



Report on Access to Council Services for Older Deaf People in England and Wales

Contents

1. Introduction	5
2. Methodology	7
3. Findings	8
4. Geographical Mix	20
5. Gender	20
6. Key Themes	21
7. Recommendations	23
8. Conclusion	24
9. Bibliography	25
Appendix 1: BDA's BSL Charter	26
Appendix 2: Narratives	27
The British Deaf Association – BDA	36

"I love politics and we all need to be involved. We need to be a part of this."
(Gentleman – Islington)

1. Introduction

Since the British Deaf Association (BDA) was founded in 1890, its primary purpose has been the status and recognition of the Deaf community and British Sign Language (BSL) in the United Kingdom. The cornerstones of the BDA are:

- Language
- Community
- Identity
- Heritage
- Representation of Deaf¹ people's needs, aspirations, rights and responsibilities.

The BDA is a high profile national Deaf people's organisation with a presence throughout England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

As a member-led organisation, our work is focused on achieving equality for Deaf people through community empowerment, membership and campaigning. Working with local Deaf and BSL communities is crucial to the success of BDA campaigns and creates opportunities for Deaf people to develop, participate and contribute in wider society.

The Community Empowerment Team (CET) was established in April 2012. This is the public face of the BDA working at a local operational level and the link between local Deaf communities and the national campaign work of the BDA.

The team's objectives are to research, identify and meet local Deaf communities to establish and – in some cases – re-establish links between the local communities and public services.

Positive progress has been made by increasing the number of contacts and building upon known existing links with the many varied Deaf communities across the regions. This was achieved by instigating a series of successful visits and presentations during the first two years of CET work.

A notable feature of this work has been the promotion of the BDA's BSL Charter. This sets out five pledges to ensure local authorities meet their legal obligations under the Equality Act 2010.

During this time, it became evident there were challenges in reaching the older Deaf communities across England. However, the existence of the popular England Deaf Darby and Joan (EDDJ) annual holiday rally for over 55s seemed to be an ideal opportunity to gather some qualitative evidence.

Consequently, in October 2012, in our role as BDA Empowerment and Campaigns Officers², we joined the EDDJ in Skegness for two days to assess whether or not it would be possible to carry out a survey the following year. It was also an opportunity to build up relations and trust with those at the rally as many of those attending are repeat attendees. We felt it was important to appreciate that older Deaf people are wary of people they do not know.

¹ The BDA uses a capitalised 'D' to denote those who use British Sign Language and consider themselves as part of a Deaf community with its own language and culture. A lowercase 'd' is used to describe those who have hearing loss and are not seen as members of the Deaf community.

² Robin Ash & James Mclean

The following year the EDDJ rally took place at Butlins, Minehead, Somerset from 30 September to 4 October 2013. We attended for a whole week to enable us to have access to and survey a proportion of 850 Deaf people in attendance from all over the UK. The aim was to obtain the experiences and impact of accessing health services in their own local areas.

This report outlines the methodology used, findings, key themes and recommendations.

2. Methodology

After visiting the EDDJ rally in Skegness, we took a decision to take a week in Minehead for the purposes of interviewing people face-to-face. This decision was influenced by evidence indicating that the older generation of Deaf BSL users have had limited access to education, consequently literacy skills are much lower compared to that of the general population. In addition, many older deaf people have limited or no access to social media. Historically they do not respond in an open and frank way if sent written forms to complete. To source so many people within this age category across the country would have been a monumental task and to follow up with face-to-face interviews would have been equally challenging.

For us to be able to access those older Deaf people who prefer to express their views in BSL enabling to contribute their own ideas and solutions in a culturally safe environment, the EDDJ rally in Minehead was an ideal event to meet those requirements.

2.1 CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS

Both of us spent significant amounts of time talking in BSL with attendees in various locations at different times of the day during that week. Interviews took place either individually, or in groups of no more than six, depending on individual preferences.

The aim was to ascertain if they had issues in accessing local council services. Additional questions were asked about how they felt they had been treated and what could be done to improve their individual experiences. There was also opportunity to discuss what support was available to resolve whatever issues arose as well as the overall effect it has on their lives.

Limited research has been undertaken regarding accessing council services, but even less on how older Deaf people feel about the way they have been treated and the isolation they may experience accessing council services. Older Deaf people have had very limited opportunities to share their experiences of accessing council services in their preferred language, BSL.

2.2 OUR APPROACH

We wanted to understand how older Deaf people perceive council provision and what they view as council services. Do they understand letters they receive from the council, literature related to voting, refuse collections, education, public meetings, and tenancy agreements? If they do not, how do they then access that information? How can the council be more accessible for this group of people?

3. Findings

3.1 THE INTERVIEWEES

From the group of 850 people in attendance, approximately a quarter was interviewed (200 in total).

We were also mindful of the fact that the EDDJ was their annual opportunity of meeting and socialising with their friends from far and wide and perhaps their only holiday. Many stayed the week at Butlins and many took the opportunity to visit the local area and sights. We would not be able to interview everyone but we managed a high rate of return.

One impact of undertaking this survey was witnessing first-hand the emotional outpouring from interviewees when revealing their experiences of accessing council services.

This was offset by how readily interviewees also wanted to share their positive experiences as well.

3.2 NARRATIVES AND IMPACT

3.2.1 TRANSCRIPTS

The transcripts were recorded using sign language interpreters who voiced into a recording machine. This was then typed up into comparable English. As BSL is a different language with a distinct grammar and syntax, it is inevitable that some of the English lacks coherence or strict grammatical rules but this is counterbalanced by its accuracy. Wherever possible we have added notes to clarify what the person meant. The following is a sample of what was said to us and we have grouped these into six categories with the rest in the appendix:

1. Providing services and information
2. Interpreting support
3. Engagement and support
4. Responding to enquiries
5. Social services provision of personal aids
6. Consultations.

Providing services and information

Many councils appear not to have appreciated the importance of providing a service or information in a format that is accessible for Deaf residents.

