater coherence, coordination and strategic leadership across curriculum development, professional learning, leadership development and school improvement. The current professional learning and improvement landscape can be fragmented, and there is value in establishing a central mechanism to promote consistency, quality assurance, evidence-informed practice and alignment with wider educational priorities. BATOD and NDCS recommend the opportunity to integrate the specialist curriculum frameworks for deaf children and children with vision impairment are recognised and embedded in the educational planning for these low incidence but high need populations.

For the Centre to successfully support all learners, it must draw on specialist expertise from across the education system, including low-incidence and specialist areas such as deaf education. Educational excellence cannot be achieved unless all CYP have meaningful access to teaching, learning, communication, curriculum content, assessment, peer interaction and the wider life of the school.

BATOD and NDCS recommend that the Centre's governance, advisory structures and commissioned work should include expertise from QToDs, educational audiologists, sensory support services and, where appropriate, wider communication specialists. This expertise will be essential to ensure that the Centre's work reflects the needs of deaf CYP and supports schools to implement inclusive, communication-accessible practice.

Deafness can affect access to incidental language learning, spoken communication, classroom discussion, peer interaction, literacy, listening, social inclusion, wellbeing, behaviour and attainment. These issues are not peripheral to educational excellence; they are central to whether deaf learners can participate fully and achieve their potential.

BATOD and NDCS therefore recommend that the proposed Centre should:

- embed deaf awareness and communication access within professional learning for teachers and leaders;
- support evidence-informed practice on classroom acoustics, seating, sightlines, lighting, captioned materials, assistive hearing technology and inclusive communication behaviours;
- recognise the role of signed language, spoken language, visual communication and augmentative or alternative communication where appropriate;
- promote high expectations alongside reasonable adjustments and specialist support;
- support schools to understand how listening fatigue and reduced access to incidental language can affect learning, behaviour, wellbeing and participation;
- include deaf learners and communication access within school improvement, curriculum development, assessment, leadership and quality assurance work;
- ensure that specialist services are consulted when developing guidance, professional learning and improvement priorities;
- strengthen collaboration between schools, families, QToDs, educational audiologists, speech and language therapists and other relevant professionals.

BATOD and NDCS also recommend that the Centre should have a clear role in supporting workforce development. There is a need for sustained, system-wide professional learning so that all teachers and leaders understand their responsibilities in relation to deaf CYP, while also recognising the essential contribution of specialist teachers and services. The Centre could play a valuable role in promoting consistent expectations, sharing effective practice and supporting equitable access to specialist advice across Northern Ireland.

BATOD and NDCS support the establishment of a Northern Ireland Centre for Educational Excellence and Improvement. To realise its full potential, the Centre must embed inclusion, communication access and deaf education expertise within its structures and work programme. This would help ensure that educational improvement benefits all learners, including deaf CYP, and that excellence is understood as both high standards and meaningful access to learning.

Question 10: Is there anything else you would like to share that could strengthen the strategy or its implementation?

Additional Comments

BATOD and NDCS welcome the overall direction of the strategy and its commitment to career-long professional learning, leadership development, evidence-informed practice and educational excellence.

To strengthen the strategy and its implementation, BATOD and NDCS recommend that deaf CYP, communication access and the specialist deaf education workforce are made explicit throughout the professional learning continuum. Deafness is a low-incidence need, but its impact on access to language, learning, literacy, social interaction, wellbeing and participation can be significant. For that reason, it must not be overlooked within system-wide teacher development and school improvement reforms.

Communication is not solely an SEN issue. It is a teaching and learning issue. Teachers communicate knowledge, pupils demonstrate understanding through communication, curriculum content is delivered through language, and relationships within schools are built through communication. For deaf CYP, however, access to classroom communication cannot be assumed. It may be affected by hearing levels, language development, listening environments, classroom acoustics, the availability of signed language, use of hearing technologies, listening fatigue, pace of classroom interaction and the communication behaviours of adults and peers.

BATOD and NDCS therefore recommend that the strategy explicitly recognises communication access as a core component of inclusive and effective teaching. This includes access to spoken language, signed language, visual communication, written information, assistive hearing technology, captioned materials, peer interaction and wider school life.

