Inquiry into attainment of school pupils with a sensory impairment

1 Introduction

1.1 Inclusion Scotland is a national network of disabled people’s organisations and individual disabled people. Our main aim is to draw attention to the physical, social, economic, cultural and attitudinal barriers that affect disabled people’s everyday lives and to encourage a wider understanding of those issues throughout Scotland. Inclusion Scotland is part of the disabled people’s Independent Living Movement.

1.2 People with sensory impairments, including blind/people with visual impairments, Deaf and hard of hearing, and Deaf/blind people, face an array of barriers to equality, inclusion and independent living. Although different impairment groups experience barriers differently, addressing the barriers of one group, through co-production, can often remove the barriers faced by other groups. For education, some of the issues are:

- 58% of Scots disabled people have no formal qualifications compared to 24% of those with no disability or long term illness
- Low expectations for attainment and for future beyond school
- Colleges used as an alternative to day care centres with evidence that disabled students do not progress.
- At age 16 young disabled people are at least twice as likely to be NEET as their non-disabled peers, and three times as likely by the age of 19.

1.3 Scottish Government statistics¹ show that people with sensory impairments in receipt of additional support for learning (ASN) are left behind as they face the transition from school. Below we consider the barriers that disadvantage children with sensory impairments and lead to this ‘attainment gap’. We also examine the implications of the attainment gap for these young people as they move on from school and make recommendations on how their attainment could be improved and how this would also benefit society more generally.

1.4 Inclusion Scotland recently held a UN Convention on the Rights of Disabled People (UN CRPD) “Grasping the Thistle” event on mainstream or ‘special’ education and the right to education. This event brought together disabled people’s organisations, single impairment groups and disability charities. There was broad agreement that currently neither model of education is meeting the educational or social needs of disabled pupils, and one recommendation was to focus on the needs of the individual child in order to develop them to their full potential. This point is worth keeping in mind here, before considering any barriers or other recommendations, and fits in with the State’s responsibilities under the UN CRC, the UN CRPD and also GIRFEC.

1.5 We also think that the current Inquiry must look beyond the school environments and curriculum and also 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.

1.6 Finally, there is no reasonable explanation as to why an individual with a sensory impairment but no other impairments or complex needs, should not be attaining qualifications on an equal basis with their non-disabled classmates. However there are plenty of barriers remaining which prevent sensory impaired students from attaining equal qualifications and achieving success beyond school.

2 Evidence of poorer attainment of school leavers with sensory impairments

2.1 According to Scottish Government data from surveys conducted on school leavers in 2012/13, in comparison to school leavers with no additional support needs, Deaf or hard of hearing school leavers who received support for learning:

(i) were more likely to leave school with no qualifications (9.8% vs. 0.9%). Since the previous year the gap has grown by 1.6%.

(ii) were more likely to leave school with only Standard Grades at 3-4 (11.8% vs. 6.6%) rather than a higher qualification.

(iii) were less likely to qualify for entry into higher education (36.3% as opposed to 61.0% of pupils with no ASN) This gap has barely changed since the previous year.

2.2 In 2012/13, in comparison to school leavers with no additional support needs, blind or visually impaired school leavers who received support for learning:

(i) Were even more likely to leave school with no qualifications (12.3% vs. 0.9%) Since the previous year, this gap has reduced by 5.6%.

(ii) Were more likely to leave school with standard grades at 3-4 (17.7% vs 6.6%) rather than a higher qualification.

(iii) Were less likely to qualify for entry into higher education (29.6% as opposed to 61% of pupils with no ASN). The gap has increased by 3.4% since the previous year.

2.3 In 2012/13 there were only 5 Deaf/blind school leavers. None of these 5 students gained any higher qualification than Intermediate or Standard Grade. No details were recorded on their outcomes in the Skills Development Scotland survey that informed these statistics.

2.4 The figures show that for pupils who are blind or have visual impairments, the attainment gap in educational outcomes has actually increased slightly since the last statistical analysis of 2011-12 school leavers. For Deaf pupils this gap has also increased. The likelihood of qualifying for entry to higher education has stayed the same for deaf pupils but reduced for people with hearing impairments. This is not a positive indication that outcomes and opportunities are improving for this group of disabled young people.