In South Wales it is their rule/policy that they only see you on a Thursday afternoon but I am at work. How can I go on a Thursday afternoon – I contacted them over a month ago and they have never got back to me.

I think this is really stupid and very frustrating. It just doesn't make sense.

(Gentleman – Wales)

I was very worried about the bedroom tax so I went to the 'One Stop Shop' because I was very worried about this – I had to write notes back and forth – they had a man that can sign – just level 1 – it is very difficult to understand him.

(Gentleman – Liverpool)

Some services are linked to social services for Deaf people. These have traditionally been accessed either through a council-run service or a voluntary agency (usually an organisation working with Deaf people) under contract.

The service is rubbish –they say there is no money to keep it open – we are fighting to keep our club open. Social services are poor too and we get no support from the social worker.

The council don't think about Deaf people. They are not involved with the Deaf community – they have services for disabled people but where are the services for Deaf people – where are the interpreters?

(Lady – Coventry)

We get no services from the council now. A long time ago it was very good – now there is one social worker for the whole area. The social worker said it's all changed now and we have to be independent – they are only like an advocate or interpreter.

(Gentleman – Huddersfield)

The services in Chester are crap – there are no excuses. We only get drop in sessions with interpreters, we have to put our names on a list and I could be sat there for over an hour waiting to be seen. The drop in only runs from 2pm to 4pm! All the Deaf People complain, as they are frustrated. We need and want more access to interpreters. The over 50's group also need to see the interpreters but they say they have no time. People have to go in one at a time and we have to wait our turn – it's a nuisance having to wait a long time – terrible really.

Everyone feels let down by the service. I am frustrated. We all complain and complain but nothing changes.

(Lady – Chester)

The council is not very good – various problems with them. The service is rubbish – why do they reduce the number of Deaf Clubs – everything is smaller and there is no support. No social worker now – no support and no contact with the council. I get letters but nothing is explained.

(Lady – Brighton)

It appears that voluntary agencies working with Deaf people are generally well regarded as there were very few complaints about their services. That is probably because they have staff that can use BSL.

The council have interpreters and have helped me many times. If I get letters from them and I don't understand and then I take to Worcester Deaf Direct. If there were no Deaf Direct I would be totally lost – I wouldn't know what to do.

When I see them I feel much better – I have no problems with my house now as they have helped me. Most of my support comes from Deaf Direct – there are 6 interpreters there and 4 office staff. I go every 2 weeks for a coffee morning – all the Deaf come together and have a chat – this makes us all happy and we enjoy going there every 2 weeks.

(Gentleman – Worcestershire)

However, external agencies that have no experience of working with Deaf people are not easily accepted as they are unfamiliar.

There are no social services for Deaf people. They use 'Sight' which is a unit for Blind people. 'Sight' pays the costs for the interpreters. If they book the interpreters they are a bit crafty as they use low level signers – I say I am not having that. I want a fully qualified interpreter that can interpret properly.

The council are mean and only want to pay the cheapest – they don't want to pay the higher costs for a qualified interpreter.

(Lady – South Wales, previously Birmingham)

The council book interpreters but the Deaf people are confused – they don't know where to go – a lot don't know how to use interpreters – many can't write notes properly. We were told by the council to use CAB for advice and they will book interpreters. Deaf people have never gone to CAB before and it is very confusing for them as it is different from what they are used to. When the social worker was there it was good but now there is no information! The council have nothing to say – they never informed us that the social worker was going to finish, there was no letters – we knew nothing.

(Gentleman – Barnsley)

General council services, mainly housing, are also criticised for their lack of action or support.

I live in flats on the 5th floor – I have a problem with the entry door. Downstairs there are stickers on each bell to show which flat with a new entry system – you press the bell and a buzzer sounds in the flat. My sister rang the council for me and explained I was Deaf and can't hear or see who is at the door as it is an intercom system. I live on my own so no one there to answer the intercom. They said they couldn't afford a video system.

When they said no to a CCTV system I felt upset – I can't believe this – I think it is awful – it is not fair for Deaf people – they should find a way to put CCTV in for me.

(Lady – Richmond)

I had a letter about them coming to sort out my ceiling as I had damp and they tried to ring me! How can they when I am Deaf – poor access to council workers – why do they knock on the door or try to ring me?

(Lady – Manchester)

On the other hand, some respondents acknowledged that their local councils were providing a decent and accessible service.

I have been in Croydon for a year now – social services have been very good and helpful, they have worked hard for me.

(Lady – Croydon)

My council is OK – I get a good service – we have a Deaf social worker so if there are any problems they are sorted out. It is a brilliant service and they also have an interpreter there. So from what I can see so far Croydon is very good.

(Gentleman – Croydon)

I had problems with my council tax – I had help from Ruth, she is a social worker and I meet with her regularly – she is very good. Ruth helps me understand.

(Lady – Cambridge)

At my council the service we get is perfect!

(Gentleman – Surrey)

The service from the council in Islington is very good – we get everything. Support with housing issues, interpreter support just everything.

I feel very good about the service that we have.

(Lady – Islington)

Interpreting support

This was an issue that came up repeatedly. Often how authorities provided interpreting support determined how Deaf people viewed their council. Basically if they did not provide, then respondents were unhappy. But if they did, then respondents were satisfied.

When I have asked the council for an interpreter they said no. They said I had to go on a computer and do this online. I can't do this I am a sign language user I want to see someone face to face in the council with an interpreter. They said there used to be too many Deaf people going to the council so they changed it to online. Wasted a lot of time to be honest!

I felt I could not be bothered with them anymore.

(Gentleman – Bedford)

The council don't provide interpreters. We can't just turn up, we need to book appointments but we need an interpreter there. This is a problem and this is what we want. What happens when we need to ask for repairs or something to do with schools or children?

It is so unfair. There is no interpreter support. Where is the information that we need this makes me more stressed – if there is no interpreter there it makes me stressed and angry.
(Gentleman – Oldham)

We used to have a social worker that worked under Bexley council – they moved the social worker into an organisation called Inspire – they gave them a budget – when Deaf people asked the Social worker to interpret for things so the social worker did – we then found out they were not qualified and I was not happy with this. I was chair for Bexley Deaf Centre. I always demand a qualified interpreter to make sure the information I get is right and clear. Other people don't have the right level of skill and don't understand us and also the Deaf people don't understand them.

