

Chime Advocacy Newsletter

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Chime is the National Charity for Deaf and Hard of Hearing people. Since 1964 we have championed the rights of Deaf and Hard of Hearing (D/HH) people in Ireland. Chime's Advocacy Newsletter aims to inform key stakeholders including public representatives, of the priority issues affecting D/HH people that Chime is currently advocating on. The newsletter provides an overview of why the priority issues are important, what progress has been made to date, and the next steps in our campaigning efforts.

FEATURED IN THIS EDITION:

- Advocating for a national hearing care plan Pg 1
- Lack of data on Educational outcomes for Deaf and Hard of Hearing children Pg 3
- Access for the Deaf community Pg 4
- Comisiún na Meán Pg 6

National Hearing Care Plan – Working Group to be established in the New Year

Chime has been campaigning for a number of years for the Department of Health to develop a national hearing care plan. The Department have now agreed to set up a working group to develop a national plan in the New Year. A national plan would reduce the high level of unmanaged hearing loss across the population, improve quality of life and reduce health costs. The World Health Organisation recommended in 2021 that governments develop national hearing care plans and estimated that for every €1 invested, a return of €16 could be expected over the following ten years.¹

Want to know more about Chime advocacy?

Get in touch!

Email us at advocacy@chime.ie

For any queries about deafness or hearing loss:

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 **Chime**
The National Charity for Deaf and Hard of Hearing People

(Continued from Page 1)

Why is a national hearing care plan needed?

300,000 adults in Ireland have a significant hearing loss, but only one in five have hearing aids.² Unmanaged hearing loss leads to significantly increased health risks such as dementia and depression. There is no national policy or oversight for the provision of hearing aids and hearing care in the private sector. This is despite the fact that private providers currently provide more than 70% of hearing aids, while the State invested more than €24m in 2022 via the Treatment Benefit Hearing Aid Grant provided by the Department of Social Protection.

Waiting Lists

The HSE provides audiology services to medical card holders and children. While there are high clinical standards and protocols in place, there are persistently long waiting lists. Currently there are approximately 20,000 patients on HSE waiting lists, and in one case a lady in her 80s was told she would be waiting 3 years for an initial appointment.

3 years - the length of time a lady in her 80s was told she would wait to see a HSE audiologist

Duplication and Quality issues

There is a level of duplication, affordability issues and quality of service challenges. For example, some patients have dual eligibility, and there is anecdotal evidence that some patients may avail of the hearing aid grant first while they await an appointment from the HSE. Also, between 2019 and 2023 the number of patients getting cheaper 'Level 1' hearing aids increased from 3.6% to almost 30%. This raises the question if patients are getting the right hearing aids for their needs and indicates that affordability is an issue.

Facts about Hearing Loss in Ireland

- 300,000 adults have a hearing loss that requires treatment – typically with hearing aids.³
- Only one in five of these people have the hearing aids they need.²
- Ireland prescribes hearing aids at approximately half the rate of other European countries.⁴
- 8% of dementia is preventable through early treatment of hearing loss.⁵
- Based on recent research into hearing loss and depression⁶, Chime estimates that 50,000 people in Ireland have depression due to unmanaged hearing loss.

What can a national hearing care plan deliver?

The primary objective for a national hearing care plan would be to ensure that more people can access quality audiology services in a timely manner, thus reducing the level of unmanaged hearing loss across the population, improving quality of life and reducing the health burden.

The plan would include reducing HSE waiting lists and supporting those without medical cards to access hearing aids appropriate to their needs in the private sector. In addition, it would introduce a level of oversight for private provision, address affordability issues and eliminate duplication of services.

