

Executive Summary

Information provision and access to public and social services for the Deaf Community



Acknowledgments

The Citizens Information Board gratefully acknowledges the assistance of those who contributed to the preparation of this report, in particular the steering group members who gave invaluable help in guiding the research and commenting on the report. CIB would like to thank the staff in a range of Deaf advocacy organisations in supporting their members to complete the questionnaire and to take part in focus groups. CIB wishes to acknowledge staff of government departments who were interviewed as part of the research. CIB also acknowledges the work of researchers Tom Martin and Jim McDevitt of Tom Martin & Associates/TMA in undertaking the research and compiling the report.

December 2017

Members of the Steering Group:

Brendan Lennon and Shane Hamilton, DeafHear

Sylvia Nolan, Deaf Village Ireland

Mary Dunne, Dublin North West Citizens Information Service

Elaine Grehan and Orla Grehan, Irish Deaf Society

John Stewart, Sign Language Interpreting Service

Geralyn McGarry and Adrienne Collins, Citizens Information Board

Preface

The main objective of this study was to understand the experiences of the Deaf Community in accessing public and social services and related information. The report shows how members of the Deaf Community have faced severe difficulties in accessing public information in their preferred language, Irish Sign Language, and the resulting impact on the realisation of their rights.

This research is both timely and relevant in the context of the recent passing of the Irish Sign Language Act 2017. While some of the recommendations included in the report are covered in the new legislation, the insights in the report provide an important point of reference for implementing the legislation. The research was based on the experience and perspectives of the Deaf Community, as well as other key stakeholders (advocacy and representative organisations and statutory services).

Legal recognition of Irish Sign Language (ISL) is an important step towards the realisation by wider society that ISL is not a means used to overcome a disability but is rather an integral part of the unique linguistic and cultural identity shared by the Deaf Community. The legislation underpins the fact that Irish Sign Language is an indigenous language in its own right used by a sizeable minority in the State and acknowledges the right of people to use ISL as their language of choice – this was a central theme of the research and is strongly reflected in this report.

This research, coupled with the provisions of the 2017 Act, and the commitments made in the National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021 in relation to sign language provision, can make a significant contribution to catering for the communication needs and rights of ISL users in relation to accessing and securing public and social services.

The Irish Sign Language Act has significant implications for the Deaf Community and for the provision of services to this community. CIB very much welcomes the commitment to resource the Sign Language Interpreting Service (SLIS), a CIB-supported service, to increase the number of trained sign language and deaf interpreters; to extend the hours interpretation services are available; and to develop a quality assurance and registration scheme for interpreters with related ongoing professional training and development. We look forward to the implementation of the Act and to supporting SLIS in its role in contributing to developments under the legislation.

This research strongly supports the views expressed during the Dáil debate on the legislation that official recognition of the language is just the start and not the end of the journey for the Deaf Community generally and for ISL users in particular. Legal rights for ISL users, better access to public services through ISL, better education for deaf children, better third-level education and training for deaf adults and better interpreting quality and monitoring are clearly important provisions. However, these will only translate into practice through concerted efforts both by Government and individual public bodies.

Executive Summary

The main objective of this study commissioned by the Citizens Information Board was to explore the information needs of the Deaf Community and their experiences in accessing information and public and social services.

Research programme

The programme of research comprised a review of the literature, consultation with the Deaf Community, their representative/advocacy bodies and public organisations, and a questionnaire-based survey of the Deaf Community. The researchers, Tom Martin & Associates/TMA, were supported by a steering group comprising representatives of the Citizens Information Board, Sign Language Interpreting Service (SLIS), the Dublin North West Citizens Information Service and representative and advocacy bodies for the Deaf Community (Irish Deaf Society, DeafHear and Deaf Village Ireland).