I don't feel we get equal access – it is difficult. Why do they use low level interpreters? Their communication is very poor – I am not happy.*

(Gentleman – Bexley, Kent)

* Unqualified and not registered with the National Registers of Communication Professionals Working with Deaf and Deafblind People (NRCPD)

We never have interpreters present when accessing any council services.

It is unfair because hearing people get dealt with straightaway whereas we are told to return the next day when an interpreter may be booked.

(Gentleman – Stafford)

Never been anything serious but they have a bad attitude if I ask for an interpreter - they look like they can't be bothered.

(Lady – Leicester)

I received a letter from the County council so I went down, took a ticket and waited a long time, I had to watch the machine all the time – everyone else was reading magazines – when I went up I was told I have to wait for an interpreter – this is not fair, everyone else doesn't have to wait. I needed to know what this letter said. I waited over an hour for nothing.

They treated me like I was a bit stupid – it was not a nice experience. When I was trying to talk to her she kept looking in other places not at me. She had no idea at all and did not understand me at all. I gave up and left. I am not happy at all.

(Gentleman – Swindon)

We have no social worker at all – Bexley are lucky they get someone booked to interpret - we get nothing. We don't get any interpreters at all. Bexley get them all the time. I get nothing in Essex yet across the water in Kent they get everything – a good service – how come?

(Lady – Essex)

It does not have to be this way. With the right organisation, councils can provide an adequate service to meet the needs of Deaf residents.

My council is Islington – there are lots of interpreters – very good even though the area is poor.

I don't know why other councils are not good – some Deaf people are lucky and have children that can sign and some interpreters are not very good! The council has really good services – it is very, very good. Deaf people attend their meetings – good for us.

(Gentleman – London)

My council is very good – they send me information – I don't understand it though – I have to give it to someone to explain it to me. There is an interpreting agency that I take the letters to and they explain them to me.

(Gentleman – Tameside)

Engagement and support

One way that authorities engage with their local communities is by sending letters or other material. This is mostly unappreciated by respondents.

When I receive questionnaires from the council or leaflets and that type of information I just throw them away as I have no interest in them. I have no personal contact with the council at all; I have no involvement with them. When I look at the city council – they don't encourage us to take part in anything! They don't make any effort to make us feel a part of it. I don't know what is happening! – I have no access to the radio or when there is information on the TV or the news. I just have no interest. They are just not aware of Deaf people – they just think about themselves – locked away in their 'Ivory Tower'. They just don't get involved with us at all.

I am really not bothered – fed up of waiting for them to ask us to be involved, they just don't do that. To be honest I feel really left out. They don't support us 100% and I don't support them either.

(Lady – Chippenham)

I live in my own home and have no communication with the council – they never send me anything. I have no information about what is happening locally – sometimes I get a letter to say they are doing a repair on the roads but apart from that I get nothing really – I have no involvement at all.

(Lady – Birmingham)

I don't have dealings with the council – same as normal. I don't really understand the information that they send to me. My sons help to translate it for me.

(Lady – Chester)

Do not have much contact with them, they send me letters but I never meet them. If I have any problems I use my son or the social worker.

Can't be bothered with them, I ask my son. He says some not important.*

(Lady – Bolton le Sands, Carnforth, Lancashire)

* some letters and information leaflets

Some authorities do not seem to communicate at all with their local Deaf residents. The following are illustrative of some views from respondents.

I don't really have any dealings with my local council; I don't know anything about them or what the council does. I rent a house and if they come to do repairs they never bring interpreters so I don't really know what's happening.

Frustrated, as I don't know what they say or what they do!

(Lady – Cambridge)

The council just don't talk to us – we get no information from the council.

I feel I want to know information about my local area and I get absolutely nothing from them. Feels like I am invisible. I am worried as I feel I need that information. How do they know I am here! If I go and ask for help they can't understand me!

(Lady – Nottingham)

The service was good before; we had typetalk and DVD's, which used to be good. It is hard now to get access to things now – the service is poor. We get letters to say we have to pay this or that but when they are doing something in the street we see them knocking on the neighbours doors but they always miss our house.*

(Gentleman – Sandwell)

* A service that provides telephone interaction between textphones and voicephones by using a third party – now called Text Relay

I tried to enrol onto a council run course but was told that an interpreter would not be booked so I was unable to attend; they did not contact me to let me know if they was able to provide one.

I feel that the council is behind the times especially with access for Deaf people. I feel that we are treated lower than hearing people.

(Gentleman – Surrey)

Some older Deaf people are aware that life has changed and they want to get up to date with computer technology. Unfortunately, it appears that many authorities do not recognise that this is needed.

I don't use my fax anymore and am trying to learn how to use a computer – I need someone to come and sit with me and explain it more. The computer makes it easier to contact the council but they need suitable access for Deaf people.

(Lady – Oakleigh, Liverpool)

I use my computer to read any information they put out but there is a problem understanding the information. I went on a course to learn how to use the computer but I have bad memory and forget easily. I don't use the minicom as the letters are always jumbled up and I don't use my fax anymore either.*

(Lady – Wigan)

* Textphone for use with landline phones

It does not need to be like this. Here respondents show their appreciation of how the council engages with them.

I have good dealings with my council – if there is anything wrong I can tell them. I have no problems – lucky really as my council is good.

(Gentleman – Liverpool)

I do not often need to contact my council but when I have then they are very good as they provide an interpreter. I am confident with my council as they provide a good accessible service.

Happy with the service.

(Lady – Kent)

If I had to go the council I would go myself, look at the leaflets to see what was suitable for us. I did this and went to the receptionist and said I am Deaf and I need to talk about this. Wow, the receptionist could sign, I was amazed, and she explained the leaflet to me. Two weeks later we went back and they started to get to know me and always provided me with that service so if something was on the TV about the Government and changes I could go and get the information I needed.

