

Deaf Children and Young People Debate Transcript
Thursday 17 October 2013

3.17 pm

Sir Malcolm Bruce (Gordon) (LD): I beg to move, That this House recognises the importance of services for deaf children and young people and acknowledges the wide attainment gap; further recognises that communications support for deaf children and their parents is vital for social development and educational progress; acknowledges that the Government has stated there is an expectation that funding for vulnerable learners is protected, but is concerned about recent evidence uncovered by the National Deaf Children's Society which shows that in 2013-14 over a third of local authorities plan to cut education services for deaf children; urges the Government to take steps to hold local authorities to account and support parents in doing so, including by asking Ofsted to inspect these vital services, improving access to communication support including sign language, and strengthening the Children and Families Bill currently before Parliament; and further urges the Government to deliver and implement reform of special educational needs.

It is a particular pleasure to be launching this debate under your chairmanship, Madam Deputy Speaker, having nominated you for the post. I know that you will conduct it with the usual good humour and common sense that is your characteristic, and I will do my best to respond in a similar fashion to any strictures you may impose on me.

I am particularly pleased to have the opportunity to launch this debate. I am grateful to 79 Members of the House who supported the call for us to debate this important subject, and to the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to it. I have to declare an interest, in that I am a vice-president of the National Deaf Children's Society and of Action on Hearing Loss, and I chair the all-party group on deafness. I can also declare a personal interest, as I have a deaf daughter. She is now grown up, but she was six when I was elected to the House, so throughout my time here, and for some time before, issues relating to deaf adults and deaf children have been of paramount concern to me.

I requested today's debate because I am concerned that support for deaf children is being cut at a time when they need more, not less, support. Having campaigned on these issues for such a long time, I remain frustrated that this country does not support deaf people as well as I believe it should and as well as some other countries do. Ten years ago, I produced a report for the Council of Europe on sign languages. I secured support from the Parliamentary Assembly for legal recognition of sign languages across Europe; sadly, the Committee of Ministers never acted on it.

I still feel that we need to ensure that deaf children get the help they need, particularly in terms of communication support. More than 50,000 people have signed a petition calling on the Government to act on the issue and many MPs have signed the motion and shown support for the debate. There is considerable strength of interest in and support for the subject. The debate is being closely watched by deaf people and their families across the country and is being actively monitored in the Twittersphere by those who are most directly affected.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Gentleman and I knew Jack Ashley, who then became Lord Ashley, very well and we remember his campaigning fervour and what a wonderful person he was. He was an exemplar—they said that a deaf person could not cope in this Chamber, but he showed that he could. I wanted to get his name on the record today, because we both worked with him and admired him greatly.

Sir Malcolm Bruce: I absolutely acknowledge that. Jack Ashley was the honorary president of the all-party group and, having at first been sceptical about setting up a discrete group for deaf people, he actively supported it once it was created. That is a key part of this debate. I accept that all kinds of children have special educational needs and have no doubt that the Minister will allude to Government policy on special educational needs, but I hope that he will also accept that deaf children have specific needs that need to be articulated expressly in policy and not just swept up in general issues of special needs and disability.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Before the right hon. Gentleman moves away from the subject of sign language, is he aware of the problems faced by people such as my constituent Rachel Goswell? She has a profoundly deaf son, Jesse, and the only way of communicating with him will be to learn sign language herself. There is no support locally for parents to learn sign language. Does he agree that that and the training of educationalists at a local level cannot be left to a postcode lottery? There must be national guidelines so that everyone in England gets the same level of support.

Sir Malcolm Bruce: I am extremely grateful for that intervention, because my speech will make that point powerfully. There has been some progress from the previous and present Governments, but there has not yet been enough. That is a powerful point that I hope the Minister and other Ministers will take on board.

It is estimated that there are 45,000 deaf children in the UK, but no one actually knows how many there are. There is no systematic collection of statistics or data on deaf children, and that is a problem in itself. As we increasingly mainstream deaf children, they become less visible and can also be socially isolated, particularly if they are the only deaf child in the school. There is evidence that they might be bullied, they might suffer depression and not all of them thrive. I am not against mainstreaming in principle, but I believe that some profoundly and severely deaf children will make better progress in a school resourced properly and dedicated to their needs. Schools such as Heathlands in St Albans and Frank Barnes, which serves London, offer impressive education for deaf children but such schools are not found everywhere in the country.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way and commend him for securing this important debate. I am pleased to say that in Warwickshire there have been no reductions in services for deaf children, but there are great difficulties in finding qualified teachers to fill vacant posts. Does my right hon. Friend agree that one issue we need to resolve is how to ensure that we train the next generation of specialist teachers for deaf children?

Sir Malcolm Bruce: I absolutely do. The Government could take a number of measures that would help to lead to a market and a demand that would ensure that such teachers were trained and resourced. That is a problem. Too often, children are being taught by

people who are inadequately qualified in such specialist teaching, not because the local authority does not want to employ qualified teachers but because they are not available.

Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, who is being very generous in giving way. Does he agree that the forthcoming Bill, which envisages a nought-to-25 process, will be more inclusive for families and administratively less cumbersome and burdensome? That can only be a good thing.

Sir Malcolm Bruce (Gordon) (LD): I am sure that the Minister will make clear the initiatives that the Government have taken, many of which I commend; they are helpful. I am not here to criticise the Government for what they are doing, but I think that more could be done, and I hope that we can press the Government to consider what that might be.

Ninety per cent. of deaf children are born to hearing parents who, when they are confronted, as I was, with the knowledge that their child is profoundly deaf, often have no knowledge of, or contact with, the deaf community. I pay tribute to the National Deaf Children's Society, which provides excellent support for people when that happens to them.

Eighty per cent. of deaf children are now being educated in mainstream schools, which is different from the time when my daughter was educated, and they may be the only deaf child in that school. The question that has to be asked is how well deaf children are achieving. Government figures suggest that only 37% of deaf children achieved five good GCSEs last year. That is a dismally low, indeed a shameful, figure because it compares with 69% for hearing children. Let us be clear that deafness is not in itself a learning disability. There is no reason why the majority of deaf children should not achieve the same as other children, provided that they get the right specialist support.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Not only is the difference in achievement between children with hearing problems and their peers shocking but it is getting worse. That figure of 37% was down from 40% the year before. So things are going in the wrong direction. The right hon. Gentleman may also be aware that it is estimated that 80% of teachers of deaf children are over 50. So we shall have a serious recruitment problem if we do not do something about this quickly.

Sir Malcolm Bruce: That is right. I have been shown local authority adverts for teachers of deaf children that did not require full capacity in sign language. In some circumstances, the sign language of the children is better than that of the teacher, and that cannot be satisfactory.

Things are getting worse in many areas. The NDCS has carried out a survey that shows that 29% of local authorities are cutting services for deaf children and a further 25% have identified that there is a risk of cuts. Of course we are living in a time of spending restraint, but that should not impact on people who have such real need and are so vulnerable. The Government have made it clear that they want to maintain support for vulnerable learners, but if it is not happening we have to ask the Government what more they can do to ensure that cuts do not happen and that standards are maintained. We have to work out what can be done to maintain support for deaf children, and we should have aspirations to do a lot better.

One suggestion is that Ofsted should be required to inspect services for deaf children. When we consider how much scrutiny mainstream teachers in schools are subject to by Ofsted, many people tell me that they are surprised that teachers of the deaf and specialist support services are subject to virtually no such oversight. That sends a signal that deaf education is less important than mainstream.

Mr Michael McCann (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (Lab): Does the right hon. Gentleman think that the reason the Government do not want to examine these issues is that the poor standard of teachers for the deaf would be exposed and there would rightly be a public scandal?

Sir Malcolm Bruce: That is a problem of government, I suppose. I would like to believe that Governments in the end will say, "We need data and if the data show that we are not up to the mark, even if we cannot solve the problem overnight, we will at least embark on a strategy to do something about it." So it is not a good excuse not to inspect services. I should be interested to hear from the Minister whether the Government would consider giving Ofsted a specific responsibility.

