Dear Terry,

Call for Views on Improving Attainment for Children with a Sensory Impairment

Children in Scotland welcomes the opportunity to provide detailed views to inform the Committee’s short inquiry. We are the umbrella body for the children’s sector, including education, health, social care, early years and childcare. We have over 440 members and our staff are delivering a wide range of projects and programmes in schools and other settings, with a variety of public, private and third sector partners.

We welcome the commitment by the Scottish Government to close the education gap and to invest significant funds in this area in line with aspirations to make Scotland the best place in the world to grow up. Whilst we welcome the Scottish Government’s Attainment Scotland Challenge initiative, we share the belief of the National Deaf Children’s Society (NDCS), that, by broadening the scope of the initiative beyond the lowest levels of socioeconomic deprivation, there would be an opportunity to understand and tackle the attainment gap experienced by learners with additional support needs (ASN); many of whom make up some of the lowest attaining groups in Scotland.

The analysis of the Growing Up in Scotland (GUS) data shows that there are clear differences between disabled and non-disabled children in terms of outcome but that the largest distinctions are in relation to
socioeconomic characteristics and it appears that these differences are, to a large extent, driving the many other differences between these children. ¹ This tells us that outcomes for disabled children – the definition for which, in terms of GUS, includes ASL needs – are equally socially patterned to those in the rest of the population. Furthermore, children who have sensory impairment as well as being socially deprived and ineffectively parented are the children for whom outcomes fare the worst. With this in mind, it is a holistic approach to supporting children and families with additional support needs in conjunction with efforts to combat poverty that will improve outcomes most effectively.

We understand that your inquiry is tightly focussed on recommendations for how to improve the attainment of children with sensory impairment and we would like to defer to the wide-ranging and detailed submissions by our members and partner organisations who are experts in this field. In particular, we would like to endorse the views of Education Scotland, Deaf Action, Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) Scotland, Equalities and Human Rights Commission, Inclusion Scotland and National Deaf Children’s Society (NDCS). Furthermore, we would like to draw your attention to the following, overarching, key areas of concern and our subsequent recommendations.

**Existing legislation, frameworks and policy**

Legislation is in place to ensure support is provided to children with additional support needs, including those with a sensory impairment, namely the Education (Standards in Scotland’s Schools etc) Act 2000; the Equality Act 2010; the Additional Support for Learning (Scotland) Act 2004 (the ASL Act); the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014; and, the Education (Scotland) Bill 2015.

Support for children with visual and hearing impairments is also underpinned by wider policy developments including the stretch aims of the Early Years Collaborative and the Scottish Government’s See Hear strategic framework. All children in Scotland are entitled to access the national curriculum, Curriculunm for Excellence, which is supported by the Getting in Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) framework. This framework

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aims to improve the outcomes for all children, including children and young people with disabilities and learning difficulties.

For the aspirations of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 to be achieved, we must consider specifically the role of the Named Person in identifying and assessing wellbeing needs. Children in Scotland agree with NDCS that it is critical that practitioners who will fulfill the role of Named Person have knowledge of the specific needs of deaf young people and are able to make effective use of the SHANARRI indicators for deaf children and young people and indeed all children with sensory impairment. For example, it is vital that health visitors receive training that raises their awareness of deafness sufficiently to be able to recognise, assess and support deaf children, or indeed children with any sensory impairment. This is connected to our call for improved access to specialist teacher and support provision across local authority areas (see point 2). We recognise, however, that detailed understanding of the wide range of needs and circumstances with which health visitors interface may not be realistically achievable. Ready access to specialised diagnostic and support services could be an alternative approach. It is essential that resources can be put in place to enable parents to support the language development of deaf children in the early years, particularly as this is so strongly associated with later educational attainment.

The forthcoming Education (Scotland) Bill 2015 is very relevant in connection to the objectives of this inquiry. One component of the Bill is the registration of teachers in Independent and Grant-Aided Schools which will ensure that all independent and grant-aided schools only employ teachers who are registered with the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS). Compulsory GTCS registration will offer assurance to parents that, irrespective of where their children are educated, the standards and quality of the teaching staff will be regulated by the GTCS. We also recognise the importance of assuring the quality and on-going professional development of those working with children with complex additional support needs in line with the recommendations (specifically recommendation 16) made in the Doran Review in 2012.

