Inquiry into the attainment of school pupils with sensory impairment-
submission from the Sensory Support Service, Education & Children’s
Services, Aberdeen City

1. It would be helpful to have national data on attainment against
which to benchmark progress. However, small statistical
numbers and variations, especially with regard to the nature and
severity of visual impairment (VI), can often mean that
information is not very useful. We track the progress of our
learners & use data from standardised assessments such as
PIPS, InCAS and specialist assessments such as Oregon,
TROG, ACE etc. Standardised tests give us evidence of areas
of progress but are not designed for children with sensory loss.
Aspects of these assessments are inappropriate to our
learners but are used widely in mainstream schools. We would
appreciate support in working with assessment providers to
adapt assessments at source rather than ad-hoc. At present
assessment of BSL is challenging as training in the
assessments that can be
used is very expensive and not
available in Scotland at present.

2. The majority of children & young people (CYP) with sensory
loss and no other significant disabilities attend mainstream
schools. Those with severe sensory loss require significant input
and resourcing. However, parental choice and the needs and
preferences of the CYP should be taken into consideration and
there will inevitably be a continuum of need which should be
addressed through a choice of provision and different support
structures. It is imperative that specialist, qualified staff with a
thorough understanding of the pedagogy related to sensory loss
continue to work closely and influence learning & teaching. CYP
with moderate to mild sensory loss/impairment tend to get
overlooked and there is a lack of understanding in mainstream
schooling of the issues and barriers the CYP encounter and how
to ensure that they are fully included & access a curriculum
adapted to their learning needs. There is often a presumption
that these CYP can “manage”. This optimism can mean that
practitioners do not seek specialist advice or training & continue
to show a lack of understanding of specific skills
needed. Although awareness training is offered, some schools
do not recognise the benefit of training until there is a problem.

3. Many children with sensory loss are socially isolated or even
marginalised in schools. CYP need greater opportunities to meet
peers with sensory loss both locally & nationally. There is a
need for greater understanding amongst peers and teachers
and a celebration of deaf culture and the world of VI.

4. We have found using HWB experiences and outcomes useful in
fostering skills of self-advocacy and self-confidence. However,
more credence and recognition needs to be given to CYP who need to have an additional curriculum of skills (in e.g. braille, BSL, assistive technology etc.) and who deserve recognition for their progress. Work done with peers in developing skills of sighted guiding, BSL etc should also be acknowledged more formally.

5. There is a severe lack of tutors of BSL, meaning that teachers have fewer opportunities to train to the required level. There are no nationally agreed guidelines on the teaching of braille and a requirement for greater sharing of best practice in the pedagogy of teaching braille. The requirements for the mandatory qualifications for teacher of the deaf (TOD) and teacher of visual impairment (TVI) are too low and should require BSL stage 2 and a competency certificate in contracted braille especially if the child who is being supported uses contracted braille or BSL. There is a requirement for TVIs to be competent in a range of mainstream and assistive technologies to support their learners. Further access to well-priced and local training is needed to keep abreast of developments & associated pedagogy.

6. Habilitation skills are crucial to the development of confident young people with VI and essential to their prospects of becoming effective contributors to society. There is a lack of suitably qualified staff to work with CYP on independence and daily living skills. Best practice would require access to a fully qualified habilitation specialist, as and when required, both within and outwith school.

7. There continues to be a shortage of suitably trained and qualified staff. Costs to train a TVI/TOD are considerable. Shortage of staff generally has had a knock on effect on the ability of services to attract staff, reducing opportunities for secondments etc. Changes and reviews have meant that staffing has been kept temporary, preventing people from starting on the mandatory qualification. There are issues with succession planning as the majority of qualified staff are in their mid to late 50s. Specialised CLPL courses are run by the SSC in Edinburgh and these are very much appreciated by staff. These can be costly for those authorities furthest away as travel costs have to be taken into account.

8. Failure to adapt school environments to make them deaf and vision friendly often impacts on learners’ confidence and social inclusion. This, in turn can be seen to impact on their progress and attainment. Trying to engage in the early stages of designing a new school building is very challenging and the cost of suggested required is always brought up as a barrier eg soundfield systems built in, furniture with contrasting edges.
9. It is vital that support is holistic. Time constraints and lack of staffing mean that time for consultation with teachers and other professionals is often limited. In a specialist provision there tends to be greater flexibility and a history of collaborative working so that this is not so much of an issue. It tends to present greater problems in mainstream schools with peripatetic staff. Difficulties with pre-teaching of skills, support in class for specific areas of work and with adapting texts etc. are more evident since the introduction of CfE and active literacy. However, more extensive use of practical maths and greater acknowledgement of learning styles and ICT often foster inclusive practice.

10. Support in early years 0-5y is essential both for children and for parents – this is an area where there are huge variations in the support offered and where there are excellent examples of good practice that should be considered and used to set a minimum level provided.