

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

The British Sign Language Broadcasting Trust (BSLBT) commissioned the Office for Public Management (OPM) to conduct a review of evidence about the Deaf audience. The purpose of this research is to understand more about the highly marginalised Deaf community within the UK, with regards to demographics and language use, as well as life issues such as integration into the wider world, health status and access to health services, and use and views of television and the internet. The findings will assist BSLBT in using its resources cost effectively to provide future television programming for the Deaf community. It is also hoped the report will add to the wider world's understanding of the life experience of Deaf people and the issues Deaf people face.

This report focuses on Deaf people whose first or preferred language is sign language. They do not view their deafness in medical terms, and reject the notion of deafness as a disability. The Deaf community sees itself as having a distinct social, cultural and linguistic identity. The term 'Deaf community' is generally only used and understood by that minority of deaf people for whom being deaf is a significant part of their cultural identity and not those who view their inability to hear as a disability. Lower case 'deaf' is *mainly used to describe those people who have lost some or all of their hearing in early or later life*. This group, who choose to use speech and lip-reading and regard English as their first language, are not the focus of this report.

From the small body of literature and data available, the key findings are:

Size and demographics of the Deaf community

There are no reliable estimates of the total number of Deaf people in the UK or their demographic profile.

- In 2010 there were 56,400 people registered as being deaf in England, and in 2014 there were at least 48,125 deaf children aged 0 to 19 across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales
- Studies suggest that the estimated prevalence of permanent bilateral hearing impairment is 1/1000 live births with this potentially rising to at least 2.05/1000 among children aged 9 and older
- Census data shows that there are 15,482 people in England and Wales whose main language is British Sign Language (BSL). However, prevalence data from the GP Patient Survey suggests that 0.44% of the adult population in England, roughly 188,000 people, are deaf and use sign language. According to the Scotland Census there are 12,533 people in Scotland who use BSL at home, but BSL may not necessarily be their first or preferred language. There is no data for Northern Ireland
- There is very little data regarding the demographic profile of the Deaf community aside from the 2011 Census for England and Wales. According to the 2011 Census, 80% of BSL users are white and 19% of BSL users are located in London

Balance of the use of British Sign Language and standard English

There is limited research on the balance of use of BSL and English in Deaf people's everyday lives

- According to the 2011 Census for England and Wales, 65% of people who use BSL as a main language cannot speak English or cannot speak English very well
- The majority of deaf children (87%) rely on spoken English at school, while 9.4% use sign language as their main language or in combination with another language
- Qualitative research with deaf children found that sign language is a very important aspect in their lives and children attending sign bilingual schools are more confident when communicating with non-signing children
- Qualitative research with young deaf people found that the use of BSL at home establishes a positive view of deafness, however many parents are not supportive of BSL and are not keen on their children using BSL as it confirms their child's difference. Instead, parents want their child to pass as 'hearing', and support the use of hearing aids as a means of engaging in the hearing world
- There is no UK data on the percentage of Deaf children born into Deaf families. However, in the USA it is estimated that 4% of deaf children have at least one deaf parent and 92% are from families where both parents are hearing

Educational attainment and language proficiency

There is evidence of significant disparities in the educational attainment of Deaf children compared to hearing children. However, there is no data regarding Deaf adults and there is a shortage of data regarding language proficiencies

- According to the 2011 Census for England and Wales, 65% of BSL users cannot speak English or cannot speak English well
- Language and literacy proficiency among Deaf children is poor, although there is a lack of recent data on this
- The age at which BSL is taught affects the signing ability of Deaf children and adults. Children who have had late access and exposure to BSL may have restricted use
- Educational attainment of Deaf children is far worse than that of hearing children, and this is true at all levels of education. However, data suggests that the attainment gap appears to be narrowing, particularly among the earlier years of education

Integration into the wider world

There are a number of studies exploring the integration of Deaf people into the wider world

- Deaf people are excluded from society and suffer from social isolation

- Deaf people face difficulties in accessing and using local services. This includes a shortage of information and services in BSL, a shortage of specialist support services, a shortage of qualified interpreters, and general lack of deaf awareness
- Deaf people face barriers to employment, and there is evidence to suggest the unemployment rate among Deaf people is higher than the general population
- Deaf children and young people face issues with regard to education and schooling. These are related to social interaction and friendships at school as well as the provision of specialist education services, such as Teachers of the Deaf

Association between Deafness and health or other disabilities

There are comparatively few studies that assess the health status of Deaf people in the UK. However, one recent comprehensive study was the Deaf Health study. **There are a number of studies focussing on access to health services.**