Deaf Community

There is no universally accepted definition of what constitutes the Deaf Community's in Ireland. For the purposes of this study it is defined as including people who are deaf and whose first language is Irish Sign Language (ISL). This definition excludes people who are hard of hearing as they do not use ISL and typically have a lower level of hearing loss. There are no definitive statistics on the size of the Deaf Community in Ireland but it is estimated at 5,000 people.

The primary language of the Deaf Community is ISL which has just received official recognition by the Irish State, bringing Ireland in line with a number of other EU Member States. The Irish Sign Language Act was signed into law in December 2017.

Members of the Deaf Community are most likely to have been educated in Deaf Schools. Research has shown that Deaf people have lower levels of educational attainment compared with their hearing peers and are less likely to attend third-level education. Older members of the Deaf Community are more likely to have been negatively impacted by the now-discredited oralism approach to the education of Deaf children that suppressed the use of sign language. Deaf people have markedly lower literacy levels compared with the hearing community and consequently may have low self-confidence in their communications with public organisations.

The socio-economic profile of Deaf and hard of hearing people indicates lower rates of employment compared with the hearing population. Young Deaf people are highly critical of the lack of ISL interpreting supports to assist them to access and participate in vocational training and employment opportunities.

Accessing information and public services

Members of the Deaf Community currently experience severe difficulties in accessing public information in their preferred language, ISL. Only a tiny fraction of public information is made available in ISL.

A significant barrier faced by the Deaf Community is the lack of awareness among public officials of the specific needs of Deaf people as compared with those of people who are Hard of Hearing. The Deaf Community perceives that public officials receive little training in disability awareness and even less in Deaf awareness.

Very few public organisations provide Deaf-friendly communication mechanisms such as web chat/text facilities or text messaging facilities that could allow Deaf people to respond to correspondence or published information. Most public organisations do provide email addresses but members of the Deaf Community typically face long response times using this method of communication.

Signage information in Deaf-friendly format in public places such as train and bus stations and on the public transport system is extremely limited. Nearly four-fifths of respondents to a survey of the Deaf Community said the provision of text information in public locations was poor or very poor.

Accessing ISL Interpreters

Accessing public services requires that the Deaf Community must communicate through trained ISL interpreters or through people with knowledge of ISL such as family members or friends. Deaf Community representative/advocacy bodies play an important role in communicating and interacting with public organisations on behalf of their members, often for routine matters that hearing people take for granted and undertake themselves without any external assistance. The findings of the questionnaire-based survey of the Deaf Community indicate that the experience of Deaf people visiting the public offices of State organisations is overwhelmingly negative.

The Deaf Community say there is a large gulf between the policy statements of public organisations in relation to providing sign language interpreters and what is available through frontline services. The feedback from the Deaf Community is that only a few public organisations provide ISL interpreters for Deaf people attending meetings with their officials.

As the vast majority of public organisations do not currently provide ISL interpreting services, Deaf people must use family, friends, neighbours and Deaf support organisations to translate for them. Having to rely on their own family members such as teenage sons or daughters to translate on their behalf undermines their self-worth and their sense of equal participation in society. Where a Deaf person has to use a non-professional interpreter during a consultation with a doctor or medical consultant, there is a real danger that miscommunication could expose them to a significant clinical risk.

One of the major problems facing the Deaf Community is the shortage of trained ISL interpreters. This shortage is particularly acute outside urban areas and further marginalises rural-based members of the Deaf Community in accessing public information and services. In addition to a regional disparity there is also a seasonal problem: ISL interpreters can be difficult to source during the academic year when many of them are engaged in assisting Deaf students on higher or further education courses. Underlying the shortage of ISL interpreters is the very low number graduating from the main ISL interpreting degree courses. This shortfall in graduates needs to be urgently addressed by the Department of Education and Skills.

The Sign Language Interpreting Service (SLIS) aims to ensure that Deaf people have easy access to public, educational and social information and services as a right. It promotes, advocates and seeks to ensure the availability of quality ISL-English interpretation services in Ireland. There is a commitment in the National Disability Inclusion Strategy to establish a quality assurance and registration scheme for interpreters.

