Submission to the Inquiry into Attainment of School Pupils with a Sensory Impairment

By Iain Cameron

I make this submission as a member of the deaf community by virtue of the fact my daughter, Audrey, was born profoundly deaf and my son-in-law, Joseph, was born profoundly deaf too. The views I’ve express were formed through my daughter’s experience of primary education in Scotland and her secondary education in England, which prepared her for university education back in Scotland and the eventual attainment of a PhD in Chemistry. She later attained a PGCE at the University of Edinburgh and taught hearing children in mainstream secondary schools. She is currently a Research Fellow at University of Edinburgh and a senior member of the team of deaf graduates who are compiling BSL resources for use in the education of deaf children. In addition to Audrey’s own educational achievements, I learnt a lot about deaf education from her wide circle of friends, many of whom have also attained degree qualifications and seven of whom are Teachers of the Deaf (ToDs). My frustrations that the failings of the deaf education system in Scotland continue to deny young deaf children the educational opportunities my daughter and her friends enjoyed, has caused me to follow developments in the field through research papers, books and other information on the subject that is in the public domain. I have also drawn on my own experience and knowledge of system delivery developed during my time as a senior manager in a national organisation.

1. What could be done to improve attainment of deaf children?

It seems a straightforward question, but it would be quite wrong of the committee to assume, as could be inferred by the wording of the ‘Call for Views’, that a few concise suggestions put to a short inquiry could produce ready-made solutions to a problem that has been ignored by authorities for generations. It is my considered view that systemic failure to give deaf children in Scotland an equal opportunity to attain comparably with their hearing peers amounts to a denial of human rights. It is outrageous that over a period of many years, local authorities in Scotland routinely paid fees to allow deaf children to attend school in England, and return home with proof that deafness is not a learning disability – by virtue of having attained entry qualifications to further and higher education; yet this evidence failed to change the prevailing ethos in Scotland that, generally speaking, deaf children are unable to attain comparably with their hearing peers.

Dr Alasdair Allan, Minister for Learning, Science and Scottish Languages, made a very clear pledge in closing a debate in the Chamber on 14th December last –

“I want to put an end to the days when those with hearing impairment disengage from learning through lack of support. There is no reason why every child and
young person should not receive the help and support that they need to grow and prosper. That is their entitlement and the Scottish Parliament will do everything in its power to make that a consistent reality across Scotland”.

This statement, together with the very commendable action of the Education and Culture Committee in setting up this inquiry, seems to indicate that at last there is a realisation at the highest level that Scotland lags well behind where it should be in terms of the effectiveness of the education service provided to deaf children in mainstream schools.

The action of setting up the inquiry will be regarded within the deaf community in Scotland as the most important action ever directed at deaf children and their parents across the length and breadth of the country. I trust the committee members will understand the import of the inquiry to deaf people and the expectation that its outcomes will at last give hope to the thousands of young deaf people who currently face a bleak future because of the failure of authorities to provide them with equal opportunities to succeed within the education system.

Background information regarding education experiences of deaf children in Scotland has been clearly set out in the Briefing for MSPs, December 2014 document prepared by NDCS Scotland.

2. Could there be a better way to address the question posed to the inquiry than to refer to the government’s own guidelines on raising attainment, as set out on the Education Scotland website? (http://bit.ly/1JWO6MZ)

The guidelines refer to six ‘approaches’ to raising attainment under the headings of

- **INCREASING AMBITION,**
- **FAMILY and COMMUNITY,**
- **EXCELLENT LEARNING and TEACHING,**
- **LITERACY and NUMERACY,**
- **EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP** and
- **UNDERSTANDING PROGRESS.**

The six ‘approaches’, are in fact the core characteristics of a mainstream education system. The inputs to the system would of course be ambition, children, the range of professionals, teachers, etc. and parents. All the remaining attitudes/characteristics listed above are elements that should form an integrated, cohesive transformation process to produce the desired output of increased attainment. The essence of my submission to the inquiry is that deaf children in Scotland do not attain comparably with their hearing peers because the system provided to them is largely devoid of the six characteristics ES say are necessary to produce the output of increased attainment.