The strategy should also recognise the essential role of QToDs, educational audiologists, communication support workers, speech and language therapists, SENCos, families and other specialist professionals. Currently, in Northern Ireland, there are no CSWs roles.

“A communication support worker (CSW) enables access to communication, using a variety of support strategies and communication modes to match individuals’ needs and preferences. CSWs liaise with other professionals such as: Qualified Teachers of Deaf Children and Young People (QToDs), audiologists, teachers, lecturers, other CSWs, and team leaders. This support generally involves a twoway exchange of information, through British Sign Language (BSL), written notes or clear speech, and provides access to information and opportunities within the educational institution. Many learners require more than one form of support at the same time and therefore may need the services of more than one professional within the same session. The CSW facilitates access to the curriculum and the wider learning environment in schools, universities, colleges of further education, adult education centres, and other learning environments, and meets the needs of the individual deaf learner wherever possible.” (adept/BATOD 2023).

The NDCS 2025 Next Steps report recommends expanding the wider specialist work force

Workforce planning and enhancing training for Teachers of Deaf Children and Young People (ToDs) Strong links should be made with training providers to ensure that there is a pipeline of suitably qualified professionals from which to recruit. Training for ToDs being available in Northern Ireland should be explored. At the same time, a long-term programme of specialising, skills upgrading and career progression should be encouraged in the Sensory Service to further improve retention of existing staff and improve the offer to deaf children and their families. This could include support: for early years; for children with additional or complex needs; and for children across all approaches to communication, including sign language. This should also explore training and development pathways for other deaf specialist roles, such as communication support workers and specialist classroom assistants, to support service sustainability and succession planning. (Recommendation six)

All teachers and leaders require a foundational understanding of deaf awareness and communication access, but this must sit alongside timely access to specialist advice, assessment, training and intervention. We highly recommend closer professional links with the volunteer community sector in Northern Ireland to avail of their specialist resources and targeted provision offers.

Expectations of the SENCO profession in Northern Ireland should be clearly articulated, recognising the role differs from the role in England. In England it is often a dedicated full-time role that is also part of the senior management team structure, with supporting staff capacity subject to the size of the setting. Whereas, in Northern Ireland it is perceived as a bolt-on responsibility for teacher with other responsibilities in the setting.

In the Northern Ireland context, BATOD and NDCS are particularly asking that implementation addresses regional equity, not only system-wide coherence. Deaf CYP are educated across mainstream schools, resource provisions, specialist settings, early years and post-16 contexts, while specialist provision is limited and geographically concentrated. Professional learning reforms should therefore ensure that teachers and leaders across all Education Authority regions have equitable access to deaf awareness, communication access training and specialist advice, so that pupils are not disadvantaged by where they live or where they are educated.

This should include explicit recognition of British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language, the role of visual communication approaches, and the need for sufficient sensory support and educational audiology capacity across Northern Ireland. BATOD also recommends that implementation planning includes Northern Ireland-specific monitoring of deaf learners' access, participation, wellbeing, progress and

attainment, including where learners have additional needs or are educated in rural areas or settings with limited previous experience of deafness.

BATOD and NDCS recommend that implementation is supported by clear, practical actions, including:

- dedicated professional learning modules on deaf awareness, communication access, classroom acoustics, listening fatigue, inclusive communication strategies and the effective use of assistive technology;
- involvement of QToDs, educational audiologists and sensory support services in the design, delivery and quality assurance of professional learning resources;
- protected time for teachers and leaders to engage in high-quality professional learning, collaborate with specialist professionals and apply learning in classroom and whole-school practice;
- measurable indicators to evaluate whether reforms are improving deaf learners' access, participation, progress, wellbeing and attainment across settings and regions.
- Northern Ireland-wide planning to ensure equitable access to specialist deaf education advice, sensory support, educational audiology and communication access training across all regions, phases and settings.

