

Written evidence submitted by APPG for Dyslexia

APPG for Dyslexia and other Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs)

**Evidence - Education Select Committee inquiry - The impact of
COVID-19 on education and children's services**

The APPG aims to understand Dyslexia and other specific learning difficulties and the need to keep government apprised of the situation in schools, education and in general in the UK. The group will also look at what statutory and non-statutory bodies are achieving in this field. The aim is to achieve a dyslexia friendly society by enabling individuals with dyslexia to achieve their potential across all ages and sectors of society.

We felt it was important to contribute to this inquiry to ensure the experience of those with Dyslexia or other Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs) was heard.

This evidence from the APPG for Dyslexia and other Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs) looks at the following inquiry terms of reference:

- The effect of cancelling formal exams, including the fairness of qualifications awarded and pupils' progression to the next stage of education or employment
- Support for pupils and families during closures

- The effect on disadvantaged groups, including the Department's approach to free school meals and the long-term impact on the most vulnerable groups (such as pupils with special educational needs and disabilities and children in need)
- What contingency planning can be done to ensure the resilience of the sector in case of any future national emergency

Support for pupils and families during closures

1. Feedback from charities operating in the sector is that whilst schools are endeavouring to support young people with dyslexia during the COVID-19 school closures, in practice, little support is taking place and young people with dyslexia are receiving the same provision from schools as any other pupil.
2. The result is that parents are left to provide support for their children with dyslexia.
3. Research carried out in 2019 for the APPG for Dyslexia and other SpLDs found that 95 percent of parents feel they lacked the skills and knowledge to support their dyslexic child.¹
4. Evidence from the group's Secretariat, the British Dyslexia Association, is that the lack of knowledge and skills identified in 2019 is now a major issue for young people with dyslexia and their families.
5. Charities can make capacity to support with training parents either through existing eLearning, or redeploying those that would have been training teachers to support and educate parents, building their capacity to support and educate their children.

¹ Research developed for the APPG for Dyslexia and other SpLDs. Distributed through social media (Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn). Over 1,300 responses were received. Survey participants were self-selecting and in addition to answering short, closed questions relating to their experiences of dyslexia, they were also able to write open-ended comments giving more detail, in their own words - in excess of 2,500 comments were received. The survey ran between 7 February 2019 and 18 March 2019.

6. However, charities do not have the money to turn on this support and make it freely available to parents and carers as their income streams, derived from commercial activities, have been decimated. Whilst many parents and carers do not have the personal resources to pay for this support in normal times, many more do not currently as they have been furloughed or have lost their income and are struggling to maintain a basic standard of living.
7. If funding could be made available from the Department to support the charities with their work enabling them to support parents with developing the required skills and knowledge to home school children with SEN, then a substantial positive impact could be achieved for both education and mental health.
8. The British Dyslexia Association reports that, since the announcement of school closures, the overwhelming focus of enquiries to their Helpline have been around supporting dyslexic learners at home. Parents have consistently expressed concern, anxiety and frustration.
9. In response to this spike in enquiries, they have been running free regular webinars for parents across various areas related to supporting dyslexic learners in a home setting. 6,000 parents of young people with dyslexia have registered for webinars so far.
10. Interestingly, the most attended of these (with over 2,000 registered) was on behavioural and emotional issues. It was clear from this session that in many cases the school closures and wider COVID-19 situation was having a substantial impact on both parent's and children's education, emotional wellbeing and mental health.

The effect of cancelling formal exams, including the fairness of qualifications awarded and pupils' progression to the next stage of education or employment

1. The early view from experts is that basing grades on predicted grades from teachers may be fairer to young people with dyslexia as teachers will have a fuller view of their abilities and that young people with dyslexia are better able to demonstrate their aptitude in the classroom than they are in an exam.
2. A student with dyslexia or another specific learning difficulty (SpLD) is twice as likely to fail to achieve a level 4 or above in English and Maths at GCSE², it will be interesting to see if that improves under the teacher grading system. If it does, it will be a catalyst to future debate around examination reform.

The effect on disadvantaged groups, including the Department's approach to free school meals and the long-term impact on the most vulnerable groups (such as pupils with special educational needs and disabilities and children in need)

1. Young people with dyslexia from disadvantaged groups are going to be substantially more impacted by the COVID-19 school closures.
2. This is shown by Dr Helen Ross in her paper *The COVID-19 School Closures: Effects on Learning and Teaching for Students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities* (which has been submitted as evidence to this enquiry), which says: "Teachers felt that disadvantaged students and those with SEND would be the most impacted by school closures long term."³
3. Firstly, whilst any young person without access to a laptop and broadband is at a major disadvantage now, those with dyslexia in this situation are even harder hit.

² In 2017/18, 70.6 percent of children without an identified SEN secured grade 4 or above in maths and English GCSE. Yet, this figure falls to just 35 percent for pupil identified as having an SpLD. Research by Angela Thompson, PhD student, Coventry University (secondary research of DfE data).

³ *The COVID-19 School Closures: Effects on Learning and Teaching for Students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities*, Dr Helen Ross, May 2020

4. Whilst those young people with dyslexia with laptops are currently benefiting from the wide array of free or affordable assistive technology to mitigate the weaknesses from dyslexia, those without do not have this advantage, hence widening the gap.
5. This is illustrated in Dr Helen Ross's research: "In the short term, while schools are still disrupted, teachers noted that lack of resources impacted on students' ability to access learning. Where students with SEND have access to appropriate technology, this can be beneficial (Ross, pending), if students and staff are appropriately trained."⁴
6. Secondly, many parents who can afford to, are currently paying for training to enable them to support their child with their dyslexia at home or are purchasing private virtual specialist support. Those parents from disadvantaged groups are highly unlikely to be able to pay for this training or for private specialist support.
7. Whilst lack of means to access private specialist support is always a major barrier for those young people with dyslexia from disadvantaged groups, now that the, albeit very limited, dyslexia support from school has all but ceased, those young people are even further deprived of the vital support, which peers from wealthier families can access.