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The duties on education authorities and Scottish Ministers within the Education (Scotland) Bill to reduce and report on inequality of outcomes for all pupils, coupled with its aspirations to extend rights enshrined in the ASL Act to children aged 12 and over – deemed to have capacity – are both welcomed. However, they come with a cautionary note to ensure that the aspirations within the Bill are adequately resourced and that children are empowered to access and understand their newly acquired rights. We welcome the financial memorandum which includes supporting the extension of the national information service – Enquire – to provide information to children on their extended rights.

1. Data collection

It is important to note that we do not have precise figures for the number of children affected by sensory impairment in Scotland and whether they have other disabilities or not, due to the fact that there have been several changes in the way in which data has been gathered over time. It is very difficult to build up a clear picture of the ways in which pupils with sensory impairments have been identified throughout Scotland. This issue is highlighted in the research carried out by the Scottish Sensory Centre and the Centre for Research in Education Inclusion and Diversity (CREID) 2012 into the education of children and young people with sensory impairment. The team also found that there was significant variation noted between the authorities in the recording of pupils with additional support needs, including those with a sensory impairment, suggesting that there may be different interpretations about who should be included in planning provision.  

The survey data they gathered suggested that authorities are balancing the needs of the overall additional support needs (ASN) population with those of pupils with a sensory impairment and that this is leading to differences in the identification, assessment and recording of pupils with a sensory impairment. Children’s needs must be properly assessed and recorded; otherwise they are unlikely to be met.

The gathering and interpretation of data is particularly poor in the early years, where the CREID 2012 report found there to be very limited data around ASN and none specific to sensory impairment.

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Recommendations: Clarity is required around what constitutes a sensory impairment and how many children and young people have been identified as sensory impaired as this informs provision and practice. We need consistent, rigorous collection of data across all local authorities in this area so that national and local government can plan effective service delivery. We echo Together’s recommendation in their State of Children’s Rights report 2014 that the Scottish Government should ensure disaggregated data on disability and other characteristics is included in the Scottish Household Survey to help address the discrepancy in data regarding the number of children with additional support needs.\(^4\)

2. Specialist teacher and support provision

Questions to Enquire – the Scottish Advice Service for Additional Support for Learning – relating to children and young people with sensory impairment, concern reductions and availability of specialist support locally. In the early years, a lack of specialist support is of great concern to parents given the significance of this time for language development in particular. This does not sit well with the Scottish Government’s early years and early intervention priorities. In particular, the availability of appropriately trained staff is a concern to families and in some cases, changes in support is not communicated to families before it takes place. Specific examples reported have included difficulties accessing speech and language therapy for deaf children, insufficiently trained communication support workers and reductions in Teachers of the Deaf and Visual Impairment support services. Appropriate support is implicit in the duty on education authorities to secure that education is directed to the development of the personality, talents and mental and physical abilities of the child or young person to their fullest potential.\(^5\)

When considering how to reduce the attainment gap, there is a significant challenge arising from the reduction in numbers of specialist teachers, especially Teachers of the Deaf, in local authorities. It is important to ascertain what local authorities are doing to address this


\(^5\) Standards in Scotland’s Schools etc. Act 2000, section2(1)
deficit and to ensure reductions in resource do not further impact on attainment levels for these children and young people. Whilst we recognise that local authorities may require additional resource to achieve any sustained change, we would like to highlight the CREID recommendation that: “There is a need to monitor over time the qualifications of staff working wholly or mainly with children and young people with sensory impairments, to ensure that there is no deterioration, and preferably an improvement, in the qualification levels of such staff. There is also a need for authorities to consider succession planning, especially in authorities where most specialist teachers are aged 45 and over. In order to ensure that the qualification levels are maintained, it may also be worth examining career prospects and additional pay for the extra qualification.”

We fully support the inclusion agenda in mainstream learning environments, and we are mindful that provision of specialist support for children with sensory impairment is already stretched and inconsistent. Therefore, we call for better interagency and collaborative working, improved communication and sharing of skills amongst professionals in order to meet the needs of all children with sensory impairment to ensure that mainstream education works for children in this group.

The fact that there is no financial incentive for teachers to obtain specialist additional qualifications, coupled with the current climate of local government cutbacks and nationwide austerity, means that there is an inevitable knock-on effect on the attainment gap for pupils with sensory impairment in our schools. Training, qualifications and experience are essential for teachers and support assistants if we are to close this gap. RNIB Scotland have identified the introduction of a joint sensory approach to service delivery as having a potentially detrimental effect on children with sensory impairment as children who are blind/visually impaired, deaf/with hearing impairment and children with dual sensory impairment all have very distinct developmental needs. We agree that failure to address these differences may provide an explanation for the current attainment gap for this group.