Ofsted did a report on communication last year, looking at three local authorities that had established best practice. That was interesting, but it did not tell us much about the other 149 authorities that it had not studied. So we do not know and we need to know. If there is a recognition that people are going to be scrutinised, that gets the Government off the hook to some extent because it means that the authorities must respond to that scrutiny. Every tier of government that has a responsibility must accept its share of responsibility. I hope the Government will consider that as a practical suggestion. Communication support is at the heart of what deaf children and their families need. I know that from personal experience. I have very poor sign language. I did go on a course but I found it very difficult. It is a language and I had difficulty keeping up with it. I try where I can. I notice that every time I am in the company of deaf people—which, because of my interest, I very often am—the transformation of that relationship by the sheer appearance of an interpreter is phenomenal. Therefore I understand absolutely why communication support is so valuable. As one blind person said to me, "I would prefer to be blind than deaf because being blind cuts me off from things, but being deaf would cut me off from people and I would find that far worse." That is what people need to understand—the social isolation resulting from the lack of communication support. I tabled a private Member's Bill which notionally has its Second Reading next Friday. It identifies the areas of communication support that the deaf community is looking for, and it identifies the need to ensure that we can develop sign language support for them. The point has been made that many families are paying thousands of pounds of their own money for sign language education—if they can find the teachers—so that they can communicate with their children. I do not believe that that is acceptable.

When I undertook a report for the Council of Europe, I discovered that the policies in Scandinavia meant that interpreters were readily available and that in most Scandinavian countries as soon as a child was diagnosed as deaf, free tuition in sign language was offered to the child and their family. I commend that as a practice that should be available to people in this country.

Stephen Phillips (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): The reason that is so important, as the right hon. Gentleman will know, is that any form of communication in early years is critical to the life outcomes of children later in their life. Does he therefore

agree that this is something that the Government should be looking at very hard indeed?

Sir Malcolm Bruce: Indeed. The number of deaf children has diminished in recent years and in some ways that is a good thing. We have rubella vaccination and other measures, but deafness will not be eliminated. Congenital deafness or unexplained deafness in newborn children happens, and diseases such as meningitis can lead to deafness in infancy, so there will always be some deaf people in our community and they need to be adequately supported.

Although cochlear implants have made an impressive contribution, they are not a cure. There is evidence now of children who were given cochlear implants 15 years ago not coping brilliantly in the mainstream, as people had hoped. They are still deaf; they just have a very sophisticated hearing aid. We went through a generation assuming that we had solved the problem. We have not. We have made a contribution to alleviating it, which is not the same thing.

I commend the previous Government and the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Mr Brown), who in response to a Prime Minister's question, found resources within the Department for Education to set up a pilot project called I-Sign which ran in Devon and Merseyside to provide support to deaf parents and children, and led to the creation of more sign language interpreters and a very much stronger support network in those two areas. That pilot was a success and the present Prime Minister has acknowledged that fact, but the scheme has not yet been rolled out nationally. When he responds, I am sure the Minister will report that the Government have taken it forward, which I welcome, but I would love to believe that we will get to a point where that is the national standard.

The step change in sign language that we need could be driven by technical innovations. The Minister responsible for communications in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport has been actively engaged with the telecommunications industry to try to develop video relay services. BT and, this week Sky, announced that sign language-using customers wishing to communicate with Sky or with BT can do so using a video relay service. Most deaf people I know who talk about video relay services say, "I don't want a video relay service to talk to BT. I want a video relay service to talk to my mum, my boss or other people." That system is established right across America, and it is hugely successful. I hope that we can find a way to achieve that, because it would make a huge contribution to communication. It would also lead to a rapid expansion in the provision of sign language interpreters, because they would have a reliable source of income. I commend the Government for what they have done so far but urge them to come up with a definitive solution that will make the difference.

Our attitudes towards sign language communication and spoken language communication are quite different. The Department for Work and Pensions gave sign language legal recognition, or definition, 10 years ago, which was hailed as a breakthrough, but it is not recognised across government, so that is another challenge for the Government. They recognise Cornish, Welsh and Gaelic, which receive huge resources, yet British sign language, which is an indigenous, created language—indeed, sign language itself was invented in Scotland—is not supported. For some people it is their only language. I know of no Welsh or Gaelic speakers—I do not know that there are any Cornish speakers—who do not also speak English, but there are sign

language users who do not communicate in English. We do not support them in the same way we support people who use minority spoken languages. Baroness Howe of Idlicote has tabled an amendment to the Children and Families Bill to try to bring such support forward, so the issue might come back to this House.

I know that the Minister has done some extremely good work and have heard many people in the industry commend him strongly for it. However, like everybody else, he is a cog in a machine that cannot always deliver everything we want as fast as we want it and across the piece. I hope that he will tell us what the Government are doing. I do not expect him to say, “Yes, of course we will adopt all those things”, but we do want champions in the Government who are prepared to drive them forward and who recognise that it is simply not right to leave out a whole section of the community who have real and identifiable needs for which there are practical solutions, not all of which cost a huge amount of money, but which could transform their life attainment. They could also provide economic benefits, because the vast majority of deaf people either cannot get a job or, when they get into the jobs market, get one well below their skills and standards, so they are inevitably a drain on the community. They also suffer a much higher proportion of mental illness. Supporting them will have an economic benefit as well as improving the quality of their lives.

I have spent 30 years campaigning in this House. In many ways I feel frustrated at how little we have achieved. I acknowledge the steps that have been taken, but when I remember what I saw in Finland and Sweden and compare it with what I see in this country, it seems a real shame that the United Kingdom cannot do more to transform the lives of deaf people in our country.

We had been pioneers in this regard. Donaldson’s school in Edinburgh led the way in developing sign language. The ironic twist—this is my final point—is that when Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet came from America to find out how to set up a school to teach deaf children in Boston, the Donaldson’s institute said that it was not prepared to share its teaching mechanism with him. In despair, he found that there was a seminary in Paris teaching deaf children. He ended up taking a squad of teachers from Paris to American, which is why American deaf people use a sign language based on French sign language, rather than British sign language. We invented sign language, but we have not always led the way in innovating and establishing it.

I challenge this Government, and any Government who come after them, to say, “We will no longer leave deaf people behind. We can transform their lives.” The resources are not great and the mechanisms are clearly understood, so let us just do it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dawn Primarolo): Order. We are short of time this afternoon, as Members will be aware. The debate has to finish by 5 o’clock. I will not impose a time limit at this stage but will wait to see how we proceed. I ask Members not to make long speeches. Hopefully they will be about eight minutes long, but 10 minutes is the maximum, including interventions. I hope that everybody will be able to participate in this important debate.

Mr Michael McCann (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (Lab): I have quite a lot to say, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I will try to bear in mind the time constraints.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Gordon (Sir Malcolm Bruce) on bringing this debate to the Chamber. I declare a personal interest, because my three siblings—my younger brother, Brian, and my two younger sisters, Clare and Delia—are profoundly deaf. Equality is a word that we often bandy about in this House, but deaf people in the United Kingdom have never had equality in education. Progress has been made thanks to deafness campaigners such as my parents, Bridget and Charles McCann—the self-same parents the right hon. Gentleman mentioned who suddenly had a deaf child and did not get any access to services to support them. However, the fight goes on. The motion highlights the fact that we still have much work to do, with the fear and danger that local authorities might cut back on services for deaf children and young people. The National Deaf Children's Society has evidence to suggest that education services for deaf people might be cut. We should not be talking about cuts; if we genuinely seek to bring about equality for deaf people, services must be increased.

Colleagues will have noticed my Scottish accent and the fact that I represent a seat in Scotland that some people have difficulty in pronouncing, particularly the last part. I entered this debate also to flag up the fact that Scotland is a year behind the cuts and austerity measures that have been brought in for local government, although I do not mention that in a party political sense. The Prime Minister agreed with the First Minister, Alex Salmond, that Scotland would retain its budget in 2010, so we are a year behind the curve. There is already speculation in Scotland about local government services being cut, and I suspect that services to deaf children and young people are in danger. That is the relevance of my participation in this debate.

