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HOUSING DISCUSSION INVOLVEMENT EVENT REPORT

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH DEAF CONNECTIONS

FRIDAY 8TH OCTOBER 2010



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1. Background to the Event

Capability Scotland and the Glasgow Centre for Independent Living (GCIL) were selected through the Housing Voluntary Grant Scheme as the Scottish Government's key strategic partner for housing and disability issues.

A key part of this project is a series of seven involvement events giving disabled people the opportunity to tell the Scottish Government about their housing issues and ways in which the housing problems faced by disabled people can be solved. The involvement events ran from August to October 2010.

This information is intended to feed into the Scottish Government's discussion "Fresh Thinking, New Ideas" which is calling for radical solutions to the housing crisis in Scotland.

This is the report of the fifth event, held in conjunction with Deaf Connections in Glasgow on Friday 8 October 2010.

17 Deaf people attended the event, all of whom use British Sign Language (BSL) as their first language. Two BSL interpreters made the event accessible to the participants.

2. Design of the Event

The involvement day was designed in a different way to the other events to ensure full accessibility for the Deaf participants. This included avoiding written activity sheets and focusing on tangible ideas rather than abstract concepts. Instead we had open discussion throughout the day.

It was important to avoid written activity sheets because for Deaf people who use BSL as their first language, English is at best a second language. Further, it is a second language of a completely different nature to BSL. It is not comparable to an English speaker having French as second language, as both English and French are oral languages constructed from words spoken in sequence. BSL on the other hand, is structured in an entirely different way. It relies less on 'words' and more on the inventive use of space and movement. It involves the three-dimensional use of space, the location of signs within that space, the speed, direction and type of movement, the hand shapes that are used, all combined with non-manual information carried by the head, face and body.

BSL is not a form of mime. Signs are conventional, often arbitrary and do not necessarily have a visual relationship to what they are referring to, much as most spoken language is not onomatopoeic. In other words, in most cases words do not sound like the thing they are referring to.

This means that people who use BSL often find it difficult to read, understand and assimilate written information. They might also misunderstand or misinterpret written information, especially where there is some ambiguity or where it relates to abstract concepts. This is why it is important to avoid asking Deaf people who use BSL to read or write information.

In facilitating the event we also took on board what Deaf Connections told us about avoiding abstract language. British Sign Language is a largely concrete language that focuses on the facts of the “here and now” and on specific examples of the things or concepts being thought about. It was therefore important to avoid abstract language that is removed from the here and now, such as “rights”, “freedom” and “strategy”.

3. Results of the Discussions

3.1 Communication barriers

Participants highlighted that it can be difficult for them to contact housing agencies and related professionals because:

- Telephones are not accessible to them
- Staff are often unaware of how to use minicomms/textphones
- Email is not accessible to them due to the problems with written English discussed on page 3
- Writing letters is not accessible to them again due to the problems highlighted on page 3
- BSL interpreters are often not booked for meetings with housing professionals, or there is a lengthy wait for an interpreter.

Participants highlighted frustration at the insistence of many agencies to speak to people on the telephone. One participant explained her difficulties with her insurance company over a claim to fix a leak in her roof: “My roof was being repaired and so we contacted the insurance company for a claim. They asked to speak to the homeowner. My daughter explained that I was Deaf and couldn't use the phone but they refused to give her the information I required.”

Participants also highlighted that housing agencies often do not provide an alternative to a telephone number for out of hours emergencies.

Participants spoke of having to repeatedly ask for BSL interpretation at a meeting with their housing association. Others stated that their housing association had refused to fund an interpreter. One man stated that his housing association would fund foreign language interpreters but not BSL interpreters.

Participants agreed that even when an interpreter is provided, you often have to wait weeks for the meeting because there is a shortage of interpreters in Scotland. One man said that this often caused stress to build up. He said that this was not fair because hearing people would be able to get the problem solved immediately and not have a negative impact on their mental health.

Another participant said that not being able to get communication support for meetings with housing agencies could lead to the Deaf person incurring a financial penalty if the problem they are trying to sort out is money related. One participant told of her experience: "I moved from one area to another, which was better, but a lot of repairs were needed to the house. It wasn't explained clearly to me and I later received a bill for both properties. I couldn't get anyone to help me as there was no accessible information. The bill had to be paid quickly but I couldn't get an interpreter in that time period."

Participants agreed that they should not have to rely on family members acting as interpreters, particularly when discussing private financial matters.