Technology and Communications

Technology has long been recognised as having the potential to assist members of the Deaf Community to communicate with public and private service providers. CIB has provided funding for SLIS to develop the Irish Remote Interpreting Service (IRIS) that enables Deaf people to interact with public officials over the internet via a remote interpreter. However, Deaf people are concerned about IRIS's limited operating hours and are critical of the fact that very few public organisations have signed up to the service. The survey of the Deaf Community found that a quarter of respondents were not aware of IRIS.

Legislative and policy frameworks

An extensive framework of international and national legislation underpins the provision of public information and services to people with disabilities. This legal framework, together with national disability and equality policies, seeks to ensure that public bodies do not discriminate on the basis of disability and should endeavour to accommodate the needs of people with disabilities. However, until very recently, there have been few laws and policy commitments specifically referring to the Deaf Community, and those that existed in the past either were not implemented or lacked the resources to be fully implemented. There is a sense that national disability strategies invited extensive consultation but did not deliver appreciable gains for the Deaf Community. The research findings support the conclusion of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice and Equality which in October 2016 stated that the “experience of the Irish Deaf Community is one of extreme marginalisation due to the lack of sign language recognition and provision.”

The recent National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021 contains actions to ensure that all public bodies provide ISL interpretation to Deaf people availing of their statutory services and to extend IRIS’s opening hours to allow greater access to remote interpreting. Deaf Community’s representative bodies have welcomed these proposals but have concerns that other actions in the strategy which could be beneficial to Deaf people are lacking in specifics.

The review of international best practice points to ways in which the Deaf Community’s access to public information and services can be developed further. Several countries have put in place sign language interpreter registration systems while others are pioneering the use of Video Remote Interpreting across workplace, healthcare and education settings. A number of European countries such as the UK, Finland, Austria, Spain, Denmark and Norway have granted official recognition to their respective national sign languages.

The enactment here of the Irish Sign Language Act in December 2017 gave official recognition to Irish Sign Language and will provide the basis for Deaf People to access public services in their preferred language. National Disability Inclusion Strategy commitments and state recognition of ISL as an official language mark a significant step change in the provision of services by government bodies.

Recommendations

The researchers present a number of recommendations to address the barriers faced by members of the Deaf Community in accessing public information and services.

Provision of ISL interpreters

A number of public organisations have a stated commitment to provide ISL interpreters for interactions with the Deaf Community. They should regularly communicate this commitment to frontline managers and staff and ensure that there are sufficient resources in place to underpin this commitment. Equally, they should use appropriate communication strategies to disseminate awareness of this commitment to Deaf customers/service users.

Public service organisations should keep an annual record of the number of times that ISL interpreters are requested for meetings with Deaf customers/service users. Where relevant, public organisations should consider keeping a register of employees who can understand or interpret ISL so that they could be called upon to provide interpretation in an emergency or for initial conversations. Some public organisations have provided funding for employees to attend ISL classes and such schemes should be actively promoted.

Public organisations should ensure that ISL interpreters they engage for meetings involving members of the Deaf Community have appropriate qualifications.

Public organisations that do not currently have a commitment to provide ISL interpreters for meetings involving members of the Deaf Community should comply with their legal obligation to provide this support. They should also register as a service provider with IRIS.

Boosting the supply of Irish Sign Language interpreters

The low numbers of ISL interpreters entering the profession is of major concern to the Deaf Community. Education policy-makers and agencies concerned with skills and manpower issues should urgently review and make recommendations on how the output of ISL interpreter graduates can be increased.

