

Deaf BSL signers

Overview

Deaf British Sign Language (BSL) signers as a group require specific support from services. Their needs are often considered through a framework of hearing loss, rather than as a cultural and linguistic minority who communicate in British Sign Language (one of the official languages of the United Kingdom). Deaf BSL signers require services to be provided in British Sign Language, or accompanied by high-quality and consistent services of translation and/or interpretation. These services should be commissioned and assessed by Deaf BSL signers themselves.

Recommendations from the report

The report makes several recommendations specific to the experiences of Deaf BSL signers, including recommendations in the following areas:

- The adoption of the Deaf Cultural/Linguistic Model; instead of defining Deaf British Sign Languages users by hearing loss, we instead recognise signers as a cultural and linguistic minority. As signers of one of the UK's official languages, they require services provided in their own language, or by qualified, competent, consistent interpreters selected by Deaf BSL signers.
- Ensuring all public-facing information is accessible to Deaf BSL signers, especially with regards to the Council website.
- Giving all public-facing staff Deaf Awareness training.
- Creating a co-commissioned service offering reliable, consistent interpretation for services provided across the borough. This includes in-person and virtual services, with support in translation, telephone calls, and written communication.
- Providing a co-commissioned 24/7 remote interpreting service for Deaf BSL signers to access healthcare, in the model of BSL Health Access (a service created during the pandemic which has since been cut).

Extension: Deaf BSL Signers

Evidence and reflections

The evidence for these recommendations comes primarily from focus groups. These groups were carried out through the Lewisham Deaf Community Association by Tony Pilkington, Vice-Chair of Lewisham Disabled People's Commission.

Key themes which emerged from these focus groups include:

- An approach to Deaf people which reflects an audist mindset, centred around defining Deafness by hearing loss instead of culture and language.
- The value of specific provisions for Deaf BSL signers within Lewisham Council, and the importance of this being provided by staff fluent in BSL.
- Access to housing and challenges emerging from a telephone and online-centred approach.
- Access to education for Deaf children.
- Travel and transport.
- Accessing healthcare services, including communication with hospitals and securing appropriate interpreters
- Experiences during COVID-19.

The expansion explores these themes in greater detail.



...British Sign Language seemed to be regarded as an access issue only.

Audist mindset

The definitions of Deafness are centred around hearing loss, rather than understanding Deaf BSL signers as a linguistic and cultural minority. This means that language such as 'hearing impaired' is used, which does not reflect the experiences of Deaf BSL signers.

Data collection often homogenises Deaf BSL signers, deaf and hard of hearing people, and deafened people as one group, which leads to disparities in data collection and opaque data. Collecting data which more clearly identifies which people are Deaf signers would allow service provision to be far more targeted and effective.



...Lewisham Council sent out a tweet celebrating over one-hundred-and-seventy spoken languages, but ignored sign languages.



[Regarding the London Borough of Culture] ...there is no BSL video clip produced to publicise this to the Deaf community



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Council Services

Specific provision in BSL

Having in-person support available in BSL was crucial for many who attended our focus groups. Attendees made it clear that, "...most Deaf people are supported in their independence day-to-day by the Senior Advice & Information Officer, Catrina Davis. Catrina is fluent in BSL Levels 4-6, and is based in Customer Services. Around 170 people have used the service, supporting them with accessing Council Services, form filling, translation, and support with making phone calls. It is seen as a vital safety net by the Deaf community."

The focus groups concluded that "Deaf people generally have a high regard for the service provided, but are frustrated when it is suspended due to annual leave, training, or other reasons such as COVID-19 or illness, as there is just one staff member. Deaf people are not always informed when the service is unavailable. The cover provided by Adult Social Care is not seen as comparable, or to the same quality."

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The telephone is a big problem for us Deaf people, so this service is so important for us

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I am happy with Catrina to sort out my Council Tax benefit, she deals with everything and makes it easy for me.

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British Sign Language is my language, and I find English hard to understand. Catrina translates forms and letters to BSL for me, and helps me become less anxious.

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Often there are problems with other services, but I know I can go to Laurence House and see Catrina there, and she helps me sort it out.

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“

...I could not manage without it as I have no one else to turn to. It is the only place in Lewisham I can go to.