Participants also agreed that they should not have to rely on communicating through notes at meetings for the reasons discussed on page 3 above.

The group called for more housing agencies to have staff trained in at least basic BSL so that they did not have to wait for an interpreter to discuss minor issues. It was suggested that these people could wear a badge so as to be easily identified by Deaf people. This badge should be standardized across Scotland so that Deaf people know what to look out for.

The group also called for more housing agencies to make use of the Sign on Screen web service. Sign on Screen is a new communication service for developed by Deaf Connections. It offers users the opportunity to use an on-line video interpreting service as a means of communicating more easily in BSL with a wide range of hearing people who are using an ordinary phone, and also in person. It enables Deaf people to access Deaf Connections interpreters through a video conference call.

The following represent a consolidation of the views expressed:

- Ensure that policy makers understand the communication barriers experienced by Deaf people.
- Ensure that the proposed BSL Bill is enacted and is effective in tackling the communication barriers experienced by BSL users.
- Promote the use of texting and faxing as alternative methods for Deaf people to report a housing-related emergency.
- Promote the importance of Deaf Awareness training being provided to staff working in housing agencies.

- Consider endorsing a badge scheme for staff who have a basic understanding of BSL.
- Provide support to Deaf Connections in the development of their innovative Sign on Screen service.
- Provide more funding for training for BSL interpreters.
- Consider requiring RSLs to keep a register of Deaf people living in their homes so that the housing association is aware of their communication requirements.

3.2 Information Barriers

Participants agreed that information is rarely made available in a format accessible to Deaf BSL users. Information about housing opportunities, grants and equipment and adaptations are usually only available in written English, not in BSL.

Participants agreed that there are a lot of forms to fill in when you want to live in a housing association property, which was the situation with the vast majority of the participants at this event.

This means that it can be difficult for Deaf people who use BSL to find out about their rights.

Communication from housing associations is also mostly sent to tenants in letter format, which is not accessible to Deaf BSL users. One participant said that he was likely to just ignore letters that were written to him in English. This could lead to his tenancy being at risk.

Participants said that letters from their landlord often contained difficult words and jargon.

One participant lives in a high-rise block that is scheduled to be demolished in 2011. She is worried about where she will live. She has had no clear explanation of what her options are and is concerned that all the good opportunities will have been snapped up by hearing people who can read the letters before she has a chance to get support to make sense of the letter.

Participants agreed that while faxes could be an alternative to the telephone, it could be difficult when the person sending the fax writes it by hand. Reading English is difficult for many Deaf people, and this is compounded when the information is handwritten.

The following represent a consolidation of the views expressed:

- Ensure that policy makers understand the information barriers experienced by Deaf people.
- Ensure that the proposed BSL Bill includes the provision of information in BSL.
- Promote the use of Plain English across all housing agencies.
- Consider requiring RSLs to keep a register of Deaf people living in their homes so that the housing association is aware of their information requirements.

3.3 Equipment in the home

Participants spoke of their frustration at what was seen as a retrograde step in the provision of flashing alert systems. Flashing lights throughout the home to alert Deaf people to the doorbell or smoke alarm are increasingly being replaced by portable pagers. However the participants stated that the pagers were not such a good system because they were not very light and you have to remember to always have it with you and not put it down somewhere.

It is not clear why the better system of flashing lights has been replaced by the pager system. However it seems likely that Deaf people were not consulted on the change, which contravenes the Disability Equality Duty.

The following represent a consolidation of the views expressed:

- Take action to ensure that local authorities and Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) comply with the duty to consult disabled people under the Disability Discrimination Act and Equality Act 2010.

3.4 Experience of buying and selling houses

Only three of the 17 participants (5.7%) own their own home. Those who were home owners had owned their home for many years and therefore did not have recent experience to share in relation to barriers to home ownership.

Participants stated that many Deaf people do not have the necessary income to own their own homes due to discrimination in employment and education. Therefore there is a higher proportion of Deaf people in social housing than in the private sector.

The following represent a consolidation of the views expressed:

- Ensure that the proposed BSL Bill includes provisions to tackle discrimination faced by BSL users.

3.5 Experience of moving house in RSL accommodation

The majority of the participants wanted to live in a different area in Glasgow because they do not feel safe where they are living. However they said that there was not enough RSL accommodation in better areas and too much competition for what houses there are.

