

Written evidence submitted by National Deaf Children's Society

Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee Inquiry – Impact of Covid-19 on DCMS sectors

National Deaf Children's Society written evidence submission, May 2020

1. Summary

1.1. BBC Bitesize has become an important source of support to children and young people for online learning in recent months. However, these online learning resources are not always accessible to deaf children. Too often, accessibility continues to be an afterthought, leaving deaf children to fall behind. We believe this is unacceptable. We urge the Government to take a stronger lead in ensuring that online educational resources are accessible to deaf children.

2. About us:

2.1. We are the National Deaf Children's Society, the leading charity for deaf children. We give expert support on childhood deafness, raise awareness and campaign for deaf children's rights, so they have the same opportunities as everyone else. There are over 50,000 deaf children in the UK. We're here for every deaf child who needs us – no matter what their level or type of deafness or how they communicate. We support deaf children, young people, and their families. We work with decision-makers and professionals to overcome the barriers that hold deaf children back.

3. Introduction and background:

3.1. We recently surveyed our members about the impact of Covid-19 on their deaf children. We received responses from 150 parents or relatives of deaf children (at the time of writing). We have also engaged closely with deaf young people on our Young People's Advisory Board. One of the main issues that is coming up among this group is the inaccessibility of online learning materials.

3.2. Due to Covid-19, the lockdown measures and the temporary closure of schools and colleges, the majority of deaf children and young people, like others, have been at home and trying to access learning remotely. This has been a challenge for many deaf children and young people due to the need for materials to be made accessible for their needs.

3.3. Due to the remit of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, this submission focuses on BBC Bitesize. We briefly discuss feedback from deaf young people about BBC Bitesize and recommend suggestions for improvements.

4. Key issues:

- 4.1. The subtitled versions of the BBC Bitesize daily lessons are only available 24 hours after the live lesson. This means that deaf children and young people are at least a day behind their peers.
- 4.2. There is no British Sign Language (BSL) translation or interpretation available for the content on BBC Bitesize. This leaves any children and young people who use BSL feeling left out and like they cannot access the same content that their peers are accessing.

“My teacher always tell me to use Bitesize but there is no signing. This makes me feel quite alone as I am the only deaf person in my school who cannot try bitesize. I am falling behind at school too” (Deaf young person)

- 4.3. The BBC Bitesize social media content and engagement is inaccessible. This doesn't fill deaf young people with much confidence in being able to access the wider content on the site.
- 4.4. The captions/subtitles are 'too fast' and so deaf young people cannot always follow the captioning.

“I like all the colours but I cannot read the content fast enough” (Deaf young person)

- 4.5. There are issues with a lack of deaf awareness in the design, filming and production of BBC Bitesize. For instance tutors are facing the wrong way so their face cannot be seen and they cannot be lip read by deaf learners.
- 4.6. There are issues with the inaccessibility and lack of deaf awareness with the website design.

(There needs to be...) *“A button that you can click so you can see all subtitled or BSL content. The BBC have this but it is old and doesn't work now”. (Deaf young person)*

“I don't think the subtitles are very clear. Even though I am deaf I keep missing when I can actually have subtitles. It would be great if this was made clearer across the website.” (Deaf young person)

- 4.7. There are issues with the inaccessibility of the 'red button' whereby if deaf young people would like to watch lessons on their television, subtitles are not offered. This is a significant barrier for those who don't have access to a computer and wish to use the red button service instead. Many households will be sharing a computer, meaning that some students will be missing out, if they have siblings also trying to learn at home or parents who are trying to work.
- 4.8. Deaf young people report that there is a lack of representation of deaf people in the BBC Bitesize content.

“When looking at videos and stuff it would be nice to see hearing tech on there like hearing aids or cochlear implants. I stop watching otherwise as it feels like a hearing video. I love

watching videos with cochlear implants even in the background as it makes me proud that I am deaf” (Deaf young person)

5. Recommendations:

- 5.1. The BBC should work with organisations such as the National Deaf Children’s Society to ensure that its content for children and young people is accessible by default and design.
- 5.2. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport should work with the BBC and with the Department for Education to seek to drive forward improvements in the accessibility of online learning materials. Decisions around commissioning content should be informed by an accessibility criteria that includes the need for subtitles and British Sign Language.