- ¹ WHO World Report on Ear and Hearing Care (WHO, 2021)
- ² Health and Wellbeing: Active Ageing for Older Adults in Ireland (TILDA, 2017)
- ³ HSE Audiology Review (2011)
- ⁴ European Hearing Instrument Manufacturers Association. Market Statistics Reports (2016–2020)
- ⁵ Dementia prevention, intervention, and care (Lancet Commission, 2020)
- ⁶ Blake et al. Hearing Loss and Depression in Older Adults: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis (2020)

Lack of data on educational outcomes for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students

Chime has been shining a light on the absence of data on the educational outcomes for Deaf and Hard of Hearing children. We met with the Minister of State for Special Education, Josepha Madigan T.D., and urged her to begin publication of educational outcomes for these children. In July 2023 we presented on this and other issues to the Oireachtas Committee on Education.

Following our presentation, the Department of Education wrote to the Chair of the Committee in October. The Department stated that they have asked the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) "to consider a study of outcomes for those children who are under the visiting teacher service."

Why do we educational outcomes to be published?

It is important to understand that deafness or hearing loss is not a barrier to learning. Indeed the NCSE recognised this in their policy advice paper in 2011 where they state that "Deaf and Hard of Hearing children should graduate from school with levels of attainment that are on a par with hearing peers of similar ability."⁷ But to date the NCSE have published no data to indicate the extent to which this objective is being achieved.

There are over 5,000 Deaf and Hard of Hearing students in Ireland

There are considerable grounds for concern that the educational attainment of Deaf and Hard of Hearing children in Ireland is at a level well below their potential. For example, under the new Special Education Teacher Allocation

The logo for the National Council for Special Education (NCSE). It features the lowercase letters 'ncse' in a bold, sans-serif font. The 'n' and 'c' are dark red, while the 's' and 'e' are orange. To the right of the text is a square icon composed of four smaller squares in shades of red and orange.

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta um Oideachas Speisialta
National Council for Special Education

NCSE Objective

"Deaf and Hard of Hearing children graduate from school with levels of attainment that are on a par with their hearing peers of similar ability".¹⁰

model, parents tell us that their children are now receiving much less support than before. Also, the Visiting Teacher Service, frequently highlighted by parents as the most important support service they receive, is operating at 60% of the corresponding service in the UK.⁸

Other concerns include the low level of post graduate qualifications of teachers of Deaf children and the low level of ISL proficiency amongst Visiting Teachers and teachers in Deaf schools.

/// *Because she had a hearing problem, she was entitled to a certain amount of one-to-one learning support, and that has been cut hugely. She had a half hour each day with a teacher on her own. And that has been cut to half an hour a week."*

Mother of Niamh ⁹

Next steps

In early 2024 Chime will be urging the NCSE to progress the 'study of outcomes' requested by the Department of Education as a matter of priority. Chime understands that relevant data on educational outcomes for Deaf and Hard of Hearing pupils, such as the results from standardised tests conducted in primary schools, is readily available, and simply has to be collated. Chime expects significant progress will be made in the coming months and that some data on educational outcomes will be made available

on educational outcomes for Deaf and Hard of Hearing children in 2024.

- 7 The Education of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children in Ireland (NCSE, 2011)
- 8 Education provision for deaf children in England in 2020/21 (CRIDE, 2022)
- 9 Parent statement on recent RTE documentary 'DEAF – not dumb', broadcast on RTÉ One on 23rd Nov 2023

Access for the Deaf community: Some good news in late 2023!

In our previous newsletter we reported on the National Disability Authority's (NDA) report on the operation of the Irish Sign Language Act, which was published in January 2023 after a delay of over 12 months. The Report was highly critical of many public bodies for their failure to provide full access to public services for Deaf citizens who communicate through Irish Sign Language (ISL). It stated:

“ Overall, the ISL Act is not yet operating as intended, with significant gaps in knowledge and understanding of the responsibilities of public bodies under the Act. Implementation was noted to be poor across most sections of the Act, with many public bodies appearing unprepared for the activities needed to achieve compliance.” ¹⁰

ISL became Ireland's third recognised indigenous language when the ISL Act was passed by the Oireachtas and signed into law by the President on December 24th 2017. The Act not only recognised ISL, but also had contained commitments regarding the provision of services and supports to Deaf citizens, including specific sections dealing with education, legal



proceedings, broadcasting and access to social and cultural events.