I will not be ungenerous in suggesting that we have not made some progress in the past 40 years. Let me tell the House about my experience with my brothers and sisters. I remember the grey bus arriving in front of our house in East Kilbride. On the bus were children with every disability one could think of—physical disabilities, physical and mental disabilities, or deaf-blindness. The amalgamation of challenges presented by those children with disabilities led to two things. First, it dumbed down education. At the school my brother and sisters went to, the education was carried out at the lowest common denominator instead of challenging the kids to do the best they could.

Secondly, there was the stigma. As you can imagine, children can be cruel. As the elder brother, I ended up with a few second prizes in the pugilism stakes. If your brother's and sisters' honour is criticised in some way, or they are taunted by other children, then you step in and defend them. Yes, children can be cruel, but we should remember that adults—the educationists of the time—created the system that enabled them to be so. The inequality of 40 years ago was palpable. Profoundly deaf children were not allowed to sign. The right hon. Member for Gordon talked about British sign language. We made up our own sign language in the house, because there was no formal language to communicate in. Believe it or not, my brother was forced to sit with his hands behind his back in the classroom, unable to communicate, despite the fact that he was profoundly deaf. Forty years ago, deaf children had no access to the curriculum that I had as a hearing child. That meant that their ability to learn was stifled. Bright young deaf children were consigned to the dustbin on the day and hour they first entered their primary school.

I am glad that my brother and sisters have done very well in their adult lives, mainly because of my parents' refusal to take no for an answer. They refused to take on board

what the educationists of the time said was good for such children. The perceived wisdom of the day was that people listened to the educationists. Hearing parents who did not know about deafness would take the word of the people who were professional and allegedly knew more than they did. The less vigorous parents, who were not prepared to campaign like my parents, took the educationalists' word and ultimately their children suffered and did not get anywhere near the aspirations achieved by my brother and sisters. However, they have fallen foul of many of the problems mentioned by the right hon. Gentleman, including mental health issues and the inability to get employment. I often wonder what my brother and sisters could have achieved—even though they have achieved a lot—had they had access to the same education opportunities as me.

Julie Hilling (Bolton West) (Lab): Thomasson Memorial school, an excellent primary school for deaf children and children with hearing difficulties, is located in my constituency. Does my hon. Friend agree that parents and children should be able to choose whether to attend a specialist school for children with disabilities or a mainstream school? The needs of the child should be paramount in any educationalist's decision about the best education for them.

Mr McCann: I agree. Choice is important and I will discuss it later. If parents want their child to attend a hearing school, they must be supported in that choice. Moreover, if parents want their child to attend a specialist school, they should not just be lumped in a classroom with a bunch of other children, because that will drag them down.

Time is of the essence. I will cut a couple of pages of what I was going to say; the right hon. Member for Gordon has already mentioned the statistics on deaf people, so I need not rehearse them again. We should recognise that there are many shades between hearing and deafness: some have lost a little hearing while others lose it a little later in life, and on the other side of the spectrum are those who are profoundly deaf. With the greatest respect to the tribute paid to Jack Ashley earlier, we should remember that he became deaf and was not born deaf, and that there is a world of difference for people who have never heard the spoken word.

The key issue is British sign language, the officially recognised language for the deaf. As the right hon. Gentleman has said, it is diverse and colourful and as finessed as any other language in the world. In fact, Members may be interested to know that every person's sign name is unique. I could not possibly show the House some of the signs that have been made for my relatives over the years, because they cannot be recorded in *Hansard*, but they would make Members chuckle.

In the world of education, the gatekeepers—the educationalists—know better, or so they think. Members may be surprised or even shocked to learn that teachers of the deaf are expected to have only BSL level 3 as a qualification. However, as the right hon. Gentleman has said, the fact that there is such a dearth of talent in this field means that some get jobs as teachers of the deaf and are labelled as such even though they have skills only at BSL level 2. It should be an aspiration, and I hope the Minister will address that issue in his response. We should raise the standards for teachers of the deaf and ensure that the right quality of individual is teaching our deaf children. I have thought about the best way to describe the situation. It is like asking someone who has just failed their driving test to become a driving instructor: they know a little, but they are not competent and should not be allowed to drive on their own.

That is a practical example by way of analogy, but I have another one. My brother Brian has five deaf children who all go to school. His eldest daughter, Monika, is 12 years old and has more advanced communication skills than her teachers. They have BSL level 2 and she is way above that at level 7 or 8, perhaps even higher. As she progresses through high school she will meet challenges and become a frustrated child unable to fulfil her potential, because her teachers are not able to communicate with her properly. In primary education and at high school, the quality of the teacher must rise with the child. The teacher must always be ahead of the child and have far advanced communication skills so that the child does not feel frustrated. When they sign something to the teacher in British sign language, the teacher must understand what the problem is and how to communicate with them. Sadly, the children in my family have become frustrated on many occasions because they are bright, sparky kids who have not always had the opportunity to be educated properly.

The NDCS has uncovered some circumstantial evidence, but local authorities are reluctant to disclose information about deaf education. A hypothesis for that might be that they do not want the figures to be revealed. Outrageously, Ofsted does not inspect services for the deaf routinely, as the right hon. Member for Gordon said. Local authorities are damaging the life chances of young deaf people across the United Kingdom. This debate has provided the opportunity to expose that argument to a wider audience, not only in this House, but across the country.

If there are to be further cuts to local government services, there is a danger that deafness will once again take a back seat and that those who are already vulnerable will be affected. My father once described deafness as a Cinderella disability because nobody can see it. When a child is physically disabled, we do not shirk the responsibility of meeting the costs of the support that they need to participate in the education system. Why is there such a dearth of ambition and support for deaf children? Local government cannot be allowed to attack this Cinderella disability because it thinks that it can get away with it. We must stop paying lip service to equality of opportunity for every child and start providing it.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I support what the right hon. Member for Gordon (Sir Malcolm Bruce) has said in this debate and, as a member of the all-party parliamentary group on deafness, I thank him for his dedicated work as its chair.

I am proud to have a deaf-aware nursery in my constituency, which is based at the New Life church in Congleton. It has been running for 25 years and caters for able children, as well as for children with needs, such as those with deafness or autism, and it will soon have a child with Down's syndrome. For the past five years, it has been managed by Margaret Sanders, a special educational needs co-ordinator with a passion for inclusion who has worked hard to ensure that the nursery goes the extra mile to provide support for deaf children in an extra special way. However, such early-years provision should not only be available when one inspirational individual is backed by committed community support, such as that provided by New Life. The nursery also works closely with specialist organisations such as the teachers of the deaf.

Justine Heathcote, the mother of a profoundly deaf three-year-old girl who attends the nursery, has shared some of her experiences with me. Her daughter was diagnosed as deaf just after birth. It was a traumatic time for the family. Justine says generously that

her family have received excellent support and care from the nursery and the local authority. Crucially, that included her daughter being given a teacher of the deaf immediately. I ask the Minister to do all that he can to ensure that that always happens. A family must be given the appropriate support straight away, either at birth or on diagnosis. I have heard that in some cases it takes 10 years from when hearing starts to deteriorate before a clear diagnosis is made.

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): Does my hon. Friend welcome the measures in the Children and Families Bill, as I do, to create care plans for people that go from nought to 24 years of age?

Fiona Bruce: I very much welcome that, because it is crucial that families can plan ahead from the earliest possible moment of childhood. I was greatly encouraged to hear from Justine that her daughter got such excellent support, but I am aware that that is not universally available across the country. I ask the Minister to make an assessment of the varying standard of support across the country. One small example, which is important for Justine's family, concerns her daughter's hearing aids, which require four batteries a day. When they run out, Justine has a one-hour round trip to a hospital to collect them, yet in a neighbouring area, rechargeable batteries for hearing aids are available.