Using the six ‘approaches’ of the recommended ES model, I have done an analysis, using available information, to show how the current system in Scotland is grossly inadequate to provide deaf children with the additional support from the early years, through pre-school and primary, to
eventual attainment comparable with hearing children in mainstream schools. I recognise that there will be isolated and occasional examples of good practice which, here and there, are producing good attainment outcomes – which in itself is an indictment of the system as a whole. The first step in standard problem solving practice is to create a holistic overview of how the current system operates and I have conducted my analysis as an overview in order to highlight the chronic deficiencies of the system.

In addition to my own knowledge and practical experience, the views I express in this submission have been influenced mostly by a number of research papers and reports relative to deaf education in Scotland, which are available on the Internet. The key ones are:

- ‘Count Us In: Achieving Success For Deaf Pupils’ (2007), HMIE and the National Deaf Children’s Society, which I will refer to as P1.
- Bilingualism and the Education of Deaf Children, (1996), Dr Susan Gregory, Birmingham University (P2).
- Inclusion of Deaf Pupils in Scotland: Achievements, Strategies and Services, (2005), Marion Grimes and Dr Audrey Cameron, Scottish Sensory Centre (P3);
- The Education of Young People with a Sensory Impairment in Scotland, (2012), Weedon, E. et al, Edinburgh University (P4)
- Scottish standards for deaf children (0-3): Families and professionals working together to improve services - Scottish Sensory Centre (P5), and

3. CHARACTERISTIC 1 - INCREASING AMBITION

The greatest single deficiency of the system of educating deaf children in mainstream schools in Scotland today is that, generally speaking, the system does not expect deaf children to attain comparably with hearing children, and is not organised or resourced to allow them to do so. The prevailing “it’s too difficult for them” ethos was imported into mainstream from the special school era, where attainment expectations were always very low. The ‘Count Us In’ report, - the only report ever to look closely at mainstreaming of deaf education, some ten years after mainstreaming became a reality, concluded that “few schools or Local Authorities had addressed issues relating to raising the attainment levels of deaf pupils”. In itemising what the aims of the deaf education should be, the report emphasises the need for “a strong focus on attainment and high expectations”. It is incredible that a further ten years since those two conclusions were reached, no follow-up inspection has taken place that would indicate if any ambition has been injected into the system.

The evidence, from deaf children who received secondary education in England and those who did succeed within the Scottish system - that deaf children can be taught and can learn, when given appropriate support – should have been sufficient to stimulate ambition that the Scottish system should also produce high levels of attainment. Sadly, despite all the boasts that are made about the quality of Scottish education, it has still not happened for deaf children.
4. **CHARACTERISTIC 2 - LITERACY and NUMERACY**

There is no reason to doubt unanimity exists between all professionals in the field that deaf children establishing a fluent language by the time they start school is of critical importance to their future potential to succeed. Yet this vital area of early and pre-school is so contentious in terms of policy and practice differences between health and education professionals, and local authorities, that it can only be described as a quagmire that could be damaging the future prospects of hundreds of deaf children.

The main issue is the decision about the best communication mode to be used for the child to become fluent in language and progress at pace with the curriculum. The choice, basically, is between spoken/written English and BSL. Policy varies; health professionals strongly favour cochlear implants followed by intensive support for oral learning. Some local authorities advocate an oral approach in pre-school and primary, others allow signing, whilst education professionals support a bilingual approach. One wonders to what extent authority policy takes account of the views of deaf people who have progressed through the education system? The bilingual approach is discussed in P2.

Concerns about variability of practice and the effects on parent’s choice and children’s prospects are set out clearly in P4. The report discusses concerns about health professionals failing to involve education professionals in the planning of additional support needs, doubts are expressed about the basis on which judgements of additional needs are made, the lack of BSL fluency amongst health staff that restrict the option for signing support to babies and pre-school children is mentioned, and also parents not being given a full picture of options for the child’s language development. The situation seems to have been of such concern to education professionals that it prompted the publication of ‘Scottish Standards for Deaf Children (0-3)’ in 2011 by the Scottish Sensory Centre P5. These standards set out a child-centred approach to the early years involving parents, educational professionals and health professionals, but no information has been made public to indicate the extent to which the standards have been adopted and are being followed by health and local authority services. It is interesting that only one year earlier, a report to Scottish Ministers puts a different perspective on this matter of early years relationships. The 2010 report P6, on implementation of the additional support legislation concludes the “children and young people with sensory impairments continue to have their additional support needs identified and addressed at an early stage through established partnership working between health and education, and through early intervention strategies”.