To strengthen the strategy, BATOD and NDCS encourage the Department to:

- embed deaf awareness, communication access and inclusive communication practice within the revised Teacher Competences;
- include communication-accessible leadership, deaf awareness and specialist workforce collaboration within Leadership Standards;
- ensure all Initial Teacher Education programmes include core content on deafness, language development, communication access, classroom acoustics, listening fatigue and inclusive teaching strategies;
- include deaf awareness and communication access within induction and Early Professional Development programmes;
- ensure the proposed Northern Ireland Centre for Educational Excellence and Improvement draws on expertise from QToDs, educational audiologists, sensory support services and other relevant specialists;
- promote communication-accessible classrooms as universal teaching environments that benefit deaf learners and many other pupils;
- support collaboration between schools, families, QToDs, speech and language therapists, educational audiologists and other professionals through professional learning, mentoring and school improvement activity;

- recognise the role of communication access in attendance, behaviour, inclusion, mental health, wellbeing and attainment;
- monitor whether professional learning reforms improve outcomes for deaf CYP, including access, participation, progress and wellbeing;
- ensure that implementation is equitable across regions and settings, including mainstream schools, resource provisions, specialist settings and early years/post-16 contexts.

BATOD and NDCS believe these additions would strengthen the strategy's ability to improve educational outcomes, reduce inequalities and support all CYP. Embedding deaf awareness, communication access and specialist collaboration throughout the strategy would help ensure that deaf CYP are not dependent on chance or individual school awareness, but benefit from a coherent, system-wide commitment to inclusive, accessible and high-quality education.

Question 11: Do you agree with the outcome of the Equality Screening and/or are there any considerations that should be reflected?

Response: Agree, with additional considerations.

BATOD and NDCS agree with the overall outcome of the Equality Screening but recommends that additional consideration is given to deaf CYP, communication access and the specialist workforce required to support equitable access to education.

Deaf CYP may be covered within broader disability considerations, but their specific access needs can be overlooked if equality analysis does not explicitly consider language, communication, listening environments and access to incidental learning. For deaf learners, equality is not achieved simply by physical access to the classroom or by placement within mainstream provision. Equality requires meaningful access to teaching, learning, assessment, peer interaction, school life and wider participation.

Communication access is central to equality. Deaf CYP may experience barriers linked to classroom acoustics, background noise, seating, sightlines, availability and effective use of hearing technology, listening fatigue, captioned resources, signed language access, staff communication behaviours and the pace of classroom interaction. These barriers can affect attainment, literacy, behaviour, wellbeing, social inclusion, attendance and confidence.

BATOD and NDCS therefore recommend that the Equality Screening and subsequent implementation planning explicitly consider the potential impact of the strategy on deaf learners across different settings, including mainstream schools, specialist provision, resource bases, early years and post-16 contexts. Particular attention should be given to pupils who have additional needs, use signed language,

rely on assistive listening technology, experience language delay, or live in areas where access to specialist support is limited.

The strategy should also consider the intersection between deafness and wider equality issues, including socioeconomic disadvantage, additional special educational needs, neurodiversity, ethnicity, language background, rurality, care experience, mental health and access to specialist services. Deaf CYP are not a homogeneous group, and equality analysis should recognise the diversity of their communication approaches, educational placements, family circumstances and support needs.

BATOD and NDCS recommend that implementation should include:

- explicit recognition of communication access as an equality issue;
- deaf awareness and communication access within professional learning resources;
- accessible digital learning platforms, including captioned audiovisual materials and compatible formats for assistive technology;
- attention to classroom acoustics, seating, sightlines, lighting and listening environments;
- recognition of British Sign Language, Irish Sign Language and visual communication approaches where appropriate;
- professional learning on listening fatigue, incidental language access and the educational impact of deafness;
- consistent access to QToDs, educational audiologists, communication support workers and other specialist professionals;
- mechanisms to monitor whether reforms improve access, participation, progress, wellbeing and outcomes for deaf CYP;
- consultation with deaf learners, families and specialist services during implementation and review.

BATOD and NDCS also encourage the Department to consider workforce equality implications. The availability of QToDs, educational audiology services and sensory support services is essential to ensuring that deaf learners receive appropriate support. Any strategy that depends on improved professional learning and inclusive practice must be accompanied by sufficient specialist capacity, access to ongoing training and clear routes for schools to obtain expert advice.

BATOD and NDCS therefore agree with the Equality Screening outcome but considers that deaf CYP, communication access and specialist deaf education services should be made more explicit. Doing so would strengthen the strategy's

ability to advance equality of opportunity, reduce barriers to learning and ensure that deaf learners can participate fully and achieve their potential.

Please contact us via email: exec@batod.org.uk

Teresa Quail

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The following sources informed BATOD's response and should be considered alongside the consultation submission.

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