

**Opening Statement by Chime to the Joint Committee on Education, Further Education, Research, Innovation and Science Committee, July 4<sup>th</sup> 2023.**

Thank you to the Committee members for organising this session on the education needs of children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing and for extending an invitation to Chime to present to you on this important subject.

Chime is pleased to have the opportunity to highlight what for us is a key issue – the significant gap between how Deaf and Hard of Hearing children are doing in our schools compared to their hearing peers of similar ability.

We in Chime suspect that the gap is in fact widening, but we don't know this for sure, because information on educational attainment is not being published. We would like to have your support in having this information made publicly available, so that we can see exactly what the educational attainment gap is, and then agree what we need to do to close it.

Let me start with some facts that we do know. According to the National Council for Special Education in 2021 there were 5,391 Deaf and Hard of Hearing children supported by Visiting Teachers of the Deaf. The majority are enrolled in mainstream schools, with 170 students currently enrolled in the two Deaf Schools.

In the first instance it is crucial to understand that being deaf or having a hearing loss is not in any way an impediment to learning. Rather it is the environment that creates barriers to learning: lack of support for parents; lack of training for teachers; and low expectations amongst professionals, to name but a few.

Chime fully endorses the NCSE's goal for the education of Deaf and Hard of Hearing children as outlined in the Council's policy advice paper of 2011. The Council stated that the goal should be that they "graduate from school with levels of educational attainment that are on a par with their hearing peers of similar ability."

However, in the intervening period neither the Department nor the Council have produced any evidence to indicate if this goal is being

realised. That is why in November last year Chime met with the Minister for Special Education and asserted that there is an immediate need to publish information on the levels of educational attainment for Deaf and Hard of Hearing children. We know that the NCSE already has this information – for example, Visiting Teachers of the Deaf receive the results of standardised tests of children on their caseloads – but it is not being collated to create a national report to determine the extent to which the NCSE’s goal for these children is being achieved.

In reality we suspect that there is a significant gap between how Deaf and Hard of Hearing children are doing in our schools both in terms of their own academic potential and in respect of their hearing peers of similar ability. We also have reason to believe that the gap is growing instead of narrowing.

In the UK where they publish this information, the gap between the attainment of Deaf and Hard of Hearing children and their hearing peers is roughly one grade per subject. The gap in Ireland may be even greater, as Deaf and Hard of Hearing children in the UK seem to receive greater support than their counterparts in Ireland.

For example, the Visiting Teacher service is widely recognised as a vital support to parents, children and classroom teachers. Chime has analysed the numbers of Visiting Teachers in both jurisdictions based on population ratios, and the capacity of the Visiting Teacher service in Ireland is currently at 60% of the service in England. Chime also believes that Teachers of the Deaf in the UK, i.e. teachers primarily involved teaching Deaf and Hard of Hearing students, are much more likely to have a post graduate qualification in Deaf Education than their counterparts here in Ireland.

Furthermore, we also have reason to believe that the gap may in fact be growing, as Deaf and Hard of Hearing children may be receiving even less special educational support than previously. Since the introduction of the new Special Education Teacher Allocation model in 2017, many parents have been telling us that their Deaf and Hard of Hearing children are receiving less support than before. We raised this matter directly with the Minister, and queried how the principle that the child with the greatest level of special educational need receives the greatest level of support is actually being applied in schools.

Until we begin to collate a real-time picture of how our Deaf and Hard of Hearing children are achieving in our schools, we believe they are increasingly less likely to get the support they need and deserve.

There are other issues relevant to this discussion: teacher-training in Deaf Education; ISL competency amongst Teachers of the Deaf and Visiting Teachers; access to assistive technology outside schools; huge waiting lists for services; a completely broken ISL Home Tuition scheme which throws all the responsibility onto parents; low participation rates in Third Level education; – all of which fall well short of what is required.

On a positive note we welcome the new teacher training course delivered through ISL which will have its first Deaf primary school teacher graduates this year – a huge boost for Deaf Education in this country. We also welcome the new ISL in-school support scheme – though we are concerned at the pace and manner in which it is being implemented.

There is also the opportunity for some quick and easy wins: for example, assistive technology known as ‘personal FM systems’ and traditionally seen as educational technology for use in schools, should be made available to families of young children from the age of 6 months onwards. This could make a positive difference to the learning opportunities for many young children, enhancing key areas of development such as language and social skills.

In summary, it is fair to say that today we have more questions than answers. The first step should be to establish how well are Deaf and Hard of Hearing children learning in our schools today by collating and publishing educational outcomes. This will enable all stakeholders to have a more informed view of where we are and what we need to do to improve. Your support to help achieve this would be most welcome.

Thank you