When the council receptionist could sign for me it was good when I see people sign.

(Gentleman – Wiltshire)

Responding to enquiries

Some Deaf respondents have tried to contact their local councils but have not met with much success.

I live in a flat and really need a ground floor flat – my council is rubbish! My hot water broke down – I told them and they never came – I waited for a long time – I complained through a woman that comes to our coffee morning who can sign – she helped me. I can't ring if there is an emergency – I would try and ask my neighbour to ring for me or I would fax.

(Lady – Worcester)

I made a report about bullying of my son and no one listened! The council or the education should have sorted it out and I used the social services to help – the council need to provide interpreters so I can report things like this.

(Lady – Wisbech)

I emailed the council and waited over 3 months and had no reply. I contacted an advocacy service called POhWHR to help me. All I wanted was information regarding recycling boxes – they had given me old ones that were broken.*

I emailed them and they have done nothing. A hearing person can make a quick phone call and it is sorted out for them. It made me totally fed up with them.

(Lady – Letchworth Garden City, Hertfordshire)

* Provider of Advocacy services

Sometimes I feel ignored and we need a 24/7 emergency text number, I used one they gave us and it took 2 days to get a reply.

(Lady – Manchester)

I am not happy with them; they never listen to what I have to say. At my flat there is a fire escape and the door is sometimes not closed properly, I have asked them to put a notice to remind people to close it properly but 6 or 7 months later and still nothing. I have no communication with them – I have had enough of them – they are not for me!

(Gentleman – Derby)

I had to contact the council about an issue so asked the social worker to ring but the council would not discuss anything with her, they asked me to talk with them on the phone instead but how can I, as I am Deaf. They do not understand Deaf issues.

I do not understand the council's literature, as it is too difficult for me to read.

(Lady – Kent)

Social services provision of personal aids

Traditionally a main part of the service from the council was equipment to assist with everyday life. This ranged from flashing light doorbells to aids for listening to television. Not surprisingly, respondents commented on this issue a few times.

It is 6 week wait for equipment in Leicester! The equipment is important for us. The doorbell is only 2 years old and broken already.*

(Lady – Leicester)

* There are various aids on the market – some are connected to the lighting system of the house, others are stand-alone flashing indicators.

My doorbell stopped working so went to the over 50's club. I asked them to phone for me – they said there is a 6 week wait – this is important to me but I have to wait so if I have a delivery coming I have to watch out all day – the reason they gave was a waiting list!

I feel I have to put the lights on all the time and it doesn't make me feel good. I have to watch everything. We only found out as one night my wife heard a bang and we saw a torch light – it was our grandson who had climbed over the gate – I said why not just ring doorbell – that's how we found out it wasn't working. I don't want to wait 6 weeks – it is just not fair – we need that access!

(Gentleman – Leicester)

Coventry council doesn't have much provision for Deaf People. There is no social worker or social services for Deaf people anymore.

They provide technical support but what is missing is they don't show Deaf people what equipment is available or check what people actually need. Some people prefer a flashing light above and others prefer at their side. They just give people equipment and say that is what they have to accept. They should talk to people and find out actually what they need and what suits each individual.*

* bodyworn alerts

Seems like social services cut more and more and the services for Deaf people are cut more and more. It makes the Deaf people uncomfortable – they become complacent and not involved anymore. They feel they can't lobby for services so just accept the situation – they just don't get access to this and it is very difficult for Deaf people and they just 'Give up'!

(Gentleman – Solihull – works in Coventry)

Caerphilly council are not good, if Deaf people go and ask for equipment such as a new minicom or doorbell the social workers there say they are now involved anymore and we have to buy our own from RNID**. I object to that, why should I have to pay for a new doorbell – I am Deaf – it is the council's responsibility to pay for that. Other places in the country get that for free – I object. I had no information about cutting the social worker***.*

(Lady – Caerphilly, Wales)

* Textphone for use with landline phones

** Now called Action on Hearing Loss

*** Specialist social worker for Deaf people – the services are now mainstream

Padstow County Council is OK, they are helpful but it's not really very often that I go there or contact them. It is only for equipment really.

(Lady – Alton, Hampshire)

Consultations

For some Deaf people, what is upsetting is the way that councils implement decisions, often without any consultation with the Deaf community. The following transcripts are indicative of their views. Our council is not really good; hard to say really, it's different now and a lot has happened. We had a social worker before and that was really good – the council provided a lot for us but now we don't get that anymore. Our Deaf club has closed and that was a council decision.

Our council is not really good; hard to say really, it's different now and a lot has happened. We had a social worker before and that was really good – the council provided a lot for us but now we don't get that anymore. Our Deaf club has closed and that was a council decision.

Tired – too tired to keep fighting. We started a forum last year – we used the space in the pub, as that was free.

(Lady – Barnsley, South Yorkshire)

They never discuss anything with me – like when they changed the bus pass rules and times. We are put to the bottom of the pile. The city and county council used to work together – everything was lovely and ran smoothly. They have split now and work separately.

I feel annoyed – there are problems just trying to complain – the county council should have let us know what was happening.

(Lady – Hinckley)

The Service from Greenwich is appalling.*

No support available to attend council meetings so views of Deaf community cannot be passed on – they say not allowed. They are supposed to help old people but nothing! We have been fighting for the support for Deaf people, as there is nothing left now for Deaf people and we want to complain.

All the forums and meetings we used to attend have all folded. No meetings in Greenwich for 5 years. I have complained and complained and no one listens to me. They just don't care – I want to attend meetings and know what is happening.

I just don't know what to do. Things are getting worse!

(Gentleman – Greenwich)

** Greenwich council*

The Deaf community have never been invited to consultations about any changes that the council are planning to make.

(Lady – Tipton)

The council have never offered us a consultation specific to Deaf people so we are unaware of what will be the changes. I have never had a council invite me to the information meetings. I receive council information through the post but just throw it straight into the bin because I do not understand what it says.

We are left out!