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6 The Education of Children and Young People with a Sensory Impairment in Scotland, SSC and CREID, 2012 - [research briefing](#)
Again, there are specific concerns around the early years workforce in this area and we need to make sure that practitioners are skilled and competent, working to guidance that has been specifically designed for them, to empower infants in accessing early education and childcare that is appropriate to their sensory impaired learning needs.

**Recommendations:** Ensure that reductions in resource to local authorities to provide specialist local service do not further impact on attainment levels for children with sensory impairment. Ensure that teachers and support staff are adequately supported and that there are incentives in place to develop, support and sustain specialist education provision within mainstream schools across Scotland. The Doran Report\(^7\) recommended that the Scottish Government consider how best to provide qualifications and courses for teachers of children and young people with complex additional support needs and what specific supports professionals need to work effectively. We call for further progress to be made on the Doran recommendations that were accepted by the Scottish Government.

3. **Transition support and bullying**

Research has indicated that, currently, deaf young people do not consistently experience transitional planning, despite this being a statutory duty on local authorities under the ASL Act, which indicates that the existing statutory frameworks around transitional planning are not being implemented for children with sensory impairment and resulting in many missing out on effective transitional planning.\(^8\)

It is also critical to consider this Bill in the light of the recent report by the *Commission for Developing Scotland’s Young Workforce* and we believe that an increased profile of BSL and increase in its use in the delivery of services will improve transition opportunities for young deaf people in the workplace and employer awareness of working with a BSL user.

In Scotland, we lack sufficient, good quality work placements and work experience to offer young people a positive flavour of work

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\(^8\) Post School Transitions of people who are deaf and hard of hearing. University of Edinburgh, 2013
environments. We know that this has been recognised but we remain concerned at the lack of progress for young people with additional support needs, including those with sensory impairment.

We would like to draw attention to findings from NDCS recent Deaf Learners Conference, which identified bullying and social isolation as the main issues for deaf young people, with many saying these experiences affected their confidence and self-esteem. This is reinforced by the fact that disabled children are at twice the risk of being subjected to long term bullying at school than non-disabled peers.⁹

Specialist mental health services and peer support would benefit children and young people with sensory impairment and investment in this area is urgently required to ensure that we are fulfilling our duties to protect the rights of children and young people.

**Recommendations:** All children and young people with sensory impairment receive an effective and person-centred transition planning process in line with the duties on education authorities in the ASL Act. The wellbeing of young people with sensory impairment is paramount and steps should be taken, in line with the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, to ensure that they are being enabled to meet the SHANARRI indicators of holistic wellbeing. Young people with sensory impairment should benefit from specialist Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and structured peer support to combat the effects of bullying and social isolation; we are calling for urgent improvements in access to CAMHS for all children in Scotland.

### 4. Stigma and perception

Children in Scotland agrees with Inclusion Scotland in calling for your inquiry to look beyond the school environments and curriculum and to focus on how society prohibits people with sensory impairments from succeeding. Much more needs to be done to improve the negative societal attitudes towards disabled people that provide the biggest barriers to full inclusion.

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NDCS gave evidence to the Members’ Business Debate on Educational Disadvantage and Deaf Children in Scotland in Dec 2014. What they said is relevant in the context of this inquiry for all children with sensory impairment: ‘The stigma around how we think about young deaf people was discussed with it being reiterated by a number of MSPs that deafness is not a learning disability and that “we have to get away from the perception that deaf children are different. They are not.”’

If BSL was available as a subject in schools, we believe it would make our schools and communities more inclusive places. This has recently happened in Highland Council where a primary school has introduced BSL and Makaton as part of the language curriculum. We endorse this move and hope that other areas will follow suit in the belief that this will challenge the stigma and negative perceptions of children and young people with sensory impairment, particularly in terms of their aspirations and educational attainment potential.

**Recommendations:** We would like to see a national campaign to challenge the negative societal attitudes towards disabled people, particularly regarding equity of opportunity and aspiration. This could have a particular focus on children and young people with sensory impairment whose capacity to achieve on a par with their non-sensory impaired peers is widely misunderstood. Time and resource should be made available to engage and consult meaningfully with children and young people with sensory impairment to ensure that they inform and shape the change. BSL should be available as subject in schools to make our schools and communities more inclusive spaces.