2.5 The table below shows the gap between those leaving school with no qualifications with no ASN and those with sensory impairments. Although the gap has narrowed since 2010-11, it rose significantly between 2006 and 2011, and more people with sensory impairments left school with no qualifications in 2012-13 than in 2006-07. By contrast, the number of children without ASN leaving school with no qualifications has consistently declined.

2.6 School leavers with sensory impairments who received support for learning were more likely to be unemployed and seeking employment or training than School leavers with no ASN (9.3% vs. 6.4%). Six months after leaving school, the rate of school leavers with sensory impairments still unemployed and seeking employment or training had only gone down by 0.5% (to 8.8%), contrasted with a fall of school leavers with no ASN still looking for employment or training after 6 months of 5% (to 1.4%).

2.7 Only around one fifth of school leavers with sensory impairments went on to Higher Education (compared with two fifths of students without any support for learning) but twice as many of both blind and deaf/ hearing impaired school leavers end up in further education than school leavers with no ASN.

3 Barriers to positive outcomes after school
3.1 The figures cited above demonstrate the stark differences in outcomes between students with sensory impairments and those with no additional support needs at school, of which the Committee will be broadly aware.

3.2 The barriers to children with sensory impairment gaining better grades and having higher aspirational outcomes when they leave school are manifold: Blind, Deaf and Deafblind school pupils face a combination of under-resourcing of communications support and expertise; low expectations for achievement; limited access to inclusion in mainstream education and, partially because of large class sizes, lack of access to technology/and or specialist teaching to access the curriculum; bullying; lack of support for transition from school to further/higher education or work and a crisis in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) delivery for children and young people with ASN.

3.3 Under-resourcing is a key issue for Deaf, Blind, and Deafblind learners. For realisation of their UN CRPD rights to inclusive and equal education, this needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. For example, according to the British Deaf Association (BDA), only 8% of teachers of Deaf children are trained in BSL. Currently 80% of education is done by sight, which presents a huge barrier for Blind and Deafblind children.

3.4 Provision of the correct number of trained teachers and teaching assistants, visual impairment specialists, and mixed formats of teaching and learning, would aid a continuity of inclusive and equal education for children with sensory impairments. In line with recommendations by the Christie Commission, preventative spending would prevent expensive (and sometimes unaffordable) special school fees and social care costs being incurred by local authorities further down the line.

3.5 Currently mainstream schools are generally not well enough resourced to support pupils with sensory impairments in either their learning or their inclusion in school social life. However, Deaf people at our UN CRPD engagement events told us that the standard of education they received at special school was poor, saying they were not taught the national curriculum. One person identified that going to a Deaf BSL medium school helped him to identify with his cultural group more, but overall we were told that more mainstreaming should be encouraged to ease the transition and aid inclusion at college age.

3.6 There is a widespread concern in the disability movement that special schools segregate disabled children away from non-disabled children, little preparing them for inclusion in a non-disabled society as adults. Attitudes towards disabled people remain poor because non-disabled children often grow up broadly unaware of disability. Yet conversely special schools are often favoured by parents who do not see mainstream education as an option for their disabled child or when their child has been failed within the mainstream system.

3.7 For example, there are over 2000 students throughout Scotland with visual impairments. The support that they get for their learning varies widely across different authorities. We believe that there should be a statutory duty placed on Local Authorities to appoint visual impairment experts to provide advice and support in the teaching of visually impaired pupils. At the moment it depends on the number of children who have visual impairments in each authority as to whether this position is resourced at all.
**Recommendation:** For BSL users to be included, a programme of BSL education should be introduced to the educational curriculum for all students in mainstream education. This would aid communication for BSL users, aiding in class and extra-curricular inclusion, and would have a positive effect on leavers’ attainment levels and later destinations. The current situation instead promotes a life-time of barriers to Deaf BSL users in accessing a career. It should be noted however that the many Deaf/hard of hearing students are not BSL users, so a variety of communication support needs to be provided.

3.9 In both mainstream and special school settings, we believe that low expectations of students with impairments are setting them up to fail in both exams and later life. The fact that twice as many school leavers with sensory impairments move on to Further Education (FE) initially looks like a positive outcome but previous research has shown that young disabled people are more likely to remain in FE longer than non-disabled students and yet attain far less by way of educational outcomes. Therefore instead of FE being a positive outcome for these school leavers, it is much more likely that it simply masks even higher levels of deferred worklessness amongst that group.