Progress in 2023

Thankfully some positive progress was made in 2023 towards greater inclusion and equality for Deaf people.

Voucher Scheme: In October 2023 the 'Voucher' scheme was reactivated after a two-year gap. Initially this was on a temporary basis, but the Minister of Social Protection has subsequently confirmed that it is her intention to fund it on a permanent basis. The Voucher scheme is based on Section 9 of the ISL Act, which aims to provide access to the Deaf community to events,

services and activities such as social events and professional services. This development has been widely welcomed within the Deaf community, as the pilot scheme in 2021 was seen as highly successful and central to Deaf people being empowered to participate in citizen activities on a more equitable basis.

What did Deaf people use vouchers for in 2011?

Medical consultations	26%
Social events	24%
Education and training	20%
Public events and professional services	18% ¹²

Reasonable Accommodation Fund (RAF): The Department of Social Protection published their review of the Reasonable Accommodation Fund (RAF) in August. The review acknowledged the shortcomings of the existing scheme and proposed an expanded scheme which, amongst other recommendations, would include interpretation support in the workplace. Until now, many Deaf people have been extremely isolated in the workplace with little prospect of promotion or career development because there was no provision for ISL interpretation under the RAF, apart from job interviews and induction.

The Department are currently working on an implementation plan for the upgraded RAF and have indicated that this will be delivered in Q1 2024. It is worth noting that the existing RAF was spending just 1% per head of population compared to the corresponding 'Access to Work' scheme in 2024. Chime and other Deaf organisations will be actively engaging with the Department to ensure that the RAF implementation plan is fit for purpose and ensures more Deaf people and people with disabilities can access employment into the future.

Areas of concern

There are still some significant issues to be addressed before the Deaf community can enjoy access to services and community life on a par with their hearing peers. There are still frequent instances, especially in regional areas outside Dublin, where public services are not providing sign language services on request to Deaf people.

Also, there is a lack of urgency in addressing the shortage of ISL interpreters. Immediate action is required to encourage more people into the profession, including school leavers and those who qualified as interpreters in the past but have since stepped away.

Finally, "an evaluation of the National Specialist Service and model of care for mental health services for the Deaf community"¹² is overdue. This was expected to be completed in 2023, but Chime understands that only preliminary planning has taken place to date. The evaluation is expected to commence formally in early 2024. Currently none of the regional Community Nurse Specialist posts contained in the business case for the service have been filled. This has contributed to concerns that the specialist service based in Cabra in Dublin is less accessible to Deaf people who live outside the Dublin region.

No regional CNS posts have been filled to date in the Mental Health Service for the Deaf community

Chime will be actively engaging in the review and hope that a report will issue as soon as possible in 2024.

¹⁰ Report on the Operation of the Irish Sign Language Act (NDA, 2011)

¹¹ Sign Language Interpreting Service Report (2022)

¹² Sharing the Vision, Recommendation 62. (HSE, 2022)

Comisiún na Meán fail to engage

Coimisiún na Meán

Comisiún na Meán was established in early 2023 as the successor body to the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland. Previously people with disabilities and advocacy groups engaged with the BAI on issues such as subtitling, audio description and ISL on TV. These access services are required from broadcasters under the 'Access Rules' – which are in turn provided for under the Broadcasting Act.

In the past Chime and others have been largely frustrated by the slow pace of progress in the area of broadcasting, and have been particularly critical of the lack of urgency of the BAI in dealing with issues such as the quality of subtitles or the amount of ISL presented programmes, particularly with regard to the Sound and Vision Scheme, (a scheme funded by part of the licence fee that provides grants for the production of audio-visual projects which are of public interest).

However, throughout 2023 Comisiún na Meán have failed to meet with representative groups for Deaf, Hard of Hearing and visually impaired people, despite having indicated that they would do so in July. Recently Chime has submitted a series of questions to the Commission, and we will be actively seeking meaningful engagement from Comisiún na Meán in 2024.

Coming in our next edition:

Campaigning for Irish Sign Language as a Leaving Certificate examination.

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