
Scrutiny Report to the City Council

Review of Signing Services

Further copies of this report can be obtained from:

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Background Papers	
<u>'Second City or Last City?'</u>	1994
<u>'Time for the Talking to Stop'</u>	2000
European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages	1992
Research into other Local Authorities' signing service provision	2002

a view to detailed proposals being made, at the latest, by the end of the European Year of Disabled People 2003.

- 2.7 That the Education and Lifelong Learning Department prepare a fully costed strategy to explore the wider usage of BSL in all schools. Thus recognising the right of all deaf and hearing impaired children to learn through their first language. In addition, that BSL be offered in schools to the hearing community, giving hearing children the opportunity to learn BSL as a second language and thereby promoting inclusion.
- 2.8 That the Education and Lifelong Learning Department develop plans to provide deaf adults with the opportunities to participate fully in one or more aspect of community life (e.g. Parent Evenings, Parent/Teacher Associations, Adult Education, etc.).
- 2.9 That the Social Services Department be required to report quarterly on the number of people registered as deaf or deafblind.

with their Social Services departments as deaf or hard of hearing. As there are estimated to be more than 7 million people with some degree of hearing loss in England and up to 8.7 million in the UK, it is clear that these registers are a very poor guide.

British Sign Language

- 3.5 The British Deaf Association (BDA) estimates that British Sign Language (BSL) is the preferred language of between 50,000 and 70,000 people. It is a language of space and movement using hands, body, face and head. Many thousands of hearing people also use BSL. Contrary to popular belief sign language is not international and wherever Communities of Deaf people exist, sign languages develop. As with spoken languages these vary from country to country and are not based on the spoken language in the country of origin.
- 3.6 People in the Deaf Community come from many backgrounds but they share a sense of experience, culture, history and commitment. The Deaf Community sees itself as a linguistic and cultural minority.
- 3.7 The British Deaf Association was established in 1890 and campaigns for the right of deaf people to use BSL, to be educated in BSL and to access information and services through BSL. The Association and its members believe this is the most effective way for deaf people to participate in society on an equal footing with the hearing population.
- 3.8 At the heart of the British Deaf Association's campaigning activities is the desire for official recognition of BSL because of the belief that this is an essential step in asserting and protecting the Deaf Community. The BDA calls on the government to recognise BSL under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages as this would ensure fuller access for deaf people to public services and information, education, social and economic life, the justice system, broadcasting and cultural life. It would also promote greater study of and research into the language and enhance the status of BSL as one of the UK's most widely used indigenous languages.

Interpreting Services

- 3.9 A sign language interpreter can provide an important link between deaf and hearing people and in particular can assist in access to services. However nationally there is currently a serious shortage. As of July 2000 there were only approximately 100 qualified interpreters and approximately 200 trainee interpreters registered with the Council for the Advancement of Communication with Deaf People. The growth of demand for interpreters has not been matched by supply and this is a major obstacle to deaf people's social inclusion.
- 3.10 It is uncertain how many people there are in Birmingham who use BSL. However, national predictions based on the SSI formula in "A Service in

Councillor Len Clark

Councillor Jane James

Councillor Keith Linnecor

Councillor Paul Tilsley

In addition Matthew Jackson, Neil Patterson and Christine McPherson were invited to attend the Committee meetings as representatives of deaf people in the City.

4. Terms of Reference

- 4.1 The review focussed on assessing the current provision and quality of Sign Language Interpreting and communication support services available to the Deaf Community through Birmingham's public agencies. The key objectives of the exercise were to gain an understanding of previous and current barriers to positive change and to make proposals for remedial action to enable deaf service users to access a more responsive service from public agencies.

6. Findings

The Deaf Community in Birmingham

- 6.1 As indicated earlier in this report there is no clear picture of how many people there are in Birmingham who might require access to Sign Language Interpreting services or what the nature of their required communication service might be.
- 6.2 The Birmingham Deaf Community has a base at the Deaf Club in Ladywood.