**5. Accessibility and content of the Curriculum for Excellence**

Our national curriculum aspires to equip all children and young people with the ‘four capacities’ to become; responsible citizens, confident individuals, effective contributors and successful learners. However, it is not possible for children with sensory impairment to achieve these aims if they do not have access to the appropriate resources and strategies to enable independent learning, personal independence and greater educational attainment. We support the recommendations made by

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RNIB Scotland who particularly focus on information and assistive technology and how important it is to get this right to support the education of children with sensory impairment. We share their view that local authorities must work to future-proof the planning and implementation of their IT accessibility policy to incorporate the needs of sensory-impaired pupils along with providing suitable staff training and maintenance of specialist equipment. In this respect, we would like to highlight the role of CALL Scotland, whose expert advice around sourcing appropriate assistive technologies and support for children and young people with sensory impairment is invaluable for local authorities.

Furthermore, Children in Scotland shares the view of several members and partners that the curriculum for excellence would best enable young people to achieve the four capacities if time was set aside for the development of ‘soft skills’ such as relationship building, personal awareness and self-care, body language and non-verbal clues, as well as movement, mobility, independent travel and living. This approach should be grounded in a commitment to full social inclusion for all pupils and for those with sensory impairment, we would recommend ‘habilitation provision’ which takes a holistic approach with an emphasis on the early development needs of children with sensory impairment.

**Recommendations:** The national curriculum must be resourced adequately by national and local government to ensure that all pupils can access their learning, with a particular focus on the associated technologies and specialist support provisions required. There should be a focus on the development of habilitation staff across Scotland and staff who currently hold the qualification should be encouraged and supported to progress their skills and qualifications.

**6. Family support and early intervention**

Children in Scotland acknowledges that children with sensory impairment who do not have any other ASN are a minority whose attainment should, unequivocally, match their non-sensory impaired peers.

In order to move towards equity of outcome for children with sensory impairment, we believe this inquiry needs to prioritise culturally sensitive and appropriate family support and early intervention for
families of children with sensory impairment throughout Scotland. NDCS have articulated this point in their response to the British Sign Language (Scotland) Bill and during the Scottish Parliamentary debate on Educational Disadvantage and Deaf Children in December 2014\textsuperscript{11}.

RNIB Scotland is just about to embark on an \textit{Identify, React, Intervene, Sustained Support} (IRISS) project. This pilot early intervention project will cover 14 local authority areas and it will deliver direct early start emotional and practical support to 150 families over three years. We commend this approach and look forward to the findings, which will shape delivery of services in the future.

We fully support the call to provide national funding for Family Sign Language in a bid to redress the unnecessarily poor early years development milestones currently being met by children who are deaf or have a hearing impairment. It is crucial that families receive timely early interventions of support and information as outlined in the Scottish Government’s See Hear sensory impairment strategic framework.\textsuperscript{12} The current lack of guidance for post-diagnostic and early years support and information for children with sensory impairment is resulting in variable provision and implications for the longer-term education and wellbeing outcomes for children and young people with sensory impairment across Scotland.

\textbf{Recommendations:} Families of children with sensory impairment should be able to access tailored information and support at the point of diagnosis. National funding should be made available for Family Sign Language provision.

\textbf{7. Human Rights Context}

Article 23 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) requires states to ‘ensure that the disabled child has effective access to and receives education, training, health care services, rehabilitation services, preparation for employment and recreation opportunities in a


manner conducive to the child’s achieving the fullest possible social integration and individual development’.  

We should also consider improving attainment for children and young people with sensory impairment in the context of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which requires that state parties ensure that ‘persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live’ (Art 24). Furthermore, Article 7 of the Convention requires states to ‘take all necessary measures to ensure the full enjoyment by children with disabilities of all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with other children’.  

Finally, the UK is also a state party to the International Covenant on Economic, Cultural and Social Rights (ICESCR) which requires state parties ‘to the maximum of its available resources’ (Art 2) to progressively achieve the full realisation of the rights contained in the convention. These rights include the right to education (Art 13).  

We hope this provides helpful thinking for the Committee’s future recommendations to the Scottish Government.

Jackie Brock, CEO
Children in Scotland

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13 www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx
14 www.un.org/disabilities/default.asp?id=150
15 www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CESCR.aspx