



**SO YOU WANT TO KNOW MORE  
ABOUT DEAF PEOPLE**

### **Who are Deaf people.....?**

There are many different types of deafness, including age related hearing loss and people who are hard of hearing; this fact sheet concentrates on people who are Deaf Sign Language users. This group of people usually includes those who have a severe or profound hearing loss (i.e. unable to communicate without using their vision). They usually have been born deaf, or lost their hearing in early childhood. They form a distinct group of Deaf people who use British Sign Language, share a common culture ('Deaf Culture'), and belong to the Deaf Community.

### **What is Deaf Culture and who are the Deaf Community.....?**

The Deaf Community consists of Deaf people whose preferred language is sign language, and who identify with each other through shared experiences and a common culture and identity. It is a distinct community, similar to an ethnic minority community, in that it is close knit and functions rather like an extended family. It is a well known fact that nothing is secret in the Deaf Community; the 'Deaf grapevine' works better than any telephone to spread gossip! The culture of this community is Deaf Culture; sharing a way of life and the experience of living in a hearing world which constantly excludes Deaf people. This culture is strongly centred on the use of sign language, and as such Deaf people use the label Deaf rather than deaf, because this denotes their linguistic and cultural equivalence to being English or French.

### **What is British Sign Language.....?**

British Sign Language is not a form of glorified mime, nor is it a visual form of English; it is the natural language of the Deaf Community in Britain. It is quite different from spoken English; it has its own grammar and structure and is rich, varied and as complex as any other language. Sign language is not universal or international; each country has its own sign language, which will have developed similarly to the way spoken language evolved in that country.

### **How can I communicate with Deaf people.....?**

In order to communicate most effectively with the Deaf community, conversation needs to be carried out in British Sign Language. This isn't always practical, as few hearing people can sign fluently. You may need to book an interpreter to communicate, but this can take time. There are basic skills you can acquire for enabling smoother communication; attending a Deaf Awareness course and a basic sign language course will help you with this. If you would like more information, or a basic guide to communicating with people who have a hearing loss (such as non-sign language users) please contact us.

### **What about lipreading and writing things down.....?**

There are many myths about lipreading and Deaf people's understanding of written English. English is a second language for many Deaf sign language users, and so written information can often be as inaccessible to them as Spanish would be to most of the population of England. Care is needed to ensure that assumptions are not made about the Deaf person's level of intelligence, based on their use of English; they are effectively attempting to communicate in a foreign language. Similarly, lipreading is often not an appropriate means of communication; it has many failings. Some deaf people are expert lipreaders, but even they cannot tell the difference between many of the sounds of the English language. It is worth remembering that only about 30% of spoken English can be identified from lipreading alone. It is often the case that rather than appear rude or to save embarrassment, a deaf person may nod and appear to understand information while in fact not comprehending much at all. However, both writing and lipreading are useful tools to aid communication, but are not a substitute for fully accessible information in British Sign Language.

### **Who are interpreters.....?**

Sign Language Interpreters are bilingual and bicultural, with experience of working in a variety of settings with different dialects, idiosyncrasies, and language levels. They translate between English and British Sign Language and vice versa, working to ensure that all parties involved in the communication have full access. Interpreters are professionals, and have often been through years of training to equip them for their jobs, and as such there is a high demand for their services; unfortunately, there is

also a national shortage of interpreters to fulfil that demand. For more information on booking and working with interpreters, please contact us.

### **What about technology.....?**

In recent years there have been significant advances in technological aids for Deaf and hard of hearing people. While these can enhance quality of life, they cannot replace human contact and communication. Most technological systems used to aid communication rely on the user having a sound grasp of the English language and maybe also information technology systems. This can disempower a Deaf user who may not have the knowledge and skills to utilise such systems; technology should be viewed as a tool to aid effective communication, and not as a substitute for skilled human aids to communication.

### **How do I find out more.....?**

Deaf Direct can offer information about a range of issues relating to Deaf and Hard of Hearing people. Please feel free to contact us for more information.