Feedback from the Deaf Community

- 6.3 Representations made by the Deaf Community reveal considerable frustration and anger at the lack of any significant progress since the publication of the two reports “_____?” [1994] and “_____” [2000].
- 6.4 Members of the Deaf Community are also angry that their significant input into these consultative processes appears to have been ignored.
- 6.5 The experience of deaf service users in communicating with the City Council and other service providers remains one of frequent and continued frustration. Deaf people face many barriers when making use of public and private services and these are often due to a lack of awareness of the needs of deaf people on the part of service providers and insufficient or inadequate communications support. Deaf people with visual impairments or other disabilities are especially disadvantaged.
- 6.6 From their perspective, current access to Sign Language Interpreting services is poor and the quality of the provision is variable. When it is made available, there are usually significant delays in the delivery of a service. In addition the service user has no input into how or when the service is provided and no opportunity to feed back on the service received.
- 6.7 The service user should be the prime consideration when Sign Language Interpreting services are provided. An example was given of a deaf woman who, whilst giving birth, was provided with a Sign Language Interpreter who was male, causing her acute embarrassment.
- 6.8 Significant concerns wtery0E8(m)-3.4(e considerat1303 Tw83.0014 T8(mssn1 Tc0eto how

Recognising BSL as a Community Language

- 6.18 As indicated earlier in this report, there is a strongly argued campaign for recognition of BSL as a community language as this would be a first step in demonstrating commitment to fully involving the Deaf Community in the affairs of the city. This step would give a considerable boost to the confidence of the Deaf Community. Manchester City Council and the Greater London Assembly have already given BSL such recognition.

Conclusions

- 6.19 There is much that can be done to improve access to City Council and other public services by the Deaf Community. This review has enabled the Task and Finish Committee to identify a series of key actions that could make a significant contribution towards achieving this long-term goal. These include establishing a central resource to act as the primary facility for use by all City Council departments, in relation to both booking requests for Sign Language Interpreting services, setting and monitoring service standards and providing staff training in relation to all other communications systems used by deaf people. In addition, the City Council needs to consider how it can promote greater inclusiveness in schools for both deaf pupils and deaf parents. The Committee also concluded that the greatest impact across the city could be achieved by the City Council working with other service providers to jointly plan and pool resources to improve the provision of communication services to the Deaf Community.
- 6.20 However it is clear that more work needs to be done and it is essential that once this framework is adopted, that it is clearly owned and driven by a dedicated working group comprising senior officers, partners and representatives of the Deaf Community.

7 Recommendations

- 7.1 That a Working Group be established, comprising members, officers, partners and relevant users, including representatives from the Deaf Community to drive and oversee the development and implementation of the actions set out in paragraphs 7.2 to 7.8 below and to ensure that all proposals are fully costed.
- 7.2 That the Accessible Information Service at the Brasshouse Centre be identified as the primary corporate unit for:
 - 7.2.1 Arranging for provision of Sign Language Interpreting services throughout the City Council and its departments based upon an agreed set of service standards.
 - 7.2.2 Monitoring the quality of all Sign Language Interpreting services provided and doing so in conjunction with service users.
 - 7.2.3 Working with the Social Services Department to develop reliable information on the numbers of deaf and deafblind people in Birmingham in accord with the requirements of the National Assistance Act 1948.
 - 7.2.4 Arranging for the regular monitoring of all of the communication systems employed by the City Council which are utilised by deaf people e.g. textphones, videophones, typetalk, e-mail etc.
 - 7.2.5 Providing quarterly statistics to Council on improvements to the Sign Language Interpreting services in Birmingham to the City Council and the Deaf Community. These reports to include information from the Social Services Department regarding the number of people registered as deaf or deafblind in Birmingham.
- 7.3 That proposals be developed to provide deaf equality and communication skills training for all staff, priority being given to front line staff and senior management.
- 7.4 That British Sign Language (BSL) be recognised as a 'Community Language', in line with the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and that a formal statement of this be issued to the Deaf Community and the community at large during the European Year of Disabled People 2003.
- 7.5 That Birmingham City Council works with the Deaf Community to establish a consortium of service providers to plan, pool and improve the quality of Sign Language Interpreting services across the City. This work should include a review of the use of possible technological innovations (e.g. video-phones, multi-media, text messaging etc) and be implemented with

a view to detailed proposals being made, at the latest, by the end of the European Year of Disabled People 2003.

- 7.6 That the Education and Lifelong Learning Department prepare a fully costed strategy to explore the wider usage of BSL in all schools. Thus recognising the right of all deaf and hearing impaired children to learn through their first language. In addition, that BSL be offered in schools to the hearing community, giving hearing children the opportunity to learn BSL as a second language and thereby promoting inclusion.
- 7.7 That the Education and Lifelong Learning Department develop plans to provide deaf adults with the opportunities to participate fully in one or more aspect of community life (e.g. Parent Evenings, Parent/Teacher Associations, Adult Education, etc.).
- 7.8 That the Social Services Department be required to report quarterly on the number of people registered as deaf or deafblind. Such reports to be included in the quarterly reports of the Accessible Information Service (see 7.2.5 above).