(Gentleman – Tipton)

We have never been invited to Deaf people specific consultations about the changing council services.

Do not understand what is happening in the council.

(Gentleman – Folkestone)

I was never informed that they were cutting the social worker for the Deaf. It is very difficult for us – everything has shut down now. They should have come to the Deaf Community and asked if we agreed or not – why didn't we get the opportunity to say how we feel? This is very important.

(Gentleman – Caerphilly, Wales)

We set up a forum, they asked me to be involved, I am not very good at English but I can explain what I want as I have a good mind – other Deaf people have some good writing skills. We set up this forum last August – we had visiting people who came and we told them how we felt. They said we will come back next month and feedback to us – they never came back – they wouldn't come back. It feels like it is unfinished business.*

(Gentleman – Barnsley)

*officials from service providers

On the other hand, some authorities do consult with their local Deaf residents. When they do, it is appreciated.

I have regular meetings with the council about various things and usually I am satisfied with the meetings. If I have had forms to complete and not sure what to write then I ask the council to provide an interpreter who then completes the form from my signing to them the answers.

(Gentleman – Lewisham)

Our council is really good – I go to the forum meetings once a month. We explain our problems etc. might be the street lighting or something. 2 Deaf go to these meetings – they are proud to have us there. We can explain to the council and get more information, it is good.

(Lady – Gloucester)

4. Geographical Mix

On completion of the interviews, respondents were identified as coming from the following regions:

Region	Percentage
North West	16.8
North East	5.0
West Midlands	16.8
East Midlands	10.4
East of England	8.4
South West	14.3
South East	7.1
London	13.6
Wales	7.1

5. Gender

The following is in the gender breakdown:

Gender	Percentage
Female	62
Male	38

6. Key Themes

6.1 TRAINING

Very few frontline staff have any awareness of Deaf issues or are able to communicate at a basic level in British Sign Language (BSL). Many staff do not even know how to book interpreters to comply with the Equality Act 2010.

6.2 SUPPORT AND TECHNOLOGY

Many older Deaf people find it difficult to understand council information as English is usually their second language. There are very few specialist advocacy services they can utilise to understand their rights in accessing council services. In addition the situation is unlikely to improve in the near future as organisations supporting Deaf communities and providing specialist services are increasingly under considerable strain. A BDA survey of service providers (Oct 2012) identified that 60% of 63 respondents had funding reduced during the financial year 2011/12 whilst 55 out of 63 reported an overall drop in income. Of these, 38% lost local authority funding whilst 29% respondents reduced staffing and service provision as a result. Out of 30 respondents who answered a related question, 88% felt that the overall situation was getting worse for Deaf people.

Due to this decrease of specialist social workers with Deaf people and the reduction of local Deaf organisations providing information support, older Deaf people do not know where to go or what to do.

This is compounded by the fact that many older Deaf people do not have access to computers to be able to access council services online. If they do have computers, then there is a lack of accessible computer training to enable them to make best use of the computers.

Council services also do not use up-to-date technology to enable people access to their services e.g. Video Relay Services or text messaging.

6.3 CITIZENSHIP

Older Deaf people do not feel they are treated as equal or full citizens by their local councils. They do not feel their views are heard or understood. As a result, they feel isolated and ignored. This, in turn, means they do not have knowledge of what their local council services can provide. When they do have an understanding of council services, they are unable to access the complaints procedure as this is not in BSL. They also are not able to access any mainstream council consultations that other residents can attend.

6.4 INTERPRETERS

The biggest issue in terms of being able to access council services and its staff is lack of interpreting facilities. Older Deaf people have either experienced a lack of interpreter provision or requests for interpreters have been denied. When councils have used someone, additional difficulties are experienced by the Deaf person due to the use of unqualified people. Often those used by the council have neither the signing skills nor the understanding to be able to translate effectively. Councils have also offered communication support workers (CWSs) who do not have the same level of BSL skills. There have also been demands that family and friends are used. CSWs, relatives or friends have not been trained as interpreters so their ability to convey accurately information is limited. Another difficulty is that the older Deaf person, having been used to direct support from a specialist social worker, does not always appreciate the interpreter's role which does not include advice or advocacy.

7. Recommendations

- All local authorities should sign up to the BDA's BSL Charter as part of good practice on improving access to council services for the local Deaf residents
- All local authorities should ensure that frontline council staff undertake bespoke basic BSL skills and Deaf Equality training
- All local authorities should ensure that the communication preferences of local service users be recorded; list their preferred registered interpreters who are then automatically booked when a service user requests an appointment
- All local authorities should ensure that BSL interpreters booked are registered with National Register of Communication Professionals for Deaf People (NRCPD)
- All local authorities should make concerted efforts to engage with local Deaf communities and consult with them regularly
- All local authorities should review contracts to ensure that licenses and grants to local services or organisations include obligations to meet the Equality Act 2010. Taxi licences for example should include a stipulation that they can be contacted in a variety of ways including text messaging
- All local authorities should make provision for older Deaf people to access specialist computer training in BSL e.g. how to access online service provision
- There should be regional initiatives to develop specialist advocacy services for older Deaf people who are unable to access a specialist social worker.

8. Conclusion

Being able to interview a large number of older Deaf people within such a short timescale was a wonderful and rare opportunity and we were grateful to be able to make use of that.

It became clear that older Deaf people have a remarkable similarity of experiences attempting to access council services which have been consistently repeated across the UK. The impact on individual lives is considerable and we found this at times shocking and we came away deeply saddened.

We would hope that local council services start to work closely with and consult with their local Deaf residents and conduct a dialogue through local forums. This will enable Deaf residents to articulate their views and for council services to consider how they can make their services accessible.

Local councils can achieve this by working with the British Deaf Association. Signing up to the BSL Charter would be a positive statement of intent as the Charter provides a framework and toolkit. Once the statement of intent has been declared, an action plan can then be developed by working with the local Deaf community leading to implementation towards making services accessible. Doing so would empower Deaf people by them becoming more informed of their rights.

