

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



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# Table of Contents

Preface	1
Executive Summary	2
1. Introduction	9
1.1 Introduction	9
1.2 Research objectives and questions	9
1.3 Methodology	10
1.4 Report Structure	11
2. Literature review	12
2.1 Introduction	12
2.2 Definitions	12
2.3 Deaf Community socioeconomic data	13
2.4 Sign Language	16
2.5 Deaf Education in Ireland	18
2.6 Employment and unemