

Deaf Community: Consultation Notes May 2003

In May 2003 the Office for Disability Issues carried out consultations with over 250 members of the Deaf community, including stakeholders, in Auckland, South Auckland, Palmerston North, Wellington and Christchurch. These consultations with the Deaf community were assisted by a Deaf Advisory Group. The following is a summary of notes from these consultations.

Low levels of community awareness

There are extremely low levels of awareness about the Deaf community. Deaf culture and the different needs of Deaf people mean that Deaf people face multiple barriers when accessing a range of government and non-government services. This lack of awareness was seen in, for example, an apparent view that NZSL was not a "real" language for which interpreter services should be made available, the simple refusal of many services to provide NZSL interpreters, an assumption that written material (such as a pamphlet) was an adequate substitute for interpreter services (without regard to the average low English literacy levels of Deaf people), poor communication styles (such as talking away from a Deaf person or poor seating and lighting for interviews), few if any visual resources, and few resources on how to communicate well with Deaf people.

The lack of visibility of interpreter services generally such as in airports, tourist information, and especially in public broadcasting exacerbates the low awareness of the Deaf community and NZSL.

There is clear evidence therefore that the Deaf community is denied access to many parts of society, including government services and that the Deaf community is not seen as a valuable part of society. In addition, often little thought is given to budgeting for interpreting services, with the result these are often an afterthought or that a Deaf person is categorised as a high cost (and frequently low priority) client. This is in direct conflict with the Disability strategy.

Access to government services

The participation of Deaf people in everyday life is severely affected by their general lack of access to government services. Lack of access to live communication, poorly targeted written information, and reliance on information in forms which are not accessible to Deaf people create serious difficulties. These issues point not only to a lack of awareness of the needs of Deaf people, but show that it is rare for Deaf people themselves to be adequately consulted in service design and delivery. Examples of the sorts of issues that arise include:

Communication: Public information, such as tax reminders or changes in government policies, is not accessible to Deaf people, for example, because this is communicated through radio or print media that Deaf people cannot access. This increases the likelihood of non-compliance or that Deaf people will miss out on

opportunities to benefit from government services. The lack of information in video format with NZSL translation was a major area of concern.

- A significant number of the concerns raised by the Deaf community were about poor access to services offered by IRD, WINZ and CYFS and poor service delivery by those agencies. IRD has acknowledged that its level of service provision to Deaf people is not equivalent to that available to hearing people. CYFS has also acknowledged that it has no clear policy on the use of interpreters and frequently uses a Deaf person's family member to interpret.
- Many Deaf people reported poor responsiveness of government agencies, such as long time delays in responses to facsimile communication and unsatisfactory reliance on this as a substitute to live communication. Many Deaf people reported weeks or even months of waiting for responses to faxes from government agencies.
- Many Deaf people reported that most government agencies refuse to pay for interpreter services and that often a Deaf person will need to pay for these themselves. These additional costs of accessing government services are not borne by hearing people accessing the same services.
- In order to minimise costs, agencies frequently use unqualified people to interpret for Deaf people, with obvious risks to quality service delivery.

Health and Health Services

- Poor educational outcomes as well as low English literacy skills means that Deaf people do not have information about health risks or how to keep themselves healthy.
- Specific information about health and health services (including educational or public health information) is frequently difficult to obtain in timely and accessible ways (such as recent information about the SARS virus, ante-natal and post-natal care, birth control information and information about sexuality issues).
- Deaf people reported medical misdiagnosis by health professionals and lack of informed consent to medical treatment (sometimes with serious consequences) because practitioners or service providers refuse to provide interpreter services for Deaf patients, and place inappropriate reliance on children and other family members to interpret for Deaf adults in diagnosis or treatment situations.
- Deaf people experience additional stress and trauma in emergency situations where they may not be able to access emergency services by phone, where interpreters are not available and where emergency service staff such as Police or ambulance officers do not know how to communicate with Deaf people. A clear need emerged for 24 hour on call interpreter services for Deaf people for emergency situations. While some regions have a facsimile system in place with Police for emergencies, there are obvious limitations to this for some emergencies.

Courts, Police, and Lawyers

- Deaf people reported facing higher costs in accessing legal services and the justice system as a result of the additional time needed when working with (or without) an interpreter. Difficulties were also reported in access to judicial processes outside the Court, such as counselling, mediation and witness and victim services.
- The misinterpretation of culturally appropriate body language and behaviour of Deaf people by justice sector officials lead to inappropriate treatment of Deaf people.

Work

- Deaf people face discrimination in pre-employment situations (resulting in high levels of unemployment or underemployment). Full participation in the workplace is difficult for those few Deaf people who are able to find suitable work since many report lack of interpreters for staff meetings and poor workplace responsiveness to Deaf staff.
- Employers and union workers lacked creativity in their thinking about how to better manage to needs of their Deaf staff and to utilise their full potential.

Education

- The lack of access to education at all levels was one of the most significant issues for Deaf people of all ages. In schools, Deaf people noted problems with teachers' poor communications skills, lack of NZSL skills, poor use of visual teaching aids, and lack of access to interpreters and note takers.
- Deaf people emphasised their right to learn in a language they can understand and to have NZSL as a curriculum course in schools along with the development of both NCEA and NZQA standards for NZSL.
- In addition to assistance in class time, Deaf students needed support outside the classroom for their overall educational participation such as time with teacher aides and communicators.
- Families with Deaf children felt unable to make informed choices about the needs of their Deaf children, particularly in light of the lack of information about the long-term effects on Deaf children who do not develop good language skills at a young age (and therefore may not have a well developed first language). In addition, parents seemed to be under pressure to consider alternatives to the use of NZSL, such as cochlear implants, without adequate information about the potential limitations of these.
- Families also reported problems with the lack of support for parents who want to learn NZSL, playgroups and classes where parents and children can be supported to learn NZSL, and how to teach children NZSL.
- The lack of interpreter and other educational support services in tertiary institutions (as well as the cost of these) means that many Deaf people who want to gain qualifications for work, are unable to do so.