- Evidence suggests that Deaf people have higher prevalence rates of obesity, high blood pressure, mental health issues, and depression compared to the general population, but they have lower prevalence rates of cardiovascular disease, high cholesterol and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and are less likely to smoke and drink alcohol
- Deaf people are more likely to be under-diagnosed. Even when diagnosed, they are more likely to have poorer treatment and management of potentially serious health conditions
- Deaf people face many barriers when accessing health services. They face difficulties booking and attending health appointments, and in communicating with health professionals. There is often an absence of BSL interpreters at consultations, and Deaf people may instead have to rely on friends and family. Overall, Deaf people may be discouraged from accessing health services
- Deaf people have poor health knowledge, potentially because of a lack of health information in accessible formats

New technologies and social media

There is limited recent research on Deaf people's experiences of new technologies and social media. The literature tends to focus on the use of communication technologies, such as SMS and email, as well as the use of the internet among the Deaf community. The review did not identify any data on the use of social media, notably Facebook and Twitter, and applications such as FaceTime/Skype.

- Deaf people make use of a number of digital communication methods, including SMS, email, and teletypewriters. There is evidence to suggest that email is the most widely preferred, with SMS is more common among younger Deaf people

- There have been a number of studies focussing on internet use and experiences among Deaf people, but few of these studies have been recent. Nonetheless, they have identified a number of benefits of the internet. The internet provides an alternative way of communicating with other Deaf people, facilitates the development of social networks, and allows Deaf people to access online education and information
- The internet allows Deaf people to pass as hearing online and may facilitate greater integration between Deaf and hearing people. However, this does not necessarily increase the integration of the Deaf community into mainstream society

Television

There is limited recent and robust research on Deaf people's views on television broadcasting. There has been some research but many of the studies pre-date the creation of BSLBT in 2008 and are based on a very small number of participants

- Deaf people want Deaf presenters instead of hearing BSL interpreters, and the accuracy of information in BSL is prioritised over the appearance of the signer
- The most important types of programme for in-vision interpretation are news programmes, educational programmes, and documentaries
- Many Deaf people want both signing *and* subtitles on TV
- Many Deaf people watch TV online

Recommendations

This important review provides a summary, adds to the knowledge base on the Deaf community and has highlighted the extent to which this community is highly marginalised, under-represented, and under-researched. This research has highlighted the lack of data, and poor understanding of the Deaf community. In light of this, our recommendations are:

- **BSLBT to investigate more effective methods of audience engagement**

We recommend that BSLBT explores what effective and realistic audience engagement should look like in the context of its organisational aims, structure and resourcing. For example, BSLBT should take into consideration the finding from this review that there is very little reliable evidence regarding the extent to which new technologies and social media are changing Deaf people's experiences. This poses questions for engagement strategies that rely solely or largely on social media

- **All major public and charitable services are encouraged to:**
 - Understand and record use of their services
 - In light of this, consider how they might make their services more accessible

Through commissioning this review BLSBT has demonstrated commitment to raising awareness of the urgent need for robust research into the Deaf community, at the same time raising questions around the status quo which is often based on claims and assumptions that may not always be backed by evidence. These have major implications for the extent to which agencies are able to meet the needs of the Deaf community

- **Encourage a collaborative approach to the gathering of new evidence**

We recommend that Deaf charities and other organisations who may hold relevant evidence and data adopt a strategically collaborative approach to sharing data and creating synergies through joint working that will be of benefit to all. For example, it may be fruitful to explore how Deaf charities and others may work together to influence the gathering of national statistics that asks sensible questions of and on the Deaf community. One avenue potentially worth exploring is the 2021 Census

- **Recognise the marginalisation of Deaf people as an important manifestation of the current social policy focus on overcoming isolation**

It can often be easy to regard issues relating to the Deaf community as “minority issues” that are only relevant to specialist organisations. This review, however, challenges this perception by showing that the experiences of the Deaf community are manifestations (and amplifications) of cross-cutting social issues that have wider relevance for society, albeit with important nuances. For example, isolation and exclusion were recognised social problems demanding the highest level of attention from policy and practice. It is important to appreciate that we, as a society, cannot hope to tackle such problems meaningfully if we do not address the needs of some of the most isolated and excluded segments of society. A truly inclusive society requires us to treat every person as a person, first and foremost, and not as an identity label. We recommend that the findings in this review, while relating to the Deaf community, are not treated as “minority issues” that are bracketed off and de-prioritised. Instead, we strongly encourage a genuine person-centred approach that enables us to break down silos and adopt more holistic approaches to solving the problems identified.