Another difficulty for some families concerns getting a statement of educational needs for their child. One highly experienced teacher of the deaf, Liz Gwynn, has spent many years liaising with local authorities. She told me—quite bluntly—that the reason for the delay or lack of statement is often that, “local authorities don't want to commit to the financial implications of a Statement.” That cannot be right.

The one-to-one support provided by a teacher of the deaf in my council of Cheshire East is greatly appreciated, but it amounts to only one hour a week. Ideally, every deaf child and their family needs much more support and time. A teacher of the deaf plays a critical role in a child's development because they advise on whether the child is accessing the curriculum properly and adequately, on that child's language development and how they are hearing through hearing aids or cochlear implants, and on whether they need a radio aid to help them. Such teachers can act as an intermediary between the child or family and the school, in addition to helping set targets for development and providing strategies and ideas for accessing lessons. All hon. Members will agree that that cannot be done in one hour a week.

In Cheshire East there is a ratio of one teacher of the deaf to every 45 children—a phenomenal challenge for those teachers. I struggle to see how a teacher of the deaf can support that number of children and their families, let alone even more, yet I understand that in some parts of the country there is even less support for deaf children. The availability of care for deaf children and young people should not be a postcode lottery. The National Deaf Children's Society reports that some families with a deaf child are fighting that issue by moving to a different area, which is surely unacceptable. There are examples of good practice and expertise across the country, and better sharing of support across local authorities and support networks would be beneficial. I would be grateful if the Minister would tell the House whether there are any plans to share best practice across authorities and promote a more collaborative approach.

The exemplary nursery in my constituency, to which I referred, aims to maximise the individual potential of each child, but it is placed in a dilemma. When a child who has received that much-needed support—designed to raise their attainment levels in the early years to those of their non-deaf peers—moves to primary school, they are assessed. If they are assessed to be above a certain level, any one-to-one support that the child previously received, or which they may need in future, is withdrawn, and they begin primary school without it. What should the nursery do? Should it support the child to develop to the maximum level possible and risk that one-to-one support being withdrawn when they go to primary school? Withdrawal of such support would undoubtedly result in the child falling back and not continuing to flourish to the same degree that they need and for which the nursery has given them a head start. If we believe that every child should have the opportunity to develop to their fullest potential, surely that must be the case for the more vulnerable children in our society.

If a parent wants their child to go to a mainstream school in later years, it is crucial for support to be established at the start and to continue throughout the child's early years. Liz Gwynn explains:

“In a big class with a ratio of 15 pupils to one staff member, or even thirty to one, it is very easy for a deaf child to be overlooked, especially if they aren't a behavioural issue. They can appear to be understanding, but when questioned often haven't a clue and get by by copying what others are doing.”

Such a situation can result in low self-esteem and lack of confidence. That is the “stolen future” that the National Deaf Children's Society is raising awareness of, and I commend its work with local groups and parents around the country. I encourage the Minister to support those groups and ensure that all families have access to them. Will he review the assessment procedure for deaf children and young people, not just when they enter school, but when they move to another educational establishment for the first time, so as to determine appropriate individual provision for that child or young person? Sign language is critical, yet 81% of parents with deaf children never learn how to fully communicate with their child through that.

Justine, to whom I have referred, says she managed to get funding for level 1, but was unable to get funding for level 2, which she took at her own expense of £400. Level 3, at £1,000, is simply too expensive for the family. Will the Minister consider what duties can be placed on local authorities to provide sign language support for families?

As we have heard, deafness itself is not a learning disability, but we can do so much more to ensure that the attainment of deaf children and young people does not continue to fall worryingly behind that of their non-deaf peers.

4 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I begin by apologising for the fact that I am seeking permission to leave before the end of the debate because I must attend an annual prize-giving in Baverstock school in my constituency tonight. May I take this opportunity, in my first outing in my new role, to pay tribute to the work of my predecessors, my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy)?

I thank the right hon. Member for Gordon (Sir Malcolm Bruce) for the work he has done over his years in the House for deaf children, and for securing this debate. I also thank the hon. Members who have supported him. I found his speech informative and illuminating. I was interested in his points about the use of technology and support for sign language.

This is a Backbench Business Committee debate. Consequently, I intend to be brief. I acknowledge the large number of people who signed the e-petition calling for the protection of specialist deaf services, and that 79 Members pledged support for a debate on the subject. I do not regard myself as an expert on the matter and see the debate as the start of a learning exercise. I have already learned a lot simply by listening to the right hon. Gentleman, my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Mr McCann) and the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce).

When looking at the National Deaf Children's Society material, I was struck by its point that, although deafness is not a learning disability, deaf children underachieve throughout their education. As has been mentioned, as many as 80% of deaf children are in mainstream schools where they might be the only deaf child in attendance, which suggests that we should perhaps look again at the balance between mainstream and specialist schooling. It also suggests that we need to recognise the important role of specialist speech and language services, whether the specialist works directly with the child or assists the school or parents.

I note that an amendment designed to maintain speech and language therapy as special educational provision is proposed to the Children and Families Bill in the other place. It would be good to know that the Government are giving the proposal favourable consideration.

I am a realist on the economic situation and the amount of money we have to spend on any service, so I recognise that there is no magic fund on which the Minister can call, but we need to focus on the available money and how it is spent. Local authorities are not obliged to pass on to schools money for specialist education support service. It occurs to me that this is an area where decisions should be taken in conjunction with parents. It is not enough for a local authority to say, "We've given the money to the schools and we're washing our hands of it." There may be some circumstances where schools are the right people to hold the budget, but there may be others where the local authority, or some other partnership, should play a key part. This is one area where we should not be too quick to diminish the role of local education authorities, and where the case for partnership and collaboration rather than competition between schools is well made. Like others, I have noticed that so far 29% of local authorities have indicated an intention to cut specialist education services. The vast majority of local councils already do not have any specialist social care services for deaf children. This must be extremely worrying for parents of deaf children.

I hope the Minister is minded to look at the National Deaf Children's Society's proposals, particularly that Ofsted should inspect specialist education services for deaf children, that local authorities should be required to publish details of how much is spent on SEN provision and what services are actually available. We must have the data, otherwise we will never comprehend the scope of the issue and the best way to proceed. I would welcome improvements to the code of practice to make it easier for

parents to hold local authorities to account. Parents have a tough enough job as it is. Our role should be to try to make it easier for them I conclude by once again congratulating those who secured the debate and have taken part. I hope that this is an area where the Minister and I can find common ground, put the party politics aside and work together in the interests of deaf children and their parents.

4.7 pm

Annette Brooke (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Sir Malcolm Bruce) on securing the debate and for his contribution, over so many years, to this area of work. I have raised issues about the education of deaf children on many occasions, but this is the first time that I have spoken in a debate concentrated solely on this topic. This is a good opportunity to reinforce the many points raised by the National Deaf Children's Society.

I continue to be saddened that deaf children experience an attainment gap, which is reflected so strongly in GCSE results. About a month ago, I had the pleasure of meeting at party conference a deaf young person called Adam, who was introduced to me by the NDCS. Adam is an extremely bright, confident and articulate deaf young man, and was quickly in charge of the whole meeting. He explained to me clearly that he would not be where he is today without the help of the specialist support services he had received to date. Even with deaf young people such as Adam, we can see the risks of what happens when support does not match their needs and is cut. Adam told me that the support he received in maths was variable because of staff turnover, and that the extra support had been reduced to just once a week. This meant that he was now struggling to pick up some of the complex new words and vocabulary being used and that he was no longer thriving but coping in maths.

Across the country there is too much wasted potential when it comes to deaf children, because too many are not getting the support they need. I share the concerns that the Department's funding protection for vulnerable learners is not always being carried through locally. I also support the NDCS's call for Ofsted to play a greater role in inspecting specialist support services for deaf children.