The British Deaf Association would like to express their gratitude and thanks to the members of England Deaf Darby and Joan (EDDJ) who gave their time and took part in the interviews and the EDDJ organisers for their support, allowing us to visit and carry out the interviews at their annual rally.

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British Deaf Association

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Appendix I: BDA's BSL Charter

Local authorities and public services across the UK are asked to sign up to the Charter for British Sign Language (BSL) and make five pledges to improve access and rights for Deaf BSL users.

1. ENSURE ACCESS FOR DEAF PEOPLE TO INFORMATION AND SERVICES

Pledge: Deaf people will get the same quality of provision, information and standards and the same right to be consulted as everyone else.

This will make more Deaf people (include those who have problems with written information) aware of services and able to access these independently. It will also ensure compliance with the Equality Act 2010.

2. PROMOTE LEARNING AND HIGH QUALITY TEACHING OF BRITISH SIGN LANGUAGE (BSL)

Pledge: The families of deaf children and Deaf young people and local authority/public service employees will have access to BSL lessons from suitably qualified teachers.

This will improve communication and bonding between parents/carers, children and siblings, reduce Deaf people's isolation and improve relations between Deaf and hearing people.

3. SUPPORT DEAF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Pledge: At the point of diagnosis of deafness, health and education providers will offer parents genuinely informed choices, including a bilingual/bicultural approach.

This will increase Deaf people's academic achievement and job opportunities and enhance family life by improving communication between children, parents/carers and siblings.

4. ENSURE STAFF WORKING WITH DEAF PEOPLE CAN COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY IN BSL

Pledge: Customer-facing staff will have basic BSL skills. Specialist staff will have higher-level BSL skills so they can deliver good services to Deaf people without needing interpreters.

This will improve customer satisfaction and reduce the need for BSL/English interpreters when providing specialist services for Deaf people.

5. CONSULT WITH THE LOCAL DEAF COMMUNITY ON A REGULAR BASIS

Pledge: Deaf people will have the right to be consulted on services or changes to services that affect them and to have input into consultations alongside other forums and user groups.

This will improve services for Deaf people, empower Deaf people and free them up to contribute more to the local community.

Appendix II: Narratives

The following are additional transcripts – these are not in any order or organised into any categories.

I am under Trafford council and there are 11 district councils and then Manchester city council in the Manchester area. Before all the government cuts it used to be really good. Now access for Deaf people is not good.

In the Trafford area there are 37 taxi firms and the council are responsible for their annual renewal of their licences – I have told them that only 2 of the 37 have a text message number. We asked why not change this and they were very reluctant to do that – they pay to get that licence why can't the council enforce that part.

I feel like getting a machine gun and mowing them all down – they just don't listen.
(Gentleman - South Manchester)

The service we get from the council is a bit iffy!
(Lady – Bedford)

I rarely go to the council, as I don't have any problems. I remember once we came back from holiday and there was a letter to say that we owed 3 months council Tax, I went to the office and a lady there rang for me and I was told I had to go to another place so she explained how to get there. When I got there I was told I had to make an appointment for the next week and when I went back they realised they had the wrong bank account number and they sorted it all out for me.

People forget that we are Deaf and we can't ring – I say I am Deaf but people always behave the same. Most appointments made too soon so not enough time to find an interpreter.*
(Lady - Welling, Kent)

* too short notice for booking an interpreter

I object to the council when they say they are coming to visit and then don't as they have changed their minds. It is very difficult to access the council, as we can't communicate with them.

When that happens I feel very small – it is not a nice feeling.
(Lady – Derby)

It's not very good. The county council are not very supportive and there are a lot of delays in services such as repairs to my gas fire. They never tell me anything – my sister tells me what is happening. We don't have a social worker anymore. It is not good as I saw a lady who had lost a lot of weight and I was shocked to see her. Her father had passed away and she had no help or support and became depressed. I tried to help her but I couldn't – she needed a social worker – she was very vulnerable this woman and it is a shame.
(Gentleman – Loughborough)

It's OK – we got a letter from the council that I didn't understand, as my English is not that good on a Monday I have to go and get someone to explain these letters to me. There is a translation service, which really helps me – this voluntary service, but they need funding if it is to continue.

(Gentleman – Leicester)

For many years my mother and father helped me with the council. My council is Litchfield. The council have to send letters to keep us informed – I pay my council tax every month but I am never involved in any meetings. I went to the council to clarify something and the member of staff went on the computer for me so if I need to can go in to the council and write notes but if it was something serious I would tell my son as he has Power of Attorney.

(Lady – Tamworth)

If I go to the council for a repair etc the receptionist talks to me and I don't understand what they are saying so I have to write this down. I say I need an interpreter.

(Lady – Oldham)

My council is Liverpool Housing Trust – they know I am Deaf and I do try to make myself understood when I have a problem such as a repair – they never provide interpreters.

(Gentleman – Liverpool)

We have no social worker at all. We have poor interpreters in the area – not qualified. There are a lot of young Deaf people in Swindon – their level of English is better than ours. The older Deaf rely on hearing children – not fair. We need a social worker if we need to discuss benefits etc. I don't mind cuts if they are fair. Once I went to the council and took my ticket and waited my turn, they said if I wanted an interpreter I would have to wait until next week then they told me to wait in this room – a man came in with a big black dictionary. This man was learning BSL and thought he could use the BSL dictionary to sign from. I said 'No – I am not having this - sorry but this is just not good enough!' he said he was BSL Level 2. I said we need to postpone this meeting!

I have no job and feel like I am second class! Other people get support to get jobs – I am very, very frustrated.

(Lady – Swindon)

My council is Elmbridge – I have a good relationship with them. When the bedroom tax was announced I went to them and asked about this and they said either I would have to pay this or move – they got me a new flat, my daughter helped me sort this out and came with me.

When people don't listen to me I feel angry – when I say I need an interpreter and they say they don't have them but the social worker told me they do. I went into a huge rage – why do we always have to fight.