5. **CHARACTERISTIC 3 - EXCELLENT LEARNING and TEACHING**

A simple definition of ‘additional support’ would be that deaf children in a mainstream class be given additional teaching to that given to the rest of the class by the mainstream teacher. In reality, the fact that mainstream teachers receive no training in communicating with deaf pupils, and the sparsity of peripatetic support from ToDs is such that many deaf children actually get very little effective teacher support of any kind, far less the ‘additional support’ which would allow them to keep pace with the curriculum.
The report P1 is the most comprehensive study of deaf education delivered in mainstream schools in Scotland. As already stated, the data was collected during the period 2005-06 and its aim is described as being to report on the quality of deaf education currently experienced in Scottish schools. The findings of the report are so lacking in evidence of quality being experienced that the amount of advice and recommendations put into the report by its authors meant that it ended up being an ‘instruction manual’ on how best to deliver deaf education. I commented earlier under the heading of INCREASING AMBITION that it took some 10 years after ‘mainstreaming’ before these failings were first revealed. Surely, in the light of so much advice and recommendations being provided 10 years after the advent of ‘mainstreaming’, there should have been be a follow-up report within a few years to establish if there had been any improvement. This has never happened and it is my understanding HMIE do not now carry out any in-depth inspections of deaf education in mainstream schools, contrary to the claim by Education Scotland in the Feb. 2012 publication ‘Supporting Children’s and Young Person’s Learning: A Report on Progress of Implementation of the Education (ASL) Act 2004’ that “through reporting on inspection and monitoring HM Inspectors are able to provide evidence on the quality of education in Scotland”.

Other evidence of the problems deaf children face in integrating fully in mainstream classes is set out in report P3.

Other factors under this heading give further indications that the system is incapable, under current circumstances, of raising attainment levels of deaf children. Official figures from CRIDE surveys show a gradual decline in the numbers of ToD posts, which seem never to have been sufficient in the first place. The same figures highlight just how few ToDs have the recommended level of competence to use BSL in their teaching. What is not disclosed in official data is that only two ToDs in Scotland are qualified to teach as subject specialists in secondary schools. Both happen to be deaf. One of them, who worked progressively with his pupils for years towards maths Highers, saw one of the pupils, contrary to the expectations of the school management, become the first deaf child in the history of that school to attain the qualification. The teachers reward – his post was closed last Christmas?! There is also the looming issue of the demographic profile of ToDs, with 54% retiring within the next 10-15 years (http://bit.ly/1cOQRVJ).

It is salutary to note that Glasgow alone, which has a total of around 20 ToDs, has in recent years created over 100 teaching post to assist immigrant children learn English. It must also seem totally unreal to people in the Deaf community to learn of the recent announcement by the Scottish Government that it is making £7.2m available for primary education to allow “local authorities to continue implementing the ambitious European Union 1+2 languages model”. Oh that some of that ambition and money could be made available to help deaf children learn their first language.

6. CHARACTERISTIC 4 - FAMILY and COMMUNITY

The importance of parents and other family members being involved in both decision making and providing support to deaf children and their school cannot be overstated. It follows that during early years in particular, parents faced with making planning decision must be fully aware of
choice options and the part they must play in helping their child develop language and later to keep pace with the curriculum.

Another point that must be addressed, if the deaf education system is to be improved, is that deaf people themselves must find an effective voice as partners in the system. The shocking failures of deaf education would never have been tolerated in the hearing world. Deaf people have been conditioned over very many years to believe that limited language abilities mean they could not achieve in life what hearing people do. Even when they devised a language of their own, hearing experts told them signing was not an effective way to learn language. Is it any wonder, therefore, that the level of confidence in using spoken and written English is so low in the Deaf community? I am aware of one Deaf lady who was so concerned about her son’s lack of progress since joining mainstream schooling that she went along to a parent’s night hoping to get some answers. Although her limited English language skills could make her sound a little brusque, this hardly justified the action of the teacher in asking her to leave when the mother asked why her son was not doing well.