I hear really positive reports of my local services. Dorset, Bournemouth and Poole operate a long-standing joint arrangement through which specialist support is provided to children with hearing or vision impairment. Dorset is the lead authority, and the outcomes for deaf children locally have generally been good and the feedback from parents and the young people themselves about the work of the service is excellent. I am told that there are no plans to reduce the funding available for specialist provision, which sounds good, but there are concerns about the future. I was contacted by a specialist teacher who told me:

"At the present time we are not a traded service, this means that we can provide support, training, advice and teaching (depending on the child's level of need) to any school in Dorset where there is a pupil attending the school who has a hearing impairment that requires them to wear a hearing aid, who has a cochlear implant or similar hearing device. The school does not have to pay for this directly, which means we can respond to the level of need appropriately. We of course have a set of protocols to follow to ensure that the time given to each individual is proportionate. However, often the pupils with a high level of need (those with a severe to profound hearing loss)

have a great deal of support in school which along with appropriate direction and guidance from our service enables them to make good progress. It is more often (in my experience) those pupils with a mild to moderate hearing loss who are not entitled to additional support in school who find it more difficult to progress and overcome the barriers to their learning. At the present time our service is able to support these pupils also, enabling many of them to 'narrow the gap' and achieve age-related expectations. However, one of the fears for our service in Dorset is that due to financial constraints we may have to become a 'traded service' this would mean that schools may have to buy us in on an hourly rate."

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): The hon. Lady has hit the nail on the head. In this very important area—it is the same with speech therapy—people are reluctant to address some of these needs and concerns because of the lack of money available.

Annette Brooke: I accept the hon. Gentleman's point, but I am flagging up fears about the future, not about what is happening now. If each school had to buy in the service, it would be more difficult to spread it over a larger number of pupils. I think we would still have excellent support in Dorset for those with a statement of educational need or an education health care plan, but many of those with not such severe conditions are not achieving their potential in speech, language and literacy skills. It is important, therefore, not only to consider what is happening now, but to look at what might happen in the future and to ensure that we maintain support for hearing impaired children.

Like other speakers, I want to emphasise the need for good, specialist communication support workers and teachers. It has been many years, but I remember being struck by the fact that many communication support workers—I still call them teaching assistants—had only level 2 qualifications in sign language. It must be difficult for somebody with just a level 2 qualification—an important qualification in its own right—to communicate the technical language of science and maths. I am really concerned about that.

In conclusion, we all want every child to achieve their full potential, and many improvements have been made for children with hearing impairments over the years, but there is more to be done, and we must protect what we are doing well at the moment.

4.14 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Annette Brooke), who has made another thoughtful contribution.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Gordon (Sir Malcolm Bruce) on his leadership. He concluded his remarks with some self-deprecation and self-criticism for the lack of progress over 30 years. That is an indictment of Governments on both sides, not of his role, which has been an honourable one during his time in the House. Indeed, he has again demonstrated that today by securing this debate. We are all grateful to him for the opportunity to contribute. Let me also express appreciation for the National Deaf Children's Society briefing and for constituents who have contacted me about this debate.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe), the shadow Minister, on his first speech in his new role. He showed a clear interest in the subject and a determination to help the Minister, who is highly regarded and comes with great credentials. He has already done a good job in other areas; no less will be expected of him in this one. We are keen to hear what he has to say in concluding, because I am here to seek reassurances from him on the matters that colleagues on both sides of the House have raised.

Many colleagues are aware that I wear two hearing aids. I have a little understanding of what hearing loss is about. I spend most of my time in the Chamber during Prime Minister's questions standing near the Speaker's Chair, because I find the loop system better there. However, using the loop, I miss lots of the witticisms that other colleagues contribute—I know that they are sometimes better than some of the speeches, although fortunately not in this debate—and the whispers, and sometimes people think I am being rude because I do not respond. Hearing aids are great—I thank the audiologists at the Royal London hospital—but they are not perfect.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Mr McCann) and the right hon. Member for Gordon mentioned relatives and their personal experience. My experience—I suffered industrial injury in the London fire brigade, which caused damage to my hearing—is trivial compared with that of children who were born with hearing loss or born deaf. Given the powerful speeches that we have heard so far, and given the personal experience of those two families in particular, I cannot imagine how much more difficult it is for those children to come to terms with their predicament. I will come back to that point later, I hope briefly.

I am keen to hear what the Minister has to say, because we are seeking reassurances today. The two most disturbing stats I have read in the NDCS briefing, which have been mentioned by other hon. Members, concern exam passes and parental communication. As colleagues have said—including my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow and the right hon. Member for Gordon, who have personal family experience—we are not talking about kids who have not got ability, yet only 37% of deaf children achieve five GCSEs, which was down last year from 40% in 2011. That is an indictment of the education system and of all of us for allowing it to happen. The NDCS briefing also said:

“Research suggests that 40% of deaf children experience mental health problems compared to 25% of other children.”

That is a shocking statistic, but it is in no shape or form surprising, given what those children have to go through.

The other point from the NDCS briefing that I found shocking was that 81% of parents with deaf children never learn how to communicate fully with their child, which is mostly down to costs. The briefing says that it costs several hundred pounds to learn to sign—I learnt to sign the alphabet when I was young, but it is quite a long way from that to messaging by letter—but the right hon. Member for Gordon said that it now costs thousands of pounds. That is a real deterrent to ordinary families.

In my borough of Tower Hamlets, I have met children with hearing impairments and deaf children, along with their teachers, in a variety of schools. I commend all that they

do in Tower Hamlets. It is clear from the NDCS briefing that it performs a little better than many local authorities. However, the NDCS report asks for three things—they have already been mentioned, so I will not labour them, because many colleagues still want to speak and obviously the Minister's speech is important to us all. The first of the three recommendations is to

“Ask Ofsted to inspect specialist education services for deaf children.”

That does not happen, so it is key recommendation No. 1. The second is to improve the offer made by local councils by providing accurate data. If we are not measuring what is happening and do not have a proper understanding, how can we identify the nature of the problem and then put in place the remedies, which might be obvious in many instances? I should be most interested to hear what the Minister has to say about that.

The third recommendation is that

“deaf children get the basic support they need”, which several colleagues have mentioned.

I should have mentioned my appreciation for the House authorities and the technicians for what they do in the House through the loop service, which is of great assistance to all who use hearing aids. I am very pleased about this debate being called and I would like to congratulate the right hon. Member for Gordon again on securing and leading it. I have enjoyed the speeches so far and I very much look forward to hearing from the Minister how the Government intend to implement recommendations and policies to improve the situation for children and young people who are in this predicament.

4.20 pm

Mr Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), who, by talking about his own personal experiences of hearing loss, brings an extra dimension to the debate. We have encountered that time and again when contributions deal with local examples as well as national issues.

I believe it is important to focus on children and young people with the disability of hearing loss. As vice-chair of the all-party group on speech and language difficulties, I know that there are wider issues relating to the development of those services, but it is important to remember that we are talking today about a particular cohort—a cohort about which my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Sir Malcolm Bruce) spoke so powerfully in his opening speech. I pay warm tribute to him for securing this debate. I was happy to support it as part of his bid to the Backbench Business Committee.

As has been rightly said, deafness is not a learning disability, but it can be a real barrier to learning for the thousands of children and young people who live with it every day. Let us not forget the families of those young people who are and should be involved in the planning of services.

What I thought was particularly interesting in the helpful briefing from the National Deaf Children's Society was the issue of working out the numbers of children and young people with hearing loss. The estimate is over 45,000, but if we look at the official figures, the position becomes very confusing, to say the least. The school census records 16,000 children formally identified as having a hearing loss special educational need. The way that is categorised, however, can vary from school to school, so the

figure is not reliable. There clearly needs to be far greater co-ordination of these numbers.

Some of the NDCS suggestions are worthy of consideration by the Minister—for example, whether schools and local authorities should be requested to record in the school census whether the child has a disability as well as a formally identified special educational need; and whether there is a better way of capturing whether a child has a sensory impairment by looking at the child's unique health identifier or extending that to education and social care as well. That chimes very well with the education, health and care plan approach that is central to the welcome Children and Families Bill, currently proceeding in the other place. The Minister and I have enjoyed many debates in Committee on that and other issues, including on the strength and quality of the local offer that will form the heart of accountability for parents and children and young people with special educational needs. Clearly, more needs to be done properly to identify the need in the first place.