Given the urgency of the situation and the lead time required to train sign language interpreters, policy-makers in the Department of Education and Skills and relevant advisory bodies such as the National Skills Council should give immediate priority to developing measures to increase the supply of interpreters. Possible measures to be examined include the doubling of the existing output of ISL interpreting graduates from the TCD programme, the development and provision of new blended distance learning courses in ISL interpreting, the provision of conversion courses for fluent ISL users and hearing adult children of Deaf parents (CODAs) and a programme to attract back qualified ISL interpreters who may have left the profession. Consideration should be given to improving awareness of employment opportunities for ISL interpreters among career guidance counsellors and to providing opportunities for second level students to learn ISL or Deaf studies.

The introduction of a voucher system would help to stabilise the financial position of existing ISL interpreters and might assist in attracting the return of qualified interpreters.

Expanding the Irish Remote Interpreting Service (IRIS)

Public service organisations should subscribe to and make greater use of IRIS as a mechanism to facilitate the Deaf Community to communicate with them and vice versa. IRIS is a low cost service to both the public sector organisation and the Deaf Community and it has particular advantages for Deaf people located in rural areas. IRIS has advantages for facilitating initial discussions between Deaf people and public organisations but should not be used as a substitute for detailed face-to-face meetings with an ISL interpreter present.

IRIS's weekday operating hours should be extended and it should also provide a service at the weekends. The IRIS service needs to be promoted intensively both to the Deaf Community and to public and private organisations. The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection and the agencies under its aegis should be seen to lead by example by installing IRIS in all public-facing offices. The process of booking a time-slot on IRIS should be simplified. The IRIS interpreter team should be increased so as to reduce booking delays.

IRIS requires an intensive marketing strategy aimed at increasing the number of Deaf users and service providers. IRIS should have its own dedicated website and Facebook page.

Deaf representative/support organisations should continually promote IRIS within the Deaf Community as the online survey indicated a quarter of respondents were not aware of the service.

An evaluation of the HSE/SLIS pilot project to provide ISL interpreters for visits by Deaf medical card holders to their GPs should be undertaken and if successful, it should be rolled-out on a national basis.

Enhanced Deaf awareness training

The provision of comprehensive Deaf awareness training to staff in public organisations is a key recommendation emerging from this study. This is urgently needed to address the low levels of awareness among front-line staff in public organisations of the needs of the Deaf Community in accessing public information and services. It is critical that government organisations provide refresher training to staff on a regular basis. It is equally important that training should be tailored to different functional roles in the organisation.

There is a need to increase the information provided in the current NDA module on Disability Awareness in relation to Deaf service users. More information should be provided on the barriers faced by Deaf people in accessing public information and services.

Incentives should be provided by public organisations for their employees to attend ISL classes and/or Deaf awareness training programmes. However, it should be noted that employees with limited ISL qualifications should only be used as a last resort when no professional interpreters are available.

Deaf-friendly information provision

All public bodies should make their information provision more Deaf-friendly by for example providing ISL videos, on their websites and Facebook pages. Such videos, if accompanied by subtitles and speech, could also be relevant to the Hard of Hearing community and to people with low literacy levels. An annual audit should be undertaken to ensure public organisations' compliance with Deaf-friendly internet and social media information provision.

CIB should ensure that all CIS and MABS offices register with IRIS as service providers. The operating hours of St. Vincent's Deaf CIC in Deaf Village Ireland should be extended. CIB should fund the provision of Information Providers with ISL expertise in CISs in other urban centres such as Cork and Galway.

Public organisations should also consider the provision of a web "chat" facility similar to CIB's Live Advisor facility to allow Deaf people to make inquiries via their websites.

Deaf representative/supports organisations are an important source of information for Deaf people. They should constantly inform their constituents about public organisations that have an existing commitment to provide ISL interpreters and they should also make them aware of new Deaf-friendly initiatives, for example, the HSE/SLIS pilot scheme involving GPs.

Deaf-friendly customer service and communication strategies

Public organisations should consult with Deaf Community representative/advocacy organisations to ensure that their customer service and information communication provision are Deaf-friendly. A best practice guide should be developed (and regularly updated) to assist public organisations to implement specific information and service provision strategies that are aligned with the needs of the Deaf Community. Public organisations should install Deaf-friendly signage in their public offices and in any public-facing locations such as bus and train stations.