A new system aimed at raising attainment levels in deaf education must have direct input from deaf people at policy and system management levels. There is also much scope to use deaf people as role models and mentors within the system.

Organisations for deaf people should also be asking themselves “should we have a closer focus on what actually happens to deaf children in mainstream schools and could we be collaborating to a greater extent to ensure issues are highlighted and addressed by the relevant authorities”?

7. **CHARACTERISTIC 5 - UNDERSTANDING PROGRESS**

It is a measure of the confidence the body charged with monitoring and measuring progress in deaf education in Scotland has in the system that they have only produced one full inspection report and have ceased doing inspections. This seems to confirm the analysis I am setting out in this submission, that since the advent of mainstreaming, the system has not been capable of improving on the low attainment levels achieved in special schools for deaf children.

Measurement, and related interventions and adjustments, are an integral aspect of any system. Recent legislation places requirements on local authorities to report attainment data to ministers on a regular basis. But end point measurement is pointless unless there are strategies and plans in place, and intermediate measurement points, designed to support pupils to progress to the identified end points. Again, this analysis shows that the key characteristics required to increase attainment are missing, hence there can be no realistic prospect that there will be progress to report to any significant extent.

8. **CHARACTERISTIC 6 - EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP**

The organisational structure of education in Scotland, with national policy making and local authority delivery, is not conducive to creating the effective leadership needed to radically
transform deaf education into a system that could produce higher attainment by deaf children. Firstly, the critical early year’s period is not even part of that system, which throws up many issues that could potentially jeopardize future prospects for success. Secondly, there is the real problem of a disparate and widely dispersed population of deaf children across 32 authorities, many schools and even more age-group classrooms. Leadership is not the only issue; ownership and responsibility for teaching strategies and support plans and achieving system outcomes seem to go all the way down to classroom level before being addressed. Such diffusion of activity must mean additional supper to learners is very thinly spread in many locations. The evidence from the 4 research reports I’ve referred to suggest strongly that the leadership characteristic needed to advance deaf education from the ‘no hope’ days of special schools just does not exist.

9. SUMMARY/CONCLUSIONS

It’s difficult to imagine that any objective analysis of deaf education today could conclude that educating deaf children, who have no special needs, in mainstream schools has been successful in any way. The recommendation of the Warnock Commission in 1978 that deaf (and other) children be educated in mainstream schools, where deemed appropriate, contained many caveats about the need for additional support. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that authorities readily claimed that the cost savings of mainstreaming of deaf education could be justified for social inclusion reasons. But it does no credit to them or the Scottish nation that they did practically nothing to provide the additional support for learning that such a change required.

The Scottish government, rightly, puts great store on its policy of ‘Getting It Right For Every Child’. There seems little doubt that when the education system is judged against the criteria recommended by Education Scotland for raising attainment, the GIRFEC policy misses out deaf children being educated in mainstream schools. The best way to address this failure would be for the Education and Culture Committee to recommend from this inquiry that a formal review be commissioned similar to the Doran Review of Learning Provision for Children and Young People with Complex Additional Support Needs and the Widening Access Commission. A review/commission remit should be to devise a new organisation, empowered to develop a ‘YES THEY CAN’ ethos, and with a budget to manage the resources employed across all local authorities to deliver additional support for learning, including research and development, to deaf children.

Finally, it seems totally incongruous that the Scottish Government could be faced with setting up a review of deaf education, largely because of the failings of local authorities to provide the education service required, only weeks before the proposed British Sign Language (Scotland) Bill is debated in the parliament, requiring that public authorities prepare and publish BSL plans, yet the bill contains no specific requirement that the use of BSL in education should be included in authority plans. I have already made my views on this point clear in my response to the initial consultation on the proposed draft of the bill.

Iain Cameron