Let us look at a positive example of a local authority that is doing much to address some of the issues identified today. I refer to my own local authority of Swindon, which has two special resource provisions for primary and for secondary education. One commissioned body providing services is based at Red Oaks primary school, while the secondary provision is based at the Ridgeway school. I know that school very well from my days as a governor, and from my many visits to the special resource provision for hearing-impaired pupils. I pay warm tribute to the staff, pupils and parents who are involved in those two facilities, and also to the outreach work done by both facilities in the wider educational community in the borough. The budget in Swindon for special provision and outreach services is just over £900,000, which is spent on interventions that allow young people with hearing loss to integrate properly with others, and to have the opportunities that children who have hearing take for granted.

Over the last year, the local authority has been working with Isambard secondary and Red Oaks primary schools to plan for better British sign language provision at secondary level. With the help of the National Deaf Children's Society—which provided a consultant for the local authority—and funds from the local schools forum, the steering group is now training two cohorts of school staff on a BSL level 1 course.

British sign language is proving very popular and successful in my area. It is being used not only by children with hearing difficulties, but by their peers who have hearing. What a great way of not just educating young people with hearing about the challenges faced by young people with hearing loss, but increasing the confidence of the latter and helping to ensure that they are, and are seen to be, equally valued by their peers. We hear a great deal about second languages. I am a Welshman, and Welsh is my second language: it was very much part of my upbringing. Why should BSL not be a second language for children with hearing?

The hearing support team in Swindon have an impressive and useful set of web-based support tools, which are being used regularly by schools and families in the area and are helping to improve educational outcomes. In the last year, £15,000 of additional funds have been provided for BSL training courses which are available not only to staff, but to family members and members of the wider community. What an excellent example of extending the reach of BSL.

Mr McCann: The concept of BSL as a second language is indeed a noble idea, but does the hon. Gentleman concede that we might as well ask for cars to run on water, given that deaf children—and profoundly deaf children in particular—are not being given the proper education in the classroom that is available to their hearing counterparts?

Mr Buckland: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, but I am trying to make the point that there are good local examples of integration which enables children and young people with hearing loss to gain access to the mainstream rather than being isolated. I think that the widespread use of BSL is a very good way of ensuring that they are valued, that their confidence increases, and that they become very much part of the mainstream. However, it does not stop there.

We have heard a little about radio and video-aided systems. The borough of Swindon is providing £20,000 for an extra 20 such systems, which will improve curriculum access from pre-school to key stage 4. I am particularly impressed by the work of a local partnership, the children and young people's hearing services group. It contains not only professionals from education, health and social services but members of the voluntary sector, and it is led by parents. When organisations are led by parents and service users, services, rather than being developed in a way that is remote from users, are much more focused on the needs of users and their families. Moreover, keeping provision local is good for local authorities, for which out-of-borough provision can be significantly more costly. That is a good local example of money being spent wisely, in a way that helps to integrate services and maximises the advantages for young people with hearing loss.

There is much that I could say about the progress of the Bill. My hon. Friend the Minister and I continue to engage in a dialogue about the need to ensure that, when necessary, parents and families of young people with hearing loss and other special needs have a clear point of redress rather than ending up in a convoluted, labyrinthine system of appeal. I know that he is listening very carefully to those observations, and I hope that when the Bill comes back to this place both the Bill and the code of practice, which has already been improved from its original draft, will be truly a fresh start and a new dawn for children with hearing loss.

4.30 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I will be very brief so that the other Members trying to speak and the Minister replying to the debate can contribute.

First, I want to put on record my—and, I am sure, everybody else's—thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for choosing the subject of today's debate. This emphasises the importance of having a BBC that can enable a motion such as this to take place and I hope the House will approve of it. Under the old system it might have taken months and months of lobbying to get any debate in Government time on this kind of issue, apart from the lottery of trying to get an Adjournment debate.

I thank the right hon. Member for Gordon (Sir Malcolm Bruce) for what he said, and I am sorry I missed the first few minutes of his contribution. I also want to put on record my thanks to the campaign group Disability Action in Islington for the work it does for deaf people and people with disabilities across the borough. It often campaigns on getting signers for sign language, and it can be very expensive to get someone in to do signed

translation. That is an area that needs to be looked at. I do not have an easy answer, but it is a complication.

Other Members have mentioned the excellent campaign briefing from NDCS, which works for children with profound deafness and hearing issues. My constituent Jon Barnes works for that campaign and he has been extremely helpful in highlighting these issues.

The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) raised the problem of identifying children with hearing issues, and other Members talked about deaf children not being picked up in school by the teachers, with their parents either being unaware of the issue or not wanting to draw attention to it. Such children can gradually fall ever further behind their cohort group in school and eventually become educational under-achievers, and all sorts of other things follow from that. Ofsted inspections could look carefully at what is done in all schools to identify children with hearing difficulties. I know it sounds odd that we are even saying that, but it is actually perfectly possible for a child in a class of 30 children to be forgotten or ignored because they might be able to copy what others do where written answers are involved and have some minor level of hearing that enables them just about to cope. We need to ensure that all children are properly tested on their hearing abilities from the very beginning, and the Ofsted inspection could help to do that.

The figure that 75% of deaf children are not statemented is an interesting one, and the figure that 40% of those who suffer from profound deafness as children end up with mental health problems highlights how important it is to have the identification at a very early stage.

I know local authorities are up against it at the present time. I have just come from a meeting with the new leader of my local authority, Richard Watts, and he was explaining the horrendous problems it is facing in funding our current services. Islington is doing its very best to ensure that all children get a very good education, but in these circumstances it is very easy to see how in some local authorities the needs of a relatively small group of children will be forgotten or ignored, or the money will simply be spent on something else for which somebody is able to shout louder and push harder for the funding. Therefore, inspection and the protection and ring-fencing of the funds available for children with profound deafness are very important indeed.

The last point I wish to make is that if we ignore and do not provide sufficient support for children who suffer from this condition, their health will suffer and they will become increasingly dependent and less able to contribute to wider society. As a result, we all suffer, because we will spend money on children who ought to be able to achieve a great deal in school and on adults who ought to be able to achieve a great deal in life, but they end up unemployed and dependent when they could be making an enormous positive contribution to society. It is very wasteful not to identify the needs in the first place and to use all the available technology to improve communication and help people. Sign language and its teaching are very important vehicles for that.

We need to ensure that there is an acceptance that deafness is something that people can cope with if they have adequate support. If they are just ignored and forgotten as children, they end up having a much less fulfilling and less useful life than they could otherwise have. So I just hope that this motion is agreed, that the Government accept

that it is important and that, in return, local authorities fulfil their basic obligation to ensure that every child gets the best possible education and the best possible treatment to deal with whatever condition they happen to be suffering from at the time they enter school.

4.35 pm

Stephen Phillips (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the thoughtful contribution of the hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn). It is always a great pleasure to follow him, not least because he is my MP for four days a week. I am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to this important debate, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Sir Malcolm Bruce) on securing it and on all the work he has done throughout his time as chair of the all-party group on deafness.

Earlier this year, I hosted a visit to Westminster by the National Deaf Children's Society listening bus. Children from the Frank Barnes school for deaf children and others had the opportunity to meet a number of MPs to talk about their experiences of growing up deaf and the difference that extra specialist help has made to them. By all accounts, colleagues who attended were inspired by what they heard. As a former chair of governors at the school, I know that it has been a steadfast supporter of the NDCS's "Stolen Futures" campaign, which has prompted today's debate. I still have contact with the school, and I know that the teaching staff passionately believe that we should have high expectations of deaf children's social, emotional and academic development, and that effective communication, praise, celebration of success, and quality teaching and learning enables children to reach their full potential. We have heard that message from a number of hon. Members today, and it is different from the one that deaf children were receiving some decades ago.

