



An Investigation of Sign Language Interpreting in Devon



Executive Summary Report

October 2006





Table of Contents



| | |
|--|----|
| Project Summary | 3 |
| Aims of Research | 3 |
| Methodology | 4 |
| Interpreting in Sign Language | 4 |
| Using Sign Language Interpreters | 4 |
| Scenarios | 6 |
| Current Position of Interpreting in the Area | 6 |
| Conclusion | 9 |
| Recommendations | 10 |

The full 50 page version of the report is available on request from: justine.smyth@livingoptions.org

Project Summary

In 2005 Living Options Devon Deaf Project commissioned independent research into interpreting services for Sign Language users in Devon. The research was carried out by David Jackson and was funded by Devon County Council, Devon & Cornwall Constabulary, Exeter Primary Care Trust and the Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Trust. Deaf people across Devon were consulted between September 2005 and January 2006 through a series of one-to-one interviews and a focus group. A report making four recommendations was approved by the research steering group in September 2006.

Aims of the Research

There are approximately 1,400 Deaf adults and children within Devon's Deaf community, most of them concentrated in the two cities of Exeter and Plymouth. Currently in Devon (and Cornwall) there are six MRSLI/Licensed Interpreters and one Junior Trainee Interpreter (JTI).

Concerns about Sign Language interpreting services in Devon had been expressed for a number of years by Deaf people, public service organisations and by the Sign Language Interpreters themselves. The research was commissioned to obtain the representative views of the Deaf community about the interpreting services available to them. Specifically the research sought to establish:

1. The type and extent of the difficulties Deaf people face because of a lack of communication support.
2. The awareness of interpreting services among Deaf people.
3. What kind of communication support Deaf people want and how they want it organised.

The researcher was asked to present his conclusions arising from the responses of Deaf people and where appropriate, to make recommendations.

Methodology

The research data was gathered from in-depth, structured interviews with 69 Deaf people who were selected through Devon Social Services and Living Options Devon databases. Special care was taken to ensure that a broad cross-section of the Deaf community were interviewed (with particular regard to age, gender, race, geographical location and level of involvement in the Deaf community). A focus group was also held to explore and clarify emerging themes.

Interpreting in Sign Language

Interpreting in Sign Language is a two-way communication between Deaf and hearing people in a variety of settings. This requires special skills acquired during long and demanding training. People who acquire such skills are known as Sign Language Interpreters.

Using Sign Language Interpreters

Sign Language Interpreters are registered through the Independent Registered Panel (IRP) and/or are members of a professional body the Association of Sign Language Interpreters (ASLI).

The IRP has three categories:

1. Member of Registered Sign Language Interpreters (MRSLI): an Interpreter that has completed their training.
2. Trainee Interpreter (TI): an Interpreter that has degree level Interpreter training but has not yet completed their training.
3. Junior Trainee Interpreter (JTI): an Interpreter that has sufficient Sign Language skills and is on the Interpreter training course.

ASLI has two categories:

1. Licensed, which is equivalent to MRSLI.
2. Associate, which is equivalent to TI.

Registered Sign Language Interpreters and/or ASLI members have passed appropriate courses, have professional indemnity insurance and an 'Enhanced' Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check. It is important to point out that only MRSLI and Licensed Interpreters are able to work in the legal setting.

Everyone from the above categories has an identification card to verify their status.

It has long been a major issue in Devon that there are people with British Sign Language (BSL) skills but who have had no Interpreter training, working as if they were Interpreters. The research clarified that many Deaf people are very unhappy about this practise. The following comments were typical:

- ▶ “I had to stop an interpreting situation because I felt I was not getting the service required, so we had to fix another date for the same appointment.” (Female, 37)
- ▶ “Not all interpreters have clear BSL skills, so when I get an interpreter who does not sign well I find it very trying and tiring to follow that person.” (Female, 66)
- ▶ “At work, there have been cases where ‘complicated’ information is delivered and my interpreters do not always give me the full information – perhaps too superficial – need real ‘in-depth’ information.” (Female, 37)

Scenarios

Typical scenarios in which an appropriately trained and registered Sign Language Interpreter is greatly needed (to give Deaf clients the assurance and confidence and also to ensure the clients are receiving correct and clear information) are:

1. Health (visiting the doctor or attending a hospital appointment).
2. Education (learning in class where there is a mixture of Deaf and hearing students).
3. Legal (being questioned by police or taking part in a Court).
4. Public Services (Jobcentre Plus for employment, benefits etc.).
5. Employment (seeking employment by attending interviews; attending vital business meetings).
6. Religion (following services as well as sermons).

