

REPORT

To: SOCIAL WORK (OPERATIONS AND SERVICES) SUB COMMITTEE		Subject: INVESTIGATION OF ACCESS TO PUBLIC SERVICES IN SCOTLAND USING BRITISH SIGN LANGUAGE - SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE SOCIAL RESEARCH 2005
From: DIRECTOR OF SOCIAL WORK		
Date: 4 OCTOBER 2005	Ref: SK/BM	

1. **Purpose of Report/Introduction**

This report seeks to inform committee of the work to investigate the access to public services in Scotland for British Sign Language (BSL) users, and implications for North Lanarkshire Council.

2. **Background**

- 2.1. In 2002 North Lanarkshire Council Social Work Department undertook a Best Value Review of Independent Living Services for people with physical disability, acquired brain injury and/or sensory impairment as part of the Council programme of Best Value Reviews. The final report was approved at Social Work Committee on 11th March 2004. The recommendations within the final report included a number relating to communication support, and specifically for people who use British Sign Language (BSL) as a first or preferred language.
- 2.2. Existing sensory impairment services were recently redesigned following committee approval on 19th May 2005. This took forward key recommendations for social work services for people with sensory impairment, including creating additional posts within Social Work area teams and additional specialist posts.
- 2.3. Subsequently, a range of meetings has been held with local Deaf people and work is underway to investigate the possibility of establishing a Deaf Forum which would provide a mechanism for Deaf people to work in partnership with North Lanarkshire Council in providing services which support them.
- 2.4. The Scottish Executive published a report ("Investigation of Access to Public Services in Scotland Using British Sign Language" Scottish Executive Social Research 2005) which outlined a range of issues for service providers in considering how public service providers support BSL users.
- 2.5. Access to mental health services by Deaf people is the subject of separate ongoing work nationally led by the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Deaf Association. There are currently no local mental health services offered in BSL.

3. Proposals/Considerations

3.1. The Scottish Executive's report highlights the following key facts about Deaf people:

- The majority, (approximately 95%), of Deaf people are born in hearing families.
- Whilst some Deaf people benefit from using a hearing aid, some Deaf people speak and some lip read, the average literacy level is unlikely to exceed that of a 9 year old hearing person.
- Deaf people born with a hearing loss or acquire one shortly afterwards have sign language as their first language of choice. They are culturally Deaf, living and communication in a visual medium where sound has limited currency.
- British Sign Language is a visual spatial language involving the hands, body, face, eyes and mouth. It is a rich and complex language with a unique grammar and lexicon unrelated to English.
- Despite reduction in specialist school provision and reduced attendance at Deaf Clubs, there is still a strong demand for association and sense of community and culture. Therefore, Deaf Clubs still exist in all cities and are the point of contact for the BSL using community.

3.2. The key findings within the report include:

- Deaf people have very limited access to public services in BSL and appear to have very low levels of expectation in this regard.
- The research found no examples of health care, emergency services or council provision which Deaf people use which were delivered in BSL.
- Respondents reported poor Deaf Awareness, where staff deal with others first, tried to talk to family members instead of directly to them and struggle to find pen and paper to write things down.
- Contacts with the health service were considered the most stressful. Most commonly reported problems were staff failing to alert Deaf people in a waiting room when it was their turn, and medical problems not being properly explained because staff were unable to write things down or refused to do so. Contact with the police was similarly problematic.
- It appears that Deaf people do not come into contact with public services as often as may be expected. For example, the four most often used public services were reported as:

- Post Office	51%
- Chemist	31%
- GP	28%
- Education	21%

Compared with use of social services at 10%.

- Deaf people are more likely to visit their GP than hearing people, and more likely to be given prescriptions.
- Education for Deaf children is predominantly given in English, with less prominence for learning sign language.
- A range of communication methods were preferred, by Deaf people of different ages. For example, younger people preferring the internet and use of text messaging, whilst older people preferred using a fax machine.

- BSL interpreters were most commonly used for health, work and education related situations and were seen as vital in employment and education settings. However a number of problems were identified which included: a national shortage which resulted in difficulty finding an interpreter, poor performance amongst interpreters, and anxiety about confidentiality.

3.3. The report makes the following recommendations/action points:

- More information about public services should be available in a range of formats including online in BSL.
- More people within public services should have training in BSL.
- Consideration should be given to the development of a BSL curriculum for hearing and deaf school children.
- There should be increased training for and provision of BSL interpreters.
- Rapid progress to exploit video telecommunications to allow interaction at a distance including current use of text messaging to be extended for alerting and making arrangements by public services providers.
- Creation of a public location access charter which sets out good practice across all care groups, including BSL users.
- Strategic investment in the promotion and development of Deaf wellness, cultural pride and language competence which are closely related.

4. **Financial/Personnel/Legal/Policy Implications**

- 4.1. The report recommendations/action points are consistent with the broad themes within the Best Value Review of Independent Living Services. Further work is ongoing to develop the range of communication supports required locally.
- 4.2. There are no personnel, legal or financial considerations at this time. However, some policy implications exist and require further consideration which is likely to impact on resources.
- 4.3. Since many of the recommendations relate to the Council's wider function, consideration should be given to referring the report to Policy and Resources for information.

5. **Recommendation**

5.1. Committee is asked to:

- (i) note the need for corporate consideration in order to support local Deaf people access public services
- (ii) request the Director of Social Work to provide a further report which will detail progress made in supporting Deaf BSL users
- (iii) note the recommendations/action points within the report


Director of Social Work
 (5th September 2005)

For further information on this report please contact Susan Kelso, Co-ordinator, Independent Living on 01698 332633, or Bobby Miller, Development Manager on 01698 332069