Ofsted has repeatedly identified Frank Barnes school as being outstanding, and I know that the head teacher, Karen Simpson, who is with us in the Gallery today, and her staff work tirelessly to ensure that deaf pupils receive the specialist support they need. We all know that local councils need to target funding at the most vulnerable children who require the most support, including deaf children. Correctly, local authorities have a statutory duty to identify children's special educational needs and to provide the services to meet them. However, the NDCS's report reveals that many deaf children—perhaps the majority of them—are not statemented. Not only is that a matter of regret, but it should cause grave concern to Members of this House because it means that the educational potential of those children is simply not being realised in the way it should. The Government have, of course, taken action. They ensure that local authorities can retain funding for specialist education support services for deaf children as part of the high needs block. However, that does not prevent local authorities from reducing funding overall for those services and, as we now know from the NDCS report, many of them appear either to be doing that or threatening to do it. My own county council in Lincolnshire takes a much more satisfactory line. We are protecting and even increasing funding for services for deaf children, and I have to say that it is very disappointing that other local authorities are not demonstrating the same wisdom.

Any cuts take place in a context in which too many deaf children are already underachieving, as the House has heard, and are simply not getting the support they need. I know that many colleagues will agree with me that the Minister needs to send a

strong signal to all local authorities that the money that is intended for special educational needs should be used for those needs.

One solution to the general problem might well be to see what more could be done on a regional basis, particularly given the current economic climate. I would be interested to hear the Minister's thoughts on that. Deafness is a low-incidence disability and the complex needs of deaf children are not something that many local authorities, particularly smaller authorities, appear able to address on their own. The available research, to which the NDCS has drawn attention, is pretty damning. Many local authorities employ two or fewer visiting teachers of the deaf, and it is impossible to see how such small teams can provide the specialist support needed by all the deaf children and their families in those areas. We are, of course, as the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) mentioned, too often talking about families who cannot or who are not in a position to fight the system. Sometimes they come to us to do it for them, but they are often disadvantaged families and we should be doing everything we can to help their equally disadvantaged children.

I have spoken about Frank Barnes, which is one of the few schools in the country that provides a bilingual approach to teaching where deaf children learn sign language and English together. That is critical, because, as I pointed out in an intervention on my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon, all the research in this area tells us that communication in the early years, however it is achieved, is critical for life outcomes. Schools such as Frank Barnes therefore have an important role to play as centres of excellence and more should perhaps be done both to support them and to use the resources which they offer to other schools in their areas. Specialist schools across the country have the scope to innovate in teaching, but that is too often not the case in mainstream education, where there is so much focus on inclusion—inclusion that can too often, for deaf children, become exclusionary.

For my part, I think the Government could considerably improve provision by encouraging local authorities to work together to commission services on a regional basis and to work with centres of excellence such as Frank Barnes. Some authorities have perhaps already recognised that, but others have yet to do so, presumably because they lack the necessary expertise in dealing with the education of deaf children to realise that it is necessary. I want to hear from the Minister the Government's views on whether any steps can be taken to encourage the regional commissioning of services for low-incidence special needs, and for deafness in particular.

The House has already heard something about the inspection regime and the recommendations of the NDCS. Teachers of the deaf play an important role in supporting deaf children and their families and I know that the Department for Education recognises that. Many parents, teachers and other professionals—I now add my voice to theirs—are concerned by the anomaly that schools are inspected by Ofsted but education services are not.

We must ask ourselves why, in 2013, a parent of a deaf child at a school such as Frank Barnes can be confident that their child is getting a good education because the school has been inspected, but a parent of a deaf child in a nearby mainstream school cannot? The Government must look at that anomaly and fix it, and I hope to hear from the Minister that the Government are considering requiring Ofsted to inspect all educational services for deaf children.

At the same time, schools also need more guidance on progression trajectories for deaf children and how they differ between mainstream and specialist schools. In the past, special schools for the deaf have requested comparative data reports, similar to reports that were previously produced under the performance and assessment—PANDA—system to support the benchmarking of pupil attainment and other measures. There is currently no way of comparing the performances of SEN schools, as the direct comparison of data has apparently stopped, and that cannot help special schools to make progress.

Ofsted says, as I understand it, that it is unable to provide the data because of the challenges of categorising pupils who are deaf or those with special educational needs, but it fails to suggest how, without reliable data, professionals can assess how well deaf children are doing or how, for that matter, local authorities can properly commission services.

Without proper data on deafness, as on all special needs, local authorities cannot plan ahead and cannot know what they have to commission for the future. The point has, I know, been stressed by the Department for Education in the draft special educational needs code of practice, recently published for consultation, but more can be done. For example, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon (Mr Buckland) said, the school census captures only about two thirds of deaf children, as they are only identified if they have been formally assessed as having a special educational need. I hope that the Department will wish to look into whether that can be improved by looking at what data are required from schools in the census.

Those who know more about these things than I do also tell me that part of the problem with getting accurate data is that even now there are no agreed definitions to help identify which children are deaf. I have to say to the Minister that that is not an acceptable state of affairs. The Government must work, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon said, with professional bodies to agree on suitable definitions to enable data to be collected more effectively.

In the time available, let me come to specialist teaching. I have already noted that the high needs block within the dedicated schools grant for local authorities will include funding for specialist support services, including peripatetic teachers of the deaf, and that is no doubt to be welcomed. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) noted in an intervention, around 80% of teachers of the deaf are now over the age of 50. This is at a time when the number of training departments appears to be reducing. The Minister and the Department therefore need to think now about succession planning for teachers of the deaf, because action must be taken to maintain specialism funding and to give more support for, for example, specialist masters degrees, including funding for schools to provide cover while teachers study.

Let me end by saying that, although there is still much to be done, the future is much rosier than it once looked. Lengthy battles like the one I had to fight to keep Frank Barnes open because the previous Government had formulated the law so that special schools closed, look as though they are now history. Good local authorities, like mine in Lincolnshire, understand much better the issues that surround deaf education and the need to deploy appropriate resources.

This debate and the NDCS report reveal, however, that although things are perhaps rosier, they are simply not perfect. So the Government need to act, and to act now. It is worth doing so not merely because deaf children are children just like any others—entitled to the best education and the best start in life that we can give them—but because the costs to other services in the long term are much reduced by good early intervention that improves life chances. Helping deaf children to learn and communicate makes their lives much easier; it means that they are more likely to find employment; it means that they are less likely to develop mental health problems due to feelings of alienation from a society of which they are, after all, part. The case made by the NDCS in its report, as reflected in the motion before the House, is unanswerable. It is one that I respectfully suggest that the Minister must listen to.

4.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Mr Edward Timpson): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Sir Malcolm Bruce) on securing this important and well-informed debate. I take this opportunity, as others have done, to thank him for his dedication and commitment as founder and chair of the all-party parliamentary group on deafness and for his assiduous campaigning for the recognition of British sign language. I know from attending and speaking at the Signature conference that he chaired last year how his inspiring work and unstinting efforts have led to a growing recognition of the support required to help deaf children and young people achieve their potential.

I would also like to recognise the tireless work that the National Deaf Children's Society does to support deaf children and their families. It manages to balance working with my Department on projects such as I-Sign with powerful campaigning to hold Government both local and national to account. The 51,000 signatures received in support of holding this debate are testament to this campaigning, and to the importance of getting support for special educational needs right.

A whole number of pertinent points and issues have been raised by hon. Members from all parties about attainment, funding, access, support, data, inspection and the wider special educational need reforms. In the short time that I have, I will do my best to address as many of those points as possible, but where I fail to do so, I will endeavour to write to hon. Members to make sure that they have a full response to the questions and points that they have raised.

The Government are clear that the most important service for all children and young people is high-quality teaching. That is why we have ensured that funding is protected, maintaining the amount per pupil at the same cash level this year as last year. In this context, a number of hon. Members rightly raised concerns about the attainment gap between deaf children and their peers. That is a key indicator of whether deaf children are receiving high-quality teaching.