(Person – Elmbridge)

In Walsall a lot of Deaf People struggle, a lot is communication breakdown to be fair. A lot of work is done for wheelchair access etc and some provide good access and some don't and it depends on the service.

To be honest I don't have anything much to do with the council. It's my own house and the council tax is taken by direct debit – I don't have any contact with them. I do not know what is happening locally to where I live.

(Lady – Walsall)

If I try to ring using the minicom – the access to the minicom line is very poor – the minicom always plays up.*

I feel like I don't really want to contact the council anymore.

(Lady – Sandwell)

** textphone*

I do support my wife but she does need more help from the Government as it is lacking in many ways.

I feel torn sometimes as I want to support my wife in her activities. She really should be independent as possible and I thought maybe it is better for her to do things herself.

(Gentleman – Alton, Hampshire – Hearing husband of Deaf wife)

The council is poor – all the support has gone – it was better before.

People tell me that I have to phone for things – how can I do that when I am Deaf – it's not fair. Or they tell me to look online – I can't do that either because I do not understand the internet or computers.

It makes me feel fed up.

(Lady – Chester)

I live just outside Chester in North Wales – my husband does most of the contact with the council for me and interprets for me – he is hearing so makes all the phone calls for me.

(Lady – Chester)

I have heard about a lot of cuts that are happening in Winchester. A lot of interpreter cuts and they are having problems. There are major cuts there.

They don't use qualified interpreters.

(Lady – Southampton)

We have issues with provision of interpreters similar to Hampshire but the council services are very good. Sometimes I have to write down notes if there is no interpreter there and I know some people don't even get interpreters and don't understand when people write information down. Some areas have interpreters and others don't.

(Lady – Portsmouth)

I work for Norwich Deaf Society and I support Deaf people with their problems with the council etc. The relationship with the council is interesting – there isn't one. It's so frustrating, the Data Protection Act is so frustrating also. If a Deaf person wants to report a repair to the council, they come to my PA and me phones to report that repair – that is fine. But if the Deaf person wants to ask any details about any points and discuss anything they won't talk to us. Even though the Deaf person is there and explaining it to my PA, and me they won't accept the 3 way conversation. They say it is because the Deaf person has not given us permission to talk to them on their behalf. They ask can the Deaf person say their name, and full address on the phone – I say via my PA how can this person do this they are profoundly Deaf! How can they say their name and address and ask if they will take my word for it as I am from Deaf Action and they say no!

I ask for the appointment date and they say they will phone them and let them know! How when they are Deaf? Then the Deaf person comes back saying they haven't heard from the council but their phone has been ringing and they can't answer it and they get nervous as they don't know who is phoning – they don't send letters. So we have to start all over again – it is so frustrating and annoying.

(Lady – Norfolk)

I said I want to make an appointment to discuss this bill and I also need an interpreter. They said how do I contact and book an interpreter! Then they said they couldn't do that and I would have to do this myself! I said no it is your responsibility to book the interpreter – they said who will pay? I told them YOU! It is not me that pays. We had an argument over this and eventually she said she had to ask her manager – she came back and said can you lipread as it will only take 5 minutes! I really couldn't believe they had said that to me! I said no – I want an interpreter as I don't understand the written words that you are using or the English it is written in and I need an interpreter – so they agreed and I had my meeting and it did only take 5 minutes to explain.

(Lady – Norfolk)

I am worried about the future! If my husband goes before me what do I do? Where do I get information?

I have been his carer for 7 years and not had a break and he is now in respite care so I can come to EDDJ. I don't want him in a home he needs independence but I just don't know what to do about future finances!

Very concerned about the future of services and support!

(Lady – Romford, Havering)

A lady I know moved from Wolverhampton to Reading and the provision for Deaf people is amazing.

Also very concerned about the future of services and support! I don't feel that I have any communication with the council at all – not very good for Deaf people.

(Lady – Birmingham)

Deaf people don't understand the letters from the council and this can get them into debt – hearing people can access CAB and Deaf people suffer. It is embarrassing for Deaf people, as they don't understand what it means to be in debt.

Deaf people need to be equal and the responsibility is the council's, as they need to be more accessible.

(Gentleman – Islington)

I have had little or no access to services as I have to communicate via written English, but English is my second language so difficult for me to express my needs.

Council traffic wardens are not Deaf Aware, I had a problem with a meter, as I could not hear that a coin was rejected and assumed that I had paid the appropriate money for the time that I needed. I tried to question a warden about this on my return to the car, but was ushered into a council office and told to complete a form, as my written English is not perfect I couldn't explain what had happened, consequently was fined £65.00.

The Deaf community needs to work together to confront the council about their lack of access to services as I am expected to do this alone which I do not want to do.

(Gentleman – Enfield)

I do not understand what services the council offer, as I do not understand the written information

The council has let me down.

(Lady – Smethwick)

I have come across a lot of access barriers when trying to get information from the council.

We had an earthquake about 5 years ago but did not know who to go to for help or where to find out more information or any information that was in an appropriate format.

(Lady – Folkestone)

I am unable to access the council services because they do not book an interpreter, they ask for the meeting to be postponed whilst an interpreter can be found which is unfair. As I need the information at that time not days later.

Angry.

(Gentleman – Reading)

The council's written information is too high level English and I do not understand it.

Frustrated.

(Gentleman – Harrow)

The only problem is when a council worker comes to my home to inspect or something as an interpreter is never booked which means that I cannot ask what the problem is or get any feedback.

(Gentleman – Minehead)

The problem is that the council do not know who to contact when an interpreter is needed. I have had one occasion where two interpreters have arrived which is a waste of money. There are no local interpreter agencies in my area so that is why they are struggling.

The council provided the VRS without offering consultation.*

(Lady – Wigan)

* Video Relay Service. This offers remote interpreting via computer screens.

The council do not give us enough information to be able to access their services

Lack of information, which is disappointing.

(Gentleman – Wales)

The council is not accessible – it is not working – the interpreters don't turn up. When I ask they say there is no interpreter! It is discrimination – not providing interpreters.

