

Research into the Deaf audience in the UK

A review of evidence

Final report to the British Sign Language Broadcasting Trust

December 2015

Executive Summary (Plain English version)

Introduction

The British Sign Language Broadcasting Trust (BSLBT) makes TV programmes in BSL for the UK's Deaf community.

BSLBT asked the Office for Public Management (OPM) to find out what was known about that community. They wanted to know how many Deaf people there are, where they live, their age, their interests, how they communicate and so on.

OPM also looked at how Deaf people fit into the wider world, their health and education, and their views on television and the internet.

BSLBT need this information to help them make relevant programmes for the BSL community. They also hope to help the hearing world understand Deaf people's lives and issues.

By 'Deaf', we mean people whose first language is sign language. Deaf people don't see deafness as a medical condition, and certainly not as a disability. They are a community with their own culture and language. This report isn't about 'deaf' people who have simply lost some or all of their hearing and who still use English as their first language.

OPM reviewed existing data and interviewed seven leading experts. It was important to BSLBT that the information they were given was reliable, professionally produced and accurate. Too often, 'conclusions' about the Deaf community have been based on assumptions and guesswork.

OPM found that there is little recent research on this subject. It is clear that Deaf people face many difficulties in integrating fully into society, but BSLBT and other organisations which try to meet the Deaf community's needs would like more hard evidence to help them tackle the isolation that Deaf people often experience.

Size and demographics of the Deaf community

There is little reliable data apart from the 2011 Census for England and Wales. Figures that we do have include the following:

- In 2010, 56,400 people were registered as deaf in England.
- In 2014, there were at least 48,125 deaf children aged 0-19 in the UK.
- The estimate for permanent bilateral hearing impairment is 1 in 1000 live births, rising to a possible 2.05 per 1,000 among children aged 9+.
- There are about 15,500 people in England and Wales whose main language is BSL, but some data suggests that roughly 188,000 people in England are deaf and sometimes use sign language. About 12,500 people in Scotland use BSL, but not necessarily as their first language.
- 80% of BSL users are white. 19% live in London.

Balance of the use of BSL and standard English

Again, research in this area is limited. However:

- 65% of people who use BSL as a main language cannot speak English or cannot speak it very well.
- 87% of deaf children speak English. Only 9.4% use BSL as their main language or combined with another language.
- Deaf children say that sign language is very important to them. Children attending sign-bilingual schools communicate more confidently with non-signing children.

- Using BSL in the home creates a positive view of deafness, but many parents think it marks their child out as 'different'. They would prefer their child to pass as 'hearing' and think hearing aids are a better way to join in with hearing people.
- There is no UK data on the percentage of Deaf children born into Deaf families. The USA estimate is that only 4% of deaf children have a deaf parent. For 92%, both parents are hearing.

Educational attainment and language skills

- Deaf children generally do far worse than hearing children at all levels of education. They have relatively poor language skills. However, the gap appears to be narrowing, particularly in the earlier years.
- The age at which Deaf children and adults learn BSL affects their signing ability: the earlier the better.
- There aren't enough specialist education services, such as Teachers of the Deaf.

Integration into the wider world

- Deaf people are excluded from society and often feel isolated.
- They face difficulties in using local services. There is a shortage of services in BSL and of interpreters, and a general lack of deaf awareness.
- Unemployment among Deaf people is higher than in the general population.
- Deaf youngsters face difficulties in making friends and in social situations generally.

Deafness and health

The recent Deaf Health study provided useful UK data. There have also been a number of studies into access to health services.

- Deaf people are more likely to be obese, to have high blood pressure, depression and other mental health issues.
- They have lower rates of high cholesterol, cardiovascular disease and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.
- They are less likely to smoke or drink alcohol.
- They are more likely to be under-diagnosed and to receive poorer treatment for potentially serious conditions.
- They face difficulties with health appointments. There aren't usually BSL interpreters at consultations, and Deaf people may have to rely on friends or family.
- Deaf people have poor health knowledge because of a lack of information in suitable formats.

New technology and social media

There is limited recent research in this area. It focuses mainly on the use of texting, email and the internet. The review did not find any data about social media, notably Facebook and Twitter, or about applications such as FaceTime/Skype.

- Deaf people communicate by text, email and teletypewriters. Email is the most widely used, with texting popular for younger people.
- The internet is helpful in communication between Deaf people, allowing them to develop friendships and to access online education and information.
- If they wish, Deaf people can pass as hearing online and can integrate more easily with the hearing. However, this does not necessarily help in the 'real world'.

Television

The limited research available pre-dates the creation of BSLBT in 2008 and is based on small samples. However:

- Deaf people want Deaf presenters, not hearing BSL interpreters. The accuracy of the BSL information is more important than the appearance of the signer.
- In-vision signing is most valued in news, educational programming and documentaries.
- Many Deaf people want both signing and subtitles.
- Many Deaf people watch TV online.

Recommendations

This important review adds to our knowledge but highlights the extent to which the Deaf community is marginalised and under-represented. It reveals a lack of data and poor understanding of Deaf people. Recommendations are:

- BSLBT should look into how they can engage more effectively with their audience. They should review their aims, structure and resourcing.
- New technologies and social media are changing Deaf people's experiences. BSLBT should consider how they operate in those areas.
- Public services and charities should look at ways to make their services easier to use.
- Current thinking about the Deaf community is often based on claims and assumptions, not hard evidence. Agencies seeking to meet the needs of the Deaf need proper data.
- Deaf charities and other organisations with relevant experience should work more closely together. They might influence the gathering of solid statistics about the Deaf community. One avenue worth exploring is the 2021 Census.
- The Deaf community's difficulties are important to the whole of society, not just to specialist organisations. If they are to tackle the problems effectively, policymakers and practitioners must take isolation and exclusion very seriously. A truly inclusive society requires us to treat every person as a person, not merely as a label. We recommend that the findings in this review, while relating primarily to the Deaf community, are not treated as minority issues or ignored. Only a wide-ranging and person-centred approach will break down the barriers to solving these problems.