Written correspondence to Deaf customers/service users should be in plain English. Public organisations should offer Deaf customers/service users Deaf-friendly immediate response mechanisms such as a dedicated email or Skype address, mobile/text number or live-chat facility.

A number of public organisations have appointed Access Officers in compliance with their obligations under the 2005 Disability Act. Research should be undertaken to investigate the potential role that Access Officers, individually or as part of a network, can play in promoting Deaf-friendly information and customer services approaches within their organisations.

The recently introduced text relay service should be monitored to ensure it is meeting the needs of Deaf users.

Piloting best international practice

Policy-makers should consider the examples of good practice that exist internationally in relation to the provision of information and services to the Deaf Community. A number of international best practices have been identified which could support the Deaf Community to access public information and services including the Finnish voucher model and the UK Access to Work scheme. The Workplace Equipment/Adaptation Grant could be enhanced to include ISL interpreter supports as is the case with the Access to Work scheme. These should be piloted as soon as possible and/or adapted by the relevant government department to determine their suitability for the Irish context.

Other issues

The government should implement the provisions of the Irish Sign Language Act 2017 in full and government departments should be planning for the increased commitments to the Deaf Community required under the Act and ensuring these are monitored.

The National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017 - 2021 has specific targets assigned to named Departments, including targets in relation to the Deaf Community. These targets also need to be monitored.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities should be ratified as soon as possible. The government recently reaffirmed its commitment to ratify the Convention and to prioritise the remaining legislation needed.

It is important that Deaf advocacy/representative organisations play their role in policy development by responding to requests for policy submissions, particularly in relation to legislative requirements and the commitments under the National Disability Inclusion Strategy.

Goal: Improve accessibility of public information and services for the Deaf Community

Objective 1: Provision of ISL interpreters

Public bodies

Short term

- Government organisations should regularly communicate their commitment to the provision of ISL interpreters to frontline managers and staff
- Ensure that there are sufficient resources in place to back up this commitment
- Use appropriate communication strategies to disseminate awareness of this commitment to Deaf customers/service users
- Maintain a record of the number of times that ISL interpreters are requested for meetings with Deaf customers/service users
- Maintain a register of employees who can understand or interpret ISL so that they can be called upon to provide interpretation in an emergency or for initial conversations
- Actively promote incentive schemes for employees to attend ISL classes
- Vet all interpreters to ensure appropriate accreditation
- Evaluate the HSE/SLIS pilot project and if it proves successful, roll out a mainstream programme

Long term

- An audit should be carried out of frontline staff's awareness of their organisations' commitment to provide ISL interpreters
- An audit should be undertaken of awareness among the Deaf Community of public organisations' commitments to providing ISL interpreters
- Public bodies to publish statistics on usage of ISL interpreters and associated budgets

Deaf representative organisations

- Deaf Community representative organisations should have a role in monitoring ISL provision by government organisations

Objective 2: Boost the supply of ISL interpreters

Public bodies

Short term

- Carry out an urgent review of supply of ISL interpreters and make recommendations on how the output of ISL interpreter graduates can be increased
- Provide awareness training for career guidance counsellors on interpreter training and careers
- Provide ISL classes in secondary schools
- Provide access to teacher training colleges for Deaf students so that they in turn can teach ISL and provide role models
- Provide opportunities for Transition Year students to sample Deaf Assistant roles or attend a week-long Deaf Awareness/Deaf Studies programme in TCD's Centre for Deaf Studies

Long term

- Continuously review the supply and skills development of ISL interpreters and capacity to meet specialist requirements (medical, legal)

Objective 3: Expanding the Irish Remote Interpreting Service (IRIS)