Social Participation

- Deaf young people, older people and the children of Deaf adults all reported specific problems including lack of recognition of their use of NZSL, poor access to NZSL as a curriculum subject in schools, inappropriate use of children and young people as interpreters for adults, and problems with service provision in rest homes for older Deaf people (such as exclusion from activities and inadequate use of alarm systems with lights to attract attention).
- Lack of access to participation in democratic processes such as national and local elections, political party debates, City Council public meetings, and to Parliamentary processes means that Deaf people are less informed about issues of the day and cannot participate equally in debates about those issues.
- Deaf people have poor access to public broadcasting. While some text services are available for some television programmes, there is no simultaneous live translation of programmes such as television news or political party debates.

Specific Issues for Maori Deaf

Maori are disproportionately represented in the deaf population. Consultation with Te Puni Kokiri, the Maori Language Commission and Maori Deaf in South Auckland, showed some specific issues for Maori Deaf. For example, Maori Deaf are excluded from "te ao Maori", the Maori world. Participation in hui, marae, tangi and other activities is therefore problematic for many Maori Deaf. In addition, access to Maori language and culture was difficult where Maori Deaf had low levels of English literacy generally. There were reports of NZSL interpreters being forbidden to participate in marae activities. A key issue was the lack of tri-lingual interpreters who were fluent in Maori, English and NZSL. Maori Deaf overwhelmingly supported the official recognition of NZSL as a means by which they might access their own whakapapa, history and culture generally as well as give access to greater participation in society generally.

Interpreter workforce issues

There is little current research into the interpreting situation in NZ, however, as a result of our consultation with the Deaf community and NZSL interpreters (including participants at the 2003 Sign Language Interpreters Association Conference) the main areas for concern are as follows.

Shortage of interpreters

It is difficult to estimate the number of interpreters who are actually working as interpreters. The AUT NZSL interpreter diploma has had 60 graduates since its first class in 1992. Overseas information shows that sign language interpreting services are supply-driven. Therefore, the more interpreters are made available the more this is promoted the more demand rises.

Training and mentoring

Standards for assessing NZSL need to be set so that students beginning the interpreting course are at an appropriate standard of competence and post-graduation interpreters ongoing skill development can be assessed. AUT are currently looking at extending the 2 year diploma course to a 3 year degree programme in an effort to raise the standard of graduate interpreters. At present interpreters finish training with relatively little practical experience and with no post-graduation mentoring. As a result they may end up interpreting in court or other high-consequence settings for which their skills and experience levels are inappropriate.

A report from the UK in 1999 surveyed the interpreting situation and made various recommendations including that highly qualified interpreters have an added role as tutor or mentor to less experienced interpreters. SLIANZ run a mentoring program at present however registration with SLIANZ is voluntary and the infrastructure does not exist to significantly support interpreter mentoring.

At present most interpreters are freelance or on casual contracts. As noted in Finland employment conditions such as these leave interpreters with little time to develop leadership or professional skills. Liz Scott Gibson report (into interpreter services in NZ 1997) stated that there was no budget within the Deaf Association for training or supervision of interpreters. Other aspects of employment need to be re-assessed (remuneration, travel costs, booking fees, etc).

The creation of more permanent jobs are required to provide sufficient career security for interpreters throughout New Zealand. The current trend for most interpreters is that having trained in Auckland they stay in Auckland for reasons of greater job security.

In Auckland the network group of Deaf-related organisations, DAMN, is hoping to conduct a survey into interpreting services and the Office for Disability Issues could become involved with this.

Professional Monitoring

This could be resolved by the creation of professional standards so that a structured career path is set up and interpreters have the opportunity and obligation to develop their skills and have their skills assessed regularly. This would enable monitoring of interpreters skill level and would ensure that only highly qualified interpreters would be assigned work in high consequence or complex areas. There is strong support for this from both the interpreting and the Deaf community.

Coordination of interpreter services

At present the perception from the Deaf community is that coordination of interpreter services is inconsistent, ad-hoc and not respectful of the confidentiality that Deaf people require.

The Scott-Gibson report into interpreter services in NZ (1997) recommended that services be centrally coordinated. Another report by McKee (1996) on interpreters also concluded that an agency for booking interpreters be run independently from the Deaf Association in order to respect Deaf clients confidentiality.

Internet-based booking systems will mean that services can be more easily accessed by the general public and are more anonymous. An online interpreter booking system is being successfully run in London.

Complaints System

SLIANZ and the Deaf Association both have complaints procedures. However, both agencies are under resourced do not have mechanisms in place where Deaf people can provide feedback on service delivery in a systematic and structured way.

A centralized booking centre could give the service provider and client more distance so that feedback/complaints could be made without Deaf people feeling that they are jeopardising their access to services in the future.

Geographical spread of the population

Information technology, e.g.: Videophone interpreting can assist in providing interpreting services in rural and remote areas. Providing interpreting services via video-phone has been trialled with Deaf people in Australia, Britain, and the USA with considerable success. Another potential solution could be to offer extra pay for interpreters who work in rural areas.