

The Deaf Community in the UK

So what is so special about the Deaf Community in the UK?

That is an important question and in some respects, we have to say there is *nothing special* yet *everything is special*. They are within the community as a whole yet they are totally isolated. These paradoxes are probably our starting point and perhaps why we need to know more about the Deaf experience.

We give the title Deaf (with capital D) to all those who identify themselves as members of the Deaf community – who are sign language users and who are culturally deaf. This is equivalent to British and French (where the first letter is a capital) to refer to the fact that they are culturally British – use the language and have British values.

Just tell me about the Community.

The Deaf community consists of those people who term themselves Deaf. That is Deaf with a capital D – like people living in Britain are called British with a capital B. The Deaf community is made up of people who consider their identity to be Deaf. They are usually sign language users and they are likely to meet frequently with other Deaf people in the Deaf clubs which exist in every town and city in the UK.

So it is like a social club?

Yes, but then it much more. It is through the Deaf clubs and Deaf meeting places, that Deaf people come in contact with future partners – it is where they meet and get married and bring their children later on.

So how come there are no Deaf equivalents of Chinatown – where all of the people live together?

Deaf people are distributed throughout the community as a whole – they do not live in a single area of a town, where there are only Deaf people, The main reason for this, is that most Deaf people were born into hearing families and they have strong roots within the community as a whole. Deaf people meet other Deaf people socially but do not at present, see the need to live next door to other Deaf people,

So how can we describe the Deaf Community?

Let's concentrate on the characteristics of the community – let's start with numbers.

The usual question is – how many Deaf people are there? Many different estimates can be found – but they are often wild estimates. Many people have hearing losses but few people are Deaf. Some organisations say that there could be 9 million people in the UK with a hearing loss – but only one in two thousand are likely to be members of the Deaf Community. From an analysis of the patterns of schooling and what we know about the distribution of the population as a whole, we estimate that between

20,000 and 25,000 people in the UK are the core members of the Deaf community. In addition there could be another 25,000 who have lesser hearing losses or are not fluent in sign language, who are 'occasional' members.

However, since Deaf children are usually born in hearing families the impact of Deafness extends way beyond the core Deaf community.

So what do you mean – Deaf children in hearing families?

There is a sort of magic number – 90 – in the Deaf community. It is not a precise figure but it works like this:

90% of Deaf children are born to hearing parents
90% of Deaf people who marry, marry other Deaf people
90% of the children born into those marriages are hearing

In practice, only one in 20 Deaf children are born to families with both parents Deaf. So it is relatively rare to find Deaf families which go back generations with all members Deaf. However, they do exist and there are records of Deafness in the same family back to the 1820s or so. (See more on this in the Historical Q&A).

Then what about jobs?

It is generally said (quite accurately) that Deaf people are under-employed rather than un-employed. Deaf people usually leave school with fewer qualifications than hearing young people, are less likely to take further study and are more likely to find themselves in positions where they are unable to be promoted.

In the past, Deaf people were usually placed in apprenticeship schemes involving the manual trades. These placements were often successful in that Deaf people stayed in the jobs for 30 or 40 years – making furniture, repairing shoes, labouring and so on.

So how were they underemployed?

Deaf people have the same level of intelligence as hearing people – they just don't speak or hear well. As a result we might expect that they should be found in all areas of society - since they are physically and cognitively able. However, there are relatively few in the professions, in business and management and relatively more in the trades and lower socio-economic groups.

So do Deaf people still have the same jobs as before?

The pattern of employment has changed enormously in the UK. As manufacturing jobs have disappeared, this has affected Deaf people to a huge extent. Nowadays, Deaf people are to be found in offices and in service industries. As the sector of Non-governmental agencies (Charities and associations) has grown so have more Deaf people come to work with other Deaf people in these organisations. Deaf people are now much more likely to go to University but they are still likely to earn less after University.

We do not have proper national statistics on the Deaf community and employment but estimates based on our research put them about 5-10% behind hearing people in extent of employment with a disproportionate effect on young people.

In the new office jobs, however, there are more stresses than there were in the old industries. While a Deaf carpenter could work happily on the production side of the job, now the Deaf office worker has to meet with colleagues frequently and to interact continuously. It is the interaction between Deaf and hearing which causes the problems – that is why sign station exists.

And quality of life?

Deaf people consider their quality of life to be good – they have a strong social affiliation to the Deaf community. They are often involved in regional and national events and may travel a great deal on weekends. Where interaction with other Deaf people is concerned there are no barriers. As a result there exists a huge Deaf social infrastructure for interaction.

And Deaf consumerism?

We have recently researched the Deaf community nationally and have developed a good picture of life. Deaf people tend to have similar consumer goods to hearing people (washing machines etc) although more video players than CD (audio players), more computers (although less users of the Internet). Deaf people are more likely to live in terraced houses than hearing people. Deaf people are less likely to smoke and to drink than hearing people (although there are some problems with the former with young Deaf men and with the latter with Deaf women). Deaf married couples are likely to have more children than hearing people.

Deaf people use the same banks and building societies as hearing people and are just as likely to take foreign holidays. They are probably under-insured as compared to hearing people which is problematic as they seem to be more likely to be burgled than hearing people.

Deaf people drive cars and lorries and are generally just as mobile as hearing people in all transport.

What about access to information?

They are generally much less likely to know their rights in regard to all transactions – this is not surprising given that most knowledge is written and most accessible information is in written leaflets and on the Internet. Deaf people typically do not understand the bills they receive from telecoms companies, from Utilities and from the Local Council, Deaf people commonly request “Deaf-friendly” materials and text – which usually refers to more visually appropriate information and usually simpler English structures.

Are there support services for Deaf people?

Yes, there are traditional social work services which some Deaf people use and there are more recent and increasing, interpreter services (the latter is dealt with in another Q&A). These services work just as hearing services do – identifying problems and

offer support for usually short periods of time. Most Deaf people qualify for additional benefits to pay for interpreters and to meet increased costs, but most Deaf people live their lives independently and happily.

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