Every Deaf Child Matters Conference 2012

All Change: Creating Opportunities to Better Support Deaf Children

26th June 2012

Somerset County Cricket Club, Taunton

Conference Report

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This second Every Deaf Child Matters Conference once again brought together a wide range of people from the South West to look at how support for deaf children is changing in education, health and social care and at how it can be improved. Over a hundred delegates had the opportunity to share their experience and concerns with discussions focused on the far-reaching policy reforms taking place across all of these areas and what they will mean for parents, professionals, commissioners and for deaf children and young people themselves.

Key messages from the conference included:

- Achieving better outcomes for deaf children will depend on raising expectations of what they can achieve and the quality of their support: the attainment gap can and should be closed.
- Deaf children and young people are a highly vulnerable group with distinct needs that must not be overlooked. The current reforms open up new opportunities for commissioners and professionals to get out of their silos to work together better and involve parents more to meet deaf children's needs. But the risks to deaf children in the midst of these changes also have to be recognised, especially where their support services and provision are already poor, overstretched or affected by cuts.
- The SEN Green Paper and Pathfinder projects promise to improve things by supporting professionals and parents to work together more closely to ensure that deaf children and young people will access the support and services they need. But delivering on this promise will depend on addressing a number of key challenges:

- As deaf children have varying needs, it will be important that none are excluded by arbitrary thresholds or barriers in the new processes and frameworks for the single assessments and Education, Health and Social Care Plans (EHSCP).

- Clear lines of accountability will be needed between the different professionals, services and funding lines involved, and transparent legal rights and appeal processes need to be maintained for parents.
- The range or ‘market’ in local support and services for deaf children are often limited and fragmented. Providing real and informed choices and options through the single assessment, EHSCP and personal budgets will depend on a continuum of quality provision across education, health and social care; this may sometimes need to go beyond the boundaries of the existing ‘local offer’.

The conference was chaired by Brian Lamb OBE who opened with the warning that major changes are afoot with the government’s health, education funding and SEN reforms and the drive to personalise access to support and services and to develop new markets in provision through personal budgets, devolved school funding and other changes to how support will be commissioned and provided. With these changes should come opportunities and these need to be seized if deaf children are not to fall through the net. He highlighted many of the big challenges that need to be taken on, including the attainment gap between deaf and hearing children and cuts to the specialist support services that deaf children depend on.

The floor was then given to parents. They stressed that the key challenge for them will remain how to access good quality support and services for their children. What is needed is a change in people’s expectations – the expectations of parents about the quality of communication and other support that they should expect and demand for their children, the expectations of support services about the standards of provision that they should aim to deliver, the expectations of commissioners about the resources and investments needed, and the expectations of everyone about what deaf children can and should achieve.

Some of the biggest changes underway are structural. Ann James, Chief Executive of NHS Devon, Plymouth and Torbay, outlined how roles and responsibilities are shifting with the various new bodies coming into being under the Health and Social Care Act. These include the NHS Commissioning Board and its Local Area Teams, Clinical Commissioning Groups, Commissioning Support Units, and Health and Wellbeing Boards, and also local authorities with new responsibilities for public health. With this new and fast-changing framework, she emphasised that integration will be the key to meeting deaf children's needs, including:

- Integrated assessments and pathways to services for parents and deaf children and young people
- Integrated support between childhood and adulthood
- Integrated planning and delivery of services across health, social care and education
- Integrated commissioning

But the changes needed to deliver improvements aren't only about processes and structures, they are also cultural. Susan Tanner, Wiltshire Council's Head of Strategic Planning and Joint Planning and lead of Wiltshire's SEN Pathfinder project pointed to the changes in thinking and relationships that will have to underpin any efforts to make things better for deaf children. Everyone needs to be looking to improve outcomes and for this people have to get out of their silos. Changing the roles and responsibilities of all involved in supporting deaf and other disabled children and young people is fundamental to the SEN Green Paper and Pathfinder project. The aim is to bring education, health and social care professionals much more closely together to jointly assess, plan and provide support, and to put parents and young people much more in the driving seat. Mike Ellis and Kay Henry, representing the Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Pathfinder project, outlined how the voice and input of parents will need to be maintained through their piloting of the single assessment process and Education, Health and Care Plans, personal budgets and other key aspects of the Pathfinder project. Martin Quaintance from Devon's Pathfinder project outlined how parents and children and young people themselves will be at the centre of a 'team around the child'.

Delegates questioned, however, whether the Pathfinders' aspirations for change might be beyond what is really feasible for many professionals, parents and organisations who are assumed able and willing to take on the changed roles and responsibilities that the SEN Green Paper demands. Most professionals and specialist services are already overstretched, so how will they find the time, resources and opportunities that will be needed to make the single assessment process work properly and in a way that will make things easier for parents and young people? Are we really going to see any change from how things work now with the Common Assessment Framework and SEN statementing? There is a risk that things will be just as or more complicated as they are now for parents, and so the 'keyworker' or 'navigator' role is likely to be crucial. But who will provide and resource these navigators and will they have enough knowledge and understanding of deafness to provide the quality of advice and support that parents and deaf young people will need?

While many parents will welcome the chance to purchase education and other support directly with the new personal budgets, many delegates were doubtful about whether the services that parents and deaf young people may want to buy will be available. As it is a low-incidence disability, the 'market' in deaf children's support services is small, fragmented and still very weak on both the demand and supply sides. Specialist Speech and Language Therapists are in short supply, for instance. Meanwhile, schools and academies may not use their delegated SEN funding to buy in specialist services if they only have one or two deaf children placed with them and have little knowledge of what these children need. While there is an expectation that parents and young people will be able to exercise greater choice in provision, delegates were sceptical about how much choice is really out there for many deaf children and young people who, for example, may need specialist out-of-area placements or support that are not part of the 'local offer', or who need help from local services that don't have the capacity to provide.

These questions were fielded by a panel drawn from across education, health and social care commissioners and providers, including the SEN Pathfinders. The message from the panel was that all these challenges are real and must be addressed, but also, as things change, there are important opportunities to seize to improve things. In the final session, delegates focused on identifying success and opportunities for action: if positive change is going to be achieved for deaf children and young people and their families, it will have to be change that builds on the best practice and highest aspirations and these need to be shared by everyone.