One participant, who is a wheelchair user, said that her house is too small. She wanted to move to a house specifically adapted for disabled people but said that there were not enough adapted houses to go round.

Another participant told of her experience of having five children in a small house on a busy road. She explained that two of her children have autism and need to have separate rooms. However she does not have enough bedrooms in her current house to do this. But she has not been offered a larger house by her housing association.

Participants agreed that it is particularly important for Deaf people to live in better areas. Participants spoke of their fear living in bad areas, with one woman saying “It is risky for me coming home, as I might not hear someone following me”.

Another said “People use the close and back garden to cut through and people sit out the back smoking. The close should have a secure entry system and the door should be turned round so it pulls open and can't be kicked in. The noise and banging at night time, especially in the evening is disturbing. I reported the issue to the police hoping they would work alongside GHA and get something done.”

A woman living in a good area also reported fear being out after dark, saying “Usually I aim to be home before 6pm. The hedges are very high and I feel frightened when I go out after dark.”

Another said “We asked the GHA to cut back the trees outside as they were blocking the light from the streetlights. 5 years later, this still has not been done.”

The following represent a consolidation of the views expressed:

- Take action to ensure that more RSL housing is available in better neighbourhoods.

3.6 Sheltered Housing and Residential Care

Participants were asked if they felt there should be more specialized sheltered housing and residential care for Deaf people. Some people felt they could live in sheltered housing while others were happier to remain independent. Those happier to remain independent felt that people's freedom is restricted in care homes in terms of when you can get in and out and when you can receive visitors.

There was concern about the quality of care and availability of BSL users within residential care. One gentleman told the group that his wife lives in residential care and that her condition has worsened because staff cannot communicate with her. He explained that signing keeps the mind alert but because she has no opportunity to sign apart from when he visits her, she now has very little communication.

The following represent a consolidation of the views expressed:

- Recognise the importance for BSL users of social interaction with other people who sign and the potential detrimental effects of social isolation in sheltered housing and residential care homes.

3.7 Lack of awareness

Participants agreed that there is a general lack of awareness of the housing needs of Deaf people. Examples given of housing needs were:

- Living in older houses with thick walls so that they cannot feel their neighbours moving about next door.
- Living in older houses with thick walls so that their neighbours do not hear the noise that they might make without knowing it, for example, putting dishes away, moving furniture etc.
- Living in good neighbourhoods where they need not fear not hearing people breaking in or approaching them to attach them in the street.
- Having good street lighting outside their property so that they can see what is going on outside.

The following represent a consolidation of the views expressed:

- Ensure that the forthcoming housing strategy effectively takes into account the housing needs of Deaf people.
- Ensure that Deaf people continue to be involved in the development of the housing strategy.

4. Summary of Views Expressed

- Ensure that policy makers understand the communication barriers experienced by Deaf people.
- Ensure that the proposed BSL Bill is enacted and is effective in tackling the communication barriers experienced by BSL users.
- Promote the use of texting and faxing as alternative methods for Deaf people to report a housing-related emergency.
- Promote the importance of Deaf Awareness training being provided to staff working in housing agencies.
- Consider endorsing a badge scheme for staff who have a basic understanding of BSL.
- Provide support to Deaf Connections in the development of their innovative Sign on Screen service.
- Provide more funding for training for BSL interpreters.
- Consider requiring RSLs to keep a register of Deaf people living in their homes so that the housing association is aware of their communication requirements.
- Ensure that policy makers understand the information barriers experienced by Deaf people.
- Ensure that the proposed BSL Bill includes the provision of information in BSL.
- Promote the use of Plain English across all housing agencies.
- Consider requiring RSLs to keep a register of Deaf people living in their homes so that the housing association is aware of their information requirements.
- Take action to ensure that local authorities and Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) comply with the duty to consult disabled people under the Disability Discrimination Act and Equality Act 2010.
- Ensure that the proposed BSL Bill includes provisions to tackle discrimination faced by BSL users.
- Take action to ensure that more RSL housing is available in better neighbourhoods.
- Recognise the importance for BSL users of social interaction with other people who sign and the potential detrimental effects of social isolation in sheltered housing and residential care homes.

- Ensure that the forthcoming housing strategy effectively takes into account the housing needs of Deaf people.
- Ensure that Deaf people continue to be involved in the development of the housing strategy.

This report is available in a variety of accessible formats. To discuss your requirements please contact the communications team at Capability Scotland on 0131 347 1052 or communications@capability-scotland.org.uk.

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