Although we must see further progress in this area, we should recognise the enormous progress that has been made so far. In 2011-12, 71% of deaf children achieved five or more A* to C grades at GCSE compared with just 43% in 2007-08. For non-SEN pupils, the figures are 90% and 75% respectively. Over that period, deaf pupils progressed at approximately twice the rate of their peers, closing the attainment gap significantly—a testament to the pupils themselves, as well as to the work of sensory support services

across the country. Improvements in teaching practice and technological advances mean that deaf children are now far more likely to achieve their potential than five years ago.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) rightly raised concerns about the slight decline in good GCSE passes over the past year. We must, of course, be alert to that, but it is important to note that progress in those subjects has also increased markedly over the past four years: 37% of deaf pupils now achieve that standard, compared to 28% in 2007-08. However, that is still not good enough. Clearly, we all want to see progress continue. We are committed to improving the training that teachers and school leaders receive to help them identify where pupils with hearing loss face barriers to learning and to offer appropriate support, an issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) and by the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Mr McCann), who speaks with such authority, based on his own personal experiences.

The National Scholarship Fund provides funding of up to £3,500 for teachers' postgraduate qualifications and training, including specialist training for teachers of the deaf. Funding of £2,000 is available to support teaching assistants and support staff to improve their skills in SEN. Some 600 teachers have achieved or are working towards a qualification related to SEN and a further 500 have applied for the current funding round. We have also worked with the NDCS to update and increase schools' access to information on deaf-friendly teaching and on specific issues such as managing the transition to secondary school and teaching phonics for pupils with a hearing impairment. As we reform the SEN system we will work with the National Sensory Impairment Partnership—NatSIP—to provide advice and information to schools on effective support for deaf pupils.

As well as taking steps to improve the quality of education, we are taking significant steps to secure access to it for deaf children and others with disabilities and SEN. Under the Equalities Act 2010, schools and other education providers must make reasonable adjustments for disabled children and young people to alleviate any substantial disadvantage they experience because of their disability, and they must not discriminate against them. If, after those adjustments have been made, children and young people need special educational provision or specialist services, the duties that schools, local authorities and others have in relation to special educational needs come into play. The Children and Families Bill, which includes our reforms to this area, is currently being debated in the other place. I shall say more about those changes a little later.

The NDCS is concerned that, as things stand, services for deaf children risk being undermined by cuts. We have heard some examples of that this afternoon. I want to reassure the House that we have ensured that all local authorities have as much funding for SEN in 2013-14 as they had in 2012-13. The NDCS acknowledges that the Government have protected funding for vulnerable learners. Local authorities decide what SEN services to provide for children and young people, including services for deaf children, and how much to spend on them, from the funding that we supply.

The services that local authorities typically provide, either directly or by commissioning other providers, include services for visual, hearing and physical impairment; specific learning difficulties; speech, language and communication; profound and severe

learning difficulties; and autism. Local authorities are reporting that they are spending no less on their SEN services this year than they spent last year. Through their local funding formula, they also include in delegated schools budgets a clear amount of funding intended to meet the needs of pupils with additional needs, including those with SEN or disabilities. Special schools and other schools with special units often use their budgets to develop particular specialist services, including those for pupils with hearing impairments. I have seen that for myself in Springfield special school in Crewe in my constituency. Where necessary, schools receive extra top-up funding from their local authority for the additional support costs of pupils with the greatest needs.

We are committed to ensuring that the needs of children with SEN are met. We have been clear with local authorities—I re-emphasise the point now—that they should prioritise vital front-line services for vulnerable children. However, we should not forget that the current financial climate, as Members have acknowledged today, means that everyone in Government, both local and national, has to make tough decisions to ensure that the limited resources are spent most effectively.

We know that it can be challenging for local authorities to provide services for young people whose needs are less common, so we are encouraging them to work together on such provision. I heard the point my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Stephen Phillips) made about regional commissioning, and I will certainly look at that as part of the work we are doing and the reforms we are undertaking. Where services have to be changed, that should be done with a careful assessment of the impact on families, and those assessments should involve the families.

With regard to specialist support, local authorities support parents of deaf children to communicate with them through teachers of the deaf and sensory support services. The Department for Education is working with voluntary and community groups to enable local areas to benchmark the support they provide to deaf children and to access tools and information on the most effective approaches. That includes the £1.1 million we have given to NatSIP to carry out a benchmarking exercise.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and others mentioned the importance of early support. I hope that they will be pleased to hear that we have also funded the development of an early support guide for parents of deaf children and the I-Sign project to develop a family sign language programme. We are continuing to fund the I-Sign consortium to build on the learning from that project and improve the availability of sign language support for parents and families.

As the NDCS has set out, most deaf children attend mainstream schools, some with additional specialist units offering support on site. Assessments on how well those schools perform will be made as part of Ofsted's school inspection regime. The new Ofsted inspection frameworks, introduced in September 2012, place a clear emphasis on meeting the needs of disabled pupils and pupils with SEN and considering the quality of teaching and the progress made by those pupils.

I know that the NDCS and Members are calling for an alternative approach in which Ofsted would inspect the local authority services that work with schools to support deaf pupils, and there is some initial appeal in that, but the same argument could be made for pupils with autism, speech and language needs or dyslexia. However, I understand

that this is part of a wider question about the inspection of the reformed SEN system, and I expect it to continue to be discussed as the Children and Families Bill progresses. Aside from the role that Ofsted could play, I want to stress that the SEN reforms will preserve and enhance legal protections for families who want to challenge councils through their involvement in determining local provisions. The two deaf young people who are directly advising my Department on our SEN reforms have made it clear that they want to see reforms which provide legal protections; establish a better system for identifying need and commissioning services across education, health and social care; ensure that the services provided match local needs as accurately as possible; and ensure that families do not have to battle to get those services. That is what our reforms are intended to do.

I want to leave a few moments for my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon to close the debate. It is clear that this has been a thoughtful, sincere and passionate debate that has provided us all with an opportunity not only to celebrate excellence where it exists, including in Swindon, but to challenge and question what more could be done to ensure that deaf children and young people get the right support at the right time so that they can flourish and thrive. I will take away the many excellent points and suggestions made by hon. Members, particularly my right hon. Friend, and consider them carefully as our reforms move closer towards implementation. The Government's message is clear: we share his ambition and desire to give deaf children the best possible start in life and will continue to work with him in that shared endeavour.

Sir Malcolm Bruce *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. If I am to put the Question before the motion lapses, I need to do so at 4.59 pm.

4.58 pm

Sir Malcolm Bruce: I thank the Minister for his constructive and courteous response and for undertaking to follow up on those points in detail. I thank all Members who have contributed to this well-informed debate. The Minister has responded to the point about Ofsted, but there is a worry that although SEN might be maintained, switches could take place that disadvantage deaf people. We want there to be special attention to ensure that deaf children are not disadvantaged. I take the point about other categories, but I think that we are entitled at least to ask for a process by which that can be done. On the regional issue, which was also a good point, I note that in Sweden schools for the deaf are provided in every region and parents have the right to choose whether they send their children to a special school or a mainstream one. I believe that is something we should address.

We have had a very good debate. The Minister is very engaged in the subject and we look forward to working with him. I also thank the hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) for his constructive comments. This is something that we can do together, and with real commitment we can improve the quality of life for all deaf children.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House recognises the importance of services for deaf children and young people and acknowledges the wide attainment gap; further recognises that communications support for deaf children and their parents is vital for social development and educational progress; acknowledges that the Government has stated there is an expectation that funding for vulnerable learners is protected, but is concerned about recent evidence uncovered by the National Deaf Children's Society which shows that in 2013-14 over a third of local authorities plan to cut education services for deaf children; urges the Government to take steps to hold local authorities to account and support parents in doing so, including by asking Ofsted to inspect these vital services, improving access to communication support including sign language, and strengthening the Children and Families Bill currently before Parliament; and further urges the Government to deliver and implement reform of special educational needs.