Current Position of Interpreting in the Area

The Deaf participants were asked for their views on the current provision of interpreting in the Devon area. Many of them expressed similar views of which a selection is included:

Lack of Interpreters

- ▶ "I have given up trying to get a good interpreter so now I don't bother to ask for who I want. I just accept anybody and take a risk." (Female, 51)

- ▶ "Sometimes, when I don't have an interpreter, I rely on writing/reading notes. But if the hearing person writes, sometimes he uses words I don't understand." (Male, 23)

Quality of Interpreting

- ▶ "Depends on the interpreter – one was very slow and hard to concentrate, another stopped for a break because there was only one available when two should have been there. Also one interpreter was not properly trained; didn't know some signs – looked like a cowboy interpreter!" (Female, 39)

Using non-qualified people as Interpreters

- ▶ "Sometimes at work I don't get full information. That happens when I have an interpreter who is not fully qualified and who misses out information." (Male, 40)
- ▶ "I am disgusted with 'cowboy interpreters'. They should not be allowed to take advantage of us. Really, they should not be working as interpreters until they are properly qualified. It can be a risk using them." (Male, 22)

Training courses for Interpreters

- ▶ "Lack of local Level 3 BSL training courses – interpreters wanting to become fully qualified lose out because they cannot afford time and distance if such courses are far from Devon." (Female, 52)

Funding for training potential Interpreters

- ▶ "More funding for trainee interpreters to move up for full qualifications." (Female, 31)

Relationship with Interpreters

- ▶ “Interpreters need to be able to confront any situations without embarrassment i.e. able to interpret serious abuses/sex situations etc.” (Male, 64)

Booking Interpreters

- ▶ “Checking my diary constantly – I have to plan well in advance when I need interpreters. Hearing people do not have this problem so have easier lives than us.” (Female, 19)

Responses from Interpreters for their availability

- ▶ “One example was more of a lack of answer from an interpreter rather than a refusal by the source. I would not accept this particular interpreter because she did not have an ASLI card so I texted one qualified interpreter but that person did not answer.” (Male, 23)

Need for an agency

- ▶ “List of recognised interpreters to hospitals/police stations/courts, as well as for all Deaf people.” (Male, 32)
- ▶ “Better use of interpreters by swapping around i.e. one individual booking for an unimportant situation against 20 Deaf people without an interpreter for an important meeting.” (Female, 40)
- ▶ “A guide/list of Interpreters with special skills i.e. knowledge of health, transport, leisure, education, legal matters etc.” (Male, 36)
- ▶ “Interpreters should outline their minimum and maximum charges plus any other pertinent information to prospective clients - this will enable clients to make informed decisions.” (Female, 45)

Conclusion

The research provides evidence that Deaf people in Devon are unhappy with the interpreting services available to them. Four main areas of dissatisfaction can be seen:

1 The difficulties with booking Sign Language Interpreters

Booking Interpreters has not always been straightforward. In some cases, there have been many frustrations not only on the side of the Deaf clients but also for the Interpreters and service providers, particularly when the bookings have to be made at the last minute.

2 The inadequate provision of Interpreter training in the area

There were many 'negative' comments about the quality of interpreting in the area, and the use of 'non-registered untrained Interpreters' by local agencies.

3 The need for more awareness sessions for both Deaf and hearing people about the best way to use Interpreters

Many Deaf people acknowledged their need to know more about using Sign Language Interpreters. They also commented on the need for local agencies to increase their awareness of Deaf people's communication needs and rights.

4 Funding

There is a need for additional funding to cover situations not covered by current funding sources.

One comment summed up much of what Deaf people said:

"Feel Devon is 10 years behind other areas in the UK. Need to do something about it." (Male, 43)

Recommendations

The following four recommendations are made:

1 The setting up of a central Sign Language Interpreting Agency.

An agency would be a 'one-stop shop' for booking Sign Language Interpreters. A single point of contact would offer ease of contact for outside agencies/providers/companies and for Deaf people, and it would improve efficiency by making better use of resources. The agency would be able to ensure a sensible system of booking priorities and negotiate between Deaf people to arrange for Interpreters to be 'borrowed'.

2 More local training for Interpreters

An agency could offer support to Sign Language Interpreters and ensure that Deaf people and agencies were well informed about the services available. The agency could also develop in-house service training for Interpreters, both experienced and new.

An increased number of local courses could lead to more people obtaining their qualification in British Sign Language and encourage and support people to become fully qualified and registered. An agency could look for external funding to provide 'traineeships' for people wanting to become qualified Interpreters.

3 Increased awareness courses on various issues such as learning about interpreting services for Deaf people as well as companies from both the public and private sector

To ensure satisfaction all round, Deaf people and service providers need to be fully aware of how interpreting services can be used effectively and efficiently at all times, taking into account many factors including locations of the interpreting assignments, the speed of speaking and the recommended

code of ethics as laid down by ASLI and CACDP (The Council for Advancement of Communication with Deaf People).

4 Independent funding for personal interpreting

There is a need for some form of independent funding to cover the many occasions when Deaf people may need an Interpreter, but there is no funding available to pay for one. One possible suggestion is for the Local Authority to fund up to 10 hours of personal interpreting per Deaf person each year.

This could come in the form of interpreting vouchers as used in Germany by its Deaf community. There are also schemes in the USA – an example is the contribution of one Cent from every telephone bill going towards the national interpreting relay service. It would be helpful if a similar or equivalent type of scheme was adopted in Devon.

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