Public bodies

Short term

- Register with IRIS to facilitate initial meetings with Deaf clients - this should not be seen as a substitute for interpreter provision for more in-depth meetings
- Expand day-time service and extend opening hours of IRIS service outside office hours and at weekends
- Market the IRIS service intensively to both the Deaf Community and to public and private organisations
- Lead by example in installing IRIS in all DEASP public-facing offices
- Simplify the booking process
- Expand the IRIS team to reduce booking delays
- Create a dedicated IRIS website and Facebook page

Deaf representative organisations

- Continually promote IRIS within the Deaf Community (the online survey indicated that a quarter of respondents were not aware of the service)

Objective 4: Enhanced Deaf awareness training

Public bodies

- Provide comprehensive Deaf Awareness Training to staff and tailor training to different functional areas in the organisation
- Provide incentives to employees to attend external Deaf Awareness Training and ISL classes
- Collaborate in the design of Deaf Awareness Training programmes for public organisations

Deaf representative organisations

- Design and Provide Deaf Awareness Training programmes in-house and in public body's premises
- Run regular educational features on websites/Facebook pages about both members'/clients' rights and service providers' legal obligations regarding provision of public information and services
- Constantly update members/clients of new services and commitments by public service providers for example, the HSE/SLIS pilot scheme for GPs.
- Look at new ways to raise the profile of the Deaf Community and public service provision

Objective 5: Deaf-friendly information provision

Public bodies

- Make information provision more Deaf-friendly:
 - Use Plain English in all communications
 - Use ISL videos and sub-titling on websites and Facebook
- All CIS and MABS offices to register for and use IRIS
- Extend opening hours of St. Vincent's Deaf CIC
- Extend information provision in CISs
- Offer Deaf customers/service users Deaf-friendly immediate response mechanisms such as a dedicated email or Skype address, mobile/text number or live-chat facility

Objective 6: Deaf-friendly customer service and communication strategies

Public bodies

Short term

- Consult with Deaf representative/advocacy organisations to ensure that customer service and information communication provision are Deaf-friendly
- Design and maintain an updated best practice guide on Deaf customer service
- Install Deaf-friendly signage in public offices and other locations providing public services
- Carry out research to investigate the impact and potential role of Access Officers, individually or as part of a network, in promoting Deaf-friendly information and customer service approaches within public organisations

Long term

- Regularly update best practice guide on Deaf customer services; develop an award scheme for Deaf-friendly service provision
- Provide dedicated Deaf awareness training and best practice case studies for Access Officers
- Expand the use of technology to communicate with Deaf people in public and private organisations

Deaf representative organisations

- Collaborate with public bodies on design of Deaf customer service strategy
- Deaf Community organisations to contribute criteria for excellence in Deaf customer service and submit best practice examples

Objective 7: Piloting best international practice

Public bodies

Short term

- Enhance the Workplace Equipment/Adaptation Grant to incorporate the flexibility of the UK Access to Work grant which is provided over and above any reasonable adjustments grants and can be used by Deaf employees to engage interpreter services to support their continuing employment
- Monitor the Text Relay Service introduced by ComReg in 2017
- Pilot and evaluate the Finnish voucher system model for the Irish situation

Objective 8: Other issues for policy consideration

Public bodies

Short term

- Implement Irish Sign Language Act
- Ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
- Progress National Disability Inclusion Strategy

Deaf representative organisations

- Look at new ways to raise the profile of the Deaf Community
- Monitor progress of actions relevant to Deaf Community
- Respond to requests for submissions in relation to the National Disability Inclusion Strategy

The Citizens Information Board provides independent information, advice and advocacy on public and social services through citizensinformation.ie, the Citizens Information Phone Service and the network of Citizens Information Services. It is responsible for the Money Advice and Budgeting Service and provides the National Advocacy Service for people with disabilities.

Head Office
Ground Floor
George's Quay House
43 Townsend Street
Dublin 2
Eircode D02 VK65

t 0761 07 9000
f 01 605 9099
e info@ciboard.ie
w citizensinformationboard.ie