3.10 Special schools provide courses on life skills for independent living that disabled children are not offered in mainstream schools. Whether this in fact better prepares sensory impaired students for life outside school is open to question but at least the issue is acknowledged and addressed. These courses relate directly to the generally negative experience of transitions that most disabled students have on leaving school.

3.11 The transition from childhood to adulthood is of enormous significance to all children but for far too many disabled children it often seems to signify the end of state support for their inclusion in mainstream society and the beginning of a life without purpose or employment. For parents of young disabled people in Scotland, recent experiences of their children moving from children’s to adult services have been “unanimously negative”.

3.12 Clearly this is not in line with the GIRFEC framework and as such, in our response to the Children and Young People Bill consultation, we recommended an extension of the single point of contact (named person) from 18 to 24, in order to ensure that young people are not ‘lost’ during or just after transition.

**Recommendation:** All young disabled people are better supported through their transition from children to adults with clear targets set for (i) better forward planning for transitions (which has inclusive living and the needs & views of young disabled people at its centre); (ii) better educational outcomes and (iii) more young disabled people in employment.

3.14 We believe that other accompanying impairments or complex support needs also need to be taken into account when attempting to improve the outcomes for children and young people with sensory impairments. In particular, an analysis focussing solely on sensory impairments may mask the interrelation between their experiences at school and their

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4 Outlined in pp 13-14 of Stalker and Moscardin’s Critical Review (referenced above).
mental health. According to recent research, bullying at school may have a more serious impact on a child or young adult's mental health than neglect or mistreatment at home.\(^5\)

3.15 Overall, disabled children are at twice the risk of being subjected to long term bullying at school than non-disabled children.\(^6\) The “Close the Gap” report commissioned by National Deaf Children’s Society states that, ‘two thirds of the young people in the research case studies mentioned they had been bullied or felt socially isolated in school because they were deaf. They described how this affected their confidence and ultimately their post school transitions’.

3.16 Similarly according to research by Blind Children UK, 43% of blind or visually impaired children across the UK are being bullied at school by their peers and excluded from day-to-day activities by adults. This can lead to children facing various forms of bullying, with 86% verbally abused, 74% ignored, and 44% facing physical violence.\(^7\)

3.17 Bullying of all disabled children should be tackled. One way of doing this would be to raise awareness of disability for non-disabled children in mainstream schools. Part of that awareness would include having classes alongside disabled children, but this is not enough to prevent them from being bullied.

**Recommendation:** That a programme of learning on children’s rights and on disabled children’s rights needs to be put into place in all of Scotland’s primary schools, as part of our national curriculum.

3.18 The Scottish Government should also review Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) to ensure that unmet need among children and young people with ASN is addressed, and that their mental health service needs are met on equal terms with other children and young people who require these services in ways that are appropriate for the child or young person.\(^8\)

3.19 For example, for children with sensory impairments, this would include timely services that meet their communication needs; BSL and touch-sign medium counselling would meet the needs of some deaf students experiencing mental health problems. Again, a preventative approach could close the attainment gap for pupils with sensory impairments, and lead them to have positive outcomes in higher education and/or employment.


\(^6\) Research summary four: Are disabled children and young people at a higher risk of being bullied? (2014) Briefing paper. London: Centre for Longitudinal Studies. [http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/page.aspx?&sitesectionid=1203&sitesectiontitle=Trajectories+and+transitions+in+the+cognitive+and+educational+development+of+disabled+children+and+young+people](http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/page.aspx?&sitesectionid=1203&sitesectiontitle=Trajectories+and+transitions+in+the+cognitive+and+educational+development+of+disabled+children+and+young+people)


\(^8\) For specific recommendations see: ‘Improving Access to Mental Health Services for Children and Young People with Learning Disability in Scotland: Report and action plan’, Scottish Government Reshaping Care and Mental Health Division and the LD CAMHS Scotland Network’, Edinburgh, 21st June 2011
Conclusion

4.1 Inclusion Scotland hopes that this evidence is useful to the Committee’s deliberations and would be delighted to provide oral evidence, hopefully involving disabled people themselves, if any further information or accounts of lived experience were needed.

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