

Neil Gray, Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care  
St. Andrew's House, Regent Road  
Edinburgh, EH1 3DG

10<sup>th</sup> February 2025

Dear Cabinet Secretary,

**Subject: Decision to stop See Hear Strategy refresh**

We, the Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland (the ALLIANCE) and members of our Scottish Sensory Hub advisory group, are writing concerning the recent decision to cancel the See Hear Strategy refresh. The Scottish Sensory Hub is the only civic society cross-sensory forum in Scotland for people who are Deaf, Deafblind, or who have a Visual Impairment. Members of the advisory group span the sensory sector in Scotland.

On 6<sup>th</sup> Dec 2024, a selection of stakeholders from the sensory sector received a letter from Deputy Directors Alice Hall and Rachel McGruer, of the Social Care and National Care Service Directorate. The letter indicated that after two years of consultation work and discussion, the Scottish Government have decided that a new See Hear Strategy is no longer needed. The Sensory Loss in Social Care team of civil servants has been redeployed, and the Sensory Loss in Social Care Advisory Group and the See Hear Leads Network have been disbanded. These decisions are in addition to the earlier 100 per cent cut to Scottish Government funding for the Scottish Sensory Hub in 2023.

At the same time (4<sup>th</sup> Dec 2024), the suppliers of [Contact Scotland BSL](#) were issued a contract termination notice by the Social Care and National Care Service Directorate. Contact Scotland BSL is the Scottish Government's national flagship service for Deaf and Deafblind people who use BSL. The termination notice stated that there was no intention to retender service provision, "following Ministerial agreement". After concerns were raised with the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, at First Minister's Questions on 18<sup>th</sup> Dec 2024 a welcome commitment was made by the First Minister that the service would be retendered with no break in service provision.

We would like to see a similar reconsideration of the decision to end the new See Hear Strategy, with cross-portfolio engagement across Government. We are deeply alarmed at a range of recent Scottish Government decisions that reduce support for people with sensory impairments, and the adverse effects this will have on people's ability to live well. We wish to see the current decisions around the See Hear Strategy, and wider sensory policy, reviewed and reversed.

The last See Hear Strategy was published in 2014. While it technically remains active, it does not reflect the current needs and experiences of the population. To give some examples, the 2014 Strategy has one paragraph concerning children and young people; pre-dates (and so does not engage with) the BSL (Scotland) Act 2015; and does not include meaningful engagement with support for Deafblind people (including the new definition of Deafblindness). The prevalence data is also significantly lower than current evidence. For example, there are an estimated 31,000 Deafblind people living in Scotland, not 5,000.

The letter of 6<sup>th</sup> Dec states that the engagement work carried out across 2023-2024 "has highlighted the many areas where sensory loss is being mainstreamed". It concluded that no further work is required for a new See Hear Strategy. Yet a wide range of areas for improvement were highlighted in the engagement work to inform the new Strategy, as outlined in [reports by the ALLIANCE Scottish Sensory Hub](#) and other partners (including Deafblind Scotland, RNIB Scotland, and the National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS)). Policy and practice must adjust to reflect current need and developments if it is to be fit for purpose.

Mainstreaming is not inherently a problematic approach. However, to mainstream support for people with sensory impairments, there must be widespread understanding of people's rights and requirements across all areas of policy and public life. It is also important to have a clear policy home for sensory, with dedicated Government leadership – or Government-funded leadership – to enable oversight and accountability. This is not currently the case. For example, [Dementia in Scotland: Everyone's Story Delivery Plan 2024-2026](#) – mentioned as a key

example of sensory mainstreaming in the letter of 6<sup>th</sup> Dec, and an illustration of why a See Hear Strategy refresh was unnecessary – contains a single reference to sensory impairment, with no actions associated with tailored support for people who are Deaf, Deafblind, or who have Visual Impairments. Similarly, [No One Left Behind: Employability Strategic Plan 2024-27](#) does not contain any mention of how to support people with sensory impairments, nor of inclusive communication practices (a key concern highlighted in [ALLIANCE lived experience engagement work](#)). There also is no mention of sensory impairment in [Housing to 2040](#) – despite widespread issues with recent fire alarm guidance for Deaf and Deafblind people. Finally, the Accessible Travel Framework Delivery Plan contains welcome mention of assessing the feasibility of a pilot project to extend free rail travel for companions of people with Visual Impairments. However, there is no wider discussion of support for people with sensory impairments – despite this being a key area of concern for people.

We are particularly concerned about the cancellation of the new See Hear Strategy in terms of rolling back progress for Deafblind people. The recent definition of Deafblindness (led by Deafblind Scotland and the Cross-party Group on Deafness) is welcome progress, but was due to be implemented via the new See Hear Strategy. There is a high risk of reduced impact and effectiveness if this work is not folded into a coherent policy space and positioned to reach a wide audience.

Without dedicated oversight of relevant policy areas, and a current and up-to-date See Hear Strategy, it is unlikely that a mainstreaming approach to sensory policy will result in people with sensory impairments being supported to access their rights and participate in society. A single policy home, grounded in consideration of the equalities, inclusion and human rights aspects of the issues people with sensory impairments face, should be responsible for tracking implementation. Without these actions, investment in sensory impairment support is likely to be patchwork rather than strategic and efficient.

Most of us will experience sensory impairment in our lifetimes. Given the rising numbers of people living with sensory impairments – many of

whom currently experience poorer health outcomes, educational attainment gaps, and early economic inactivity against their wishes due to a lack of systematic support – it is essential that Scotland acts strategically to enable people with sensory impairments to live well and participate fully in society.

As such, we would welcome the following:

1. **Reconsideration of the decision to cancel the new See Hear Strategy**, and transparent sharing of the information which has informed the decision (including information collected as part of engagement work, suitably anonymised).
2. **Publication of a revised See Hear Strategy, cutting across portfolios** – even if this is an interim update which does not address some topics at this point (for example, social care).
3. **Clarity on See Hear funding and the delivery of an action plan that has lived experience at the centre of planning and activity**, with a commitment to efficient, cross-portfolio sensory support.
4. **An assessment and public report into the impact of the recent and widespread cuts to and decision-making around sensory support across Scotland**, and how this has impacted the human rights of Deaf, Deafblind, and Visually Impaired people.

The ALLIANCE and members of the Scottish Sensory Hub advisory group would be very happy to provide further evidence. We look forward to your response and stand ready to provide any support required to enable people with sensory impairments to access their human rights and live well.

Yours sincerely,

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Scotland (the ALLIANCE)

Teri Devine, Associate Director for Inclusion and Employment, RNID

Angela Bonomy, Chief Executive Officer, Sense Scotland

Mark Ballard, Health of Policy and Influencing for Scotland, National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS)

Jacquie Winning, Chief Executive, Forth Valley Sensory Centre

Isabella Goldie, Chief Executive, Deafblind Scotland

James Adams, Director, RNIB Scotland

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