What contingency planning can be done to ensure the resilience of the sector in case of any future national emergency

1. The APPG for Dyslexia and other SpLD continues to call for a Specialist Dyslexia Teacher Assessor for every school. Whilst this is led by a need to embed diagnostic and specialist support for dyslexia on the frontline of education generally, the COVID-19 school closures have demonstrated other reasons why this is a strategy that must be adopted by Government.

⁴ *The COVID-19 School Closures: Effects on Learning and Teaching for Students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities*, Dr Helen Ross, May 2020

2. Firstly, the school's Specialist Dyslexia Teacher Assessor could be providing virtual support directly to young people with dyslexia, maintaining the specialist intervention that are so vital to levelling the playing field for young people with dyslexia.
3. One of the key roles of Specialist Dyslexia Teacher Assessor would be to provide advice to parents in general. Right now, if there were a Specialist Dyslexia Teacher Assessor for every school, they could be providing virtual training for parents on how to support young people with dyslexia at home, which is critically missing right now.
4. Separate from a Specialist Dyslexia Teacher Assessor for every school, the COVID-19 school closures has further demonstrated the need for the mainstreaming of laptops for pupils. Generally, this would help young people with dyslexia achieve their potential by giving them access to the assistive technology that is so vital. However, in situations like our current one, it would also reduce the additional barriers faced by young people with dyslexia from disadvantaged groups for the reasons discussed earlier.
5. This is reinforced by Dr Helen Ross's research, which says: "Parents were asked what aspects of technology or working practices encountered during 'lockdown' that they would like to carry through post-closures. A significant theme, arising here was that access to ICT, internet and flexibility were key elements of SEND provision that should be carried forwards. Assistive technology, such as text-to-speech, cameras, and laptops was suggested to mitigate literacy difficulties so that students can work independently. Parents also felt that internet access, online activities/tasks and work submission would be beneficial to their children, 'as this is getting them used to how things work "in the real world".'"⁵

⁵ The COVID-19 School Closures: Effects on Learning and Teaching for Students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, Dr Helen Ross, May 2020

Conclusion

1. As we have outlined, all young people with dyslexia have been disproportionately hard hit by the COVID-19 school closures. Those from disadvantaged groups have been hit hardest.
2. Yet, the Department has done little to address this. In practice, parents have often been left filling the gap for children with dyslexia.
3. Almost all parents of young people with dyslexia are at a major disadvantage with support for their children's dyslexia, as identified by research carried out in 2019 for the APPG for Dyslexia and other SpLDs which found that 95 percent of parents feel they lacked the skills and knowledge to support their dyslexic child.⁶
4. However, those with the financial means to provide appropriate IT, particularly laptops and broadband internet, assistive technology, and private specialist support to for their child with dyslexia, are more able to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 school closure on their education.
5. Young people with dyslexia, despite dyslexia having no impact on underlying ability, were already at a major disadvantage versus their non-dyslexic peers:
6. A student with dyslexia or another SpLD is twice as likely to fail to achieve a grade 4 or above in English and maths at GCSE.⁷
7. Dyslexia rates among university students are just 5 percent compared to 10 to 15 percent in the general population.⁸

⁶ Research developed for the APPG for Dyslexia and other SpLDs. Distributed through social media (Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn). Over 1,300 responses were received. Survey participants were self-selecting and in addition to answering short, closed questions relating to their experiences of dyslexia, they were also able to write open-ended comments giving more detail, in their own words - in excess of 2,500 comments were received. The survey ran between 7 February 2019 and 18 March 2019.

⁷ In 2017/18, 70.6 percent of children without an identified SEN secured grade 4 or above in maths and English GCSE. Yet, this figure falls to just 35 percent for pupil identified as having an SpLD. Research by Angela Thompson, PhD student, Coventry University (secondary research of DfE data).

⁸ Based on UCAS data and analysis showing that in 2018 241,585 young people gained a place at university. Currently the 5 percent of HE students are dyslexic (Academic Attainment in Students with Dyslexia in Distance Education,

8. A student with dyslexia is three and a half times more likely to be temporarily or permanently excluded⁹ and youth offending institutes have dyslexia rates between 31 and 56 percent.¹⁰
9. Education is likely to be disrupted for the foreseeable future and as young people with dyslexia are likely to have further to go than their non-dyslexia peers to catch up following the disruption to education from the COVID-19 school closures, for the reason we have outlined.
10. If the Department does not wish for young people with dyslexia, particularly those from disadvantaged groups, to fall further behind their non-dyslexia peers, it is imperative that they invest in ensuring all young people with dyslexia have appropriate IT and assistive technology, and parents are given access to the training they need to be able support their child's dyslexia at home.

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2015, John T. E. Richardson) versus ten to 15 percent in the general population (British Dyslexia Association, 2019).

⁹ Timpson Review of School Exclusions, 2019

¹⁰ 52 percent, Morgan, 1997. 40-50 percent, Klein, 1998. 31 percent, Davies and Byatt, 1998. 31 percent, Alm and Andersson, 1997. 41 percent, Jensen et al, 2000. 50 percent, Kirk and Reid, 2001. 50 percent, Svensson, Lundberg and Jacobson, 2001. 56 percent, BDA, 2004