I feel like they discriminate against me! I always feel let down; they should bring in proper interpreters.*

(Gentleman – Manchester)

* Fully qualified and registered with NRCPD

The council service is poor – they need qualified interpreters. It affects a lot of people every day. They won't pay for interpreters. Very few people in the council will pay for interpreters.

(Gentleman – Hampshire)

There are so many barriers at the council and the Government just don't listen to us. It is not just interpreters we need more help. I hate being Deaf – the situation. The Government need to be aware. We should be equal to hearing people – interpreters are not always clear and we need an advocate to explain so we can understand. The interpreters just interpret what is being said then they go – they have no time afterwards and sometimes they are late.

When the council came to my house my sister was there – she is very good and explained everything to me – the interpreters won't! The interpreters need to learn how to explain things more.

It makes me depressed and I hide at home – no one listens. I feel lost and have low self-esteem. I feel very low. I get confused easily. I hate being Deaf!

(Lady – Did not wish to disclose where she came from)

There has always been a lack of information – I only know what I am told.

(Gentleman – Coventry)

It is awful – it is hard to get interpreters and it is so unfair. If we get someone they are Level 1 or Level 2 – they don't understand us**. Worksop is terrible and it is disgusting.*

(Gentleman – Worksop)

* Level of competency

** Unqualified interpreters are often unable to comprehend what is being signed in BSL

The County council is good and had interpreters – I am good at English so no problems understanding letters from the council.

(Lady – Worksop)

Social services in my area have closed now. The staff members at the council communicate by pen and paper and that is how they communicate with the Deaf community!

(Gentleman – London)

I have no access or dealings with the council – they are not fully aware. Leicester has LDAG and the Deaf Club is important for us – we need to encourage this. Deaf people do need to know about the council as they have no clue and it is not the council's fault.*

(Person – Leicestershire South)

* Leicester Deaf Action Group

We have a Community Service Network in Trafford council. Trafford is a small council and there is not enough information available – we need to keep the Network going so that when technology changes we need to keep everyone aware of these changes.

There should be one place that all professionals could go and get advice but the main problem is the language barrier!

(Lady – Manchester)

My council is very good but they are careful with their finances.

(Lady – Wandsworth)

I don't go to the council for anything – the council are there but I have no interest in them – I don't bother with them – I am happy and don't need them.

(Gentleman – Lytham St Anne's)

I don't really have any contact with the council – they never ask me anything so that is fine – not even for the elections.

(Gentleman – Tameside, Manchester)

The council are not interested in us at all – not interested in Deaf people. I had no information and didn't know until the driver told me on the bus.

(Lady – Leicester)

My council is alright – so-so. We had a meeting 2 weeks ago at Taunton Deaf club where Taunton council came and talked to us about what they are planning. One lady complained over the cuts to the bus services recently at her home area. Buses were every half an hour and they have changed the times and the bus company to WebberBus. I feel sorry for the old people who have no buses, they stand and wait and it is a long walk to the shops. It did get sorted out but it took 6 weeks. The council don't think about older people – they just don't think or consider us. The Government cuts are happening to everyone.

(Lady – Bridgewater, Somerset)

They never talk to me only what they want from me such as council tax –same as my neighbours but they never think about me as a person of Deaf people. They gave me a form to say who lived there but I felt like putting that I am Deaf and my husband is disabled but there was nowhere to put this on the form – they think we are normal!

I miss so much information for example when it's election time, they send us information about the different candidates – I refuse to vote as I do not understand the information and who to vote for and no BSL translation available so I don't understand it.

It does cause problems, maybe it's my fault for not telling them I am Deaf, they might help or say so what!

We are always pushed to the bottom of the pile and it is not fair.

(Lady – Solihull)

I have no relationship with Birmingham council at all. There is no relationship. I have had a letter about voting and I don't understand what it said this format does not suit me so I feel what is the point!

It's just one of those things... Something that we just have to put up with!

(Lady – Birmingham)

When they have the elections – I said to the council Deaf people do not understand so the Deaf people can't choose which candidate to choose. They need to explain – all the representatives – they need to come and explain it all to us. They don't know who to vote for. The Government do this every 4 years so it is worth doing.*

I love politics and we all need to be involved. We need to be a part of this.

(Gentleman – Islington)

** Deaf people*

The British Deaf Association

Vision

Our vision is Deaf people fully participating and contributing as equal and valued citizens in wider society.

Mission

Our Mission is to ensure a world in which the language, culture, community, diversity and heritage of Deaf people in the UK is respected and fully protected, ensuring that Deaf people can participate and contribute as equal and valued citizens in the wider society. This will be achieved through:

- Improving the quality of life by empowering Deaf individuals and groups;
- Enhancing freedom, equality and diversity;
- Protecting and promoting BSL.

Values

The BDA is a Deaf people's organisation representing a diverse, vibrant and ever-changing community of Deaf people. Our activities, promotions, and partnerships with other organisations aim to empower our community towards full participation and contribution as equal and valued citizens in the wider society. We also aim to act as guardians of BSL.

- 1. Protecting our Deaf culture and Identity** – we value Deaf peoples' sense of Deaf culture and identity derived from belonging to a cultural and linguistic group, sharing similar beliefs and experiences with a sense of belonging.
- 2. Asserting our linguistic rights** – we value the use of BSL as a human right. As such, BSL must be preserved, protected and promoted because we also value the right of Deaf people to use their first or preferred language.
- 3. Fostering our community** – we value Deaf people with diverse perspectives, experiences and abilities. We are committed to equality and the elimination of all forms of discrimination with a special focus on those affecting Deaf people and their language.
- 4. Achieving equality in legal, civil and human rights** – we value universal human rights such as the right to receive education and access to information in sign language, and freedom from political restrictions on our opportunities to become full citizens.
- 5. Developing our alliance** – we value those who support us and are our allies because they share our vision and mission, and support our BSL community.

Campaigning for Equal Rights for Deaf people

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Email: bda@bda.org.uk
ooVoo: [bda.britdeafassoc](https://www.bda.org.uk/bda-britdeafassoc)
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