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[The Lewisham council website is]...completely inaccessible to Deaf signers, apart from one BSL video clip which gives information about the BSL VRS service. This is, however, difficult to find on the website.

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Extension: Deaf BSL Signers

Housing

The process of bidding on social housing and enquiring about private rented accommodation is often inaccessible for Deaf people.

One aspect of housing difficulty which Deaf people report is with enquiring/bidding for social housing or private rented accommodation due to the language barrier.

Education

The attendees at the focus group noted significant issues in getting access to accurate data about education.

There was some provision for Deaf BSL signers in education, and focus group attendees were aware of, *“...two discrete provisions at primary school level: Cooper Lane & Rushey Green primary schools. There's also one at Sedgehill Secondary School - the Deaf Resource Base, although this appears to be coming to an end with four Deaf students being transferred to Thomas Tallis School in Greenwich this September. At FE level there are Lewisham & Southwark College and Hadlow College at Downham locally, and elsewhere, Shooters Hill College in Greenwich.”*

Representative provision is known to be important in education, and it is concerning that this does not appear to be in place for Deaf BSL signing students.

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...By the time I get someone to help me to phone up the flat is gone; it is too late and people beat me to it.

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...It is hard to understand how it works, and I need someone to explain it to me.

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...Generally, it is difficult to get clarity with the information when the term 'hearing impaired' is used generally within education, as to Deaf BSL signers and educational outcomes.

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...As far as we know there are no Deaf BSL adult signers employed in any educational capacity in Lewisham or within the Children and Young People's Service, working with deaf children and their families.”

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Extension: Deaf BSL Signers

Travel and transport

The Freedom Pass is very valuable for Deaf people. One respondent noted that, *"...the Freedom Pass is so important to me. I can travel to meet friends. Hearing people have more social opportunities locally, and can access services. It's not the same for Deaf people - often we have to travel out of Lewisham."*

For one Deaf wheelchair user who experiences difficulties on public transport and when using a minicab, there were also problems with Dial-A-Ride, which only communicates online or by email and doesn't offer a BSL relay service.

Healthcare

Two key issues raised were communication with hospitals, and the provision of interpreters.

Appropriate interpreters

The provision of an appropriate, consistent, highly-trained interpreter able to communicate with Deaf BSL signer patients easily is crucial for challenging the health inequities faced by Deaf BSL signers - however, this is often not in place.

Communication with hospitals

Hospital communication often relies on the telephone, which is not accessible to Deaf BSL signers.

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I asked for a female interpreter because of a UTI problem, but they booked a male interpreter. He did not know the signs for UTI issues, and did not have the skills to communicate properly

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...the Freedom Pass is good. It means I can go to a gym in Whitechapel where I have friends and an instructor who can sign to me. I'm not working, so it's important for my mental health and to keep fit. I could not afford to pay to travel there if I did not have a Freedom Pass, and there is nothing in Lewisham for me to go to.

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...Deaf BSL signers generally face long-standing health inequalities, and experience poorer health than the general population due to the lack of information and difficulties accessing health services. This is in spite of the Accessible Information Standard, which is still yet to be implemented in any meaningful way in Lewisham

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..I need to have the same interpreter at healthcare appointments so they are familiar with my condition, but this does not always happen. Hard for me to fight this as no access to complaints or the booking agency.

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..Fed up with hospital outpatients letters with just the telephone number to contact them. We can't use the telephone

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Extension: Deaf BSL Signers

COVID-19

During the pandemic, "...most Deaf people faced barriers in accessing support and services, more than usual. In addition, most were unaware of Lewisham Council's COVID-19 BSL VRS support line." This suggests that whilst the line's provision was important, without adequate promotion, many were unable to access its benefits. A closure of face-to-face services during the pandemic also disproportionately affected Deaf and hard-of-hearing people, especially Deaf BSL signers: "...It was very hard to get access to our GP service when it suddenly closed its doors, as we can't use the telephone."

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...When COVID-19 happened and I had no face-to-face appointment with an interpreter present, we changed to online with interpreters from all over the UK. I do not understand them, and they do not understand me.

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...My outpatients appointment was repeatedly cancelled, but I only found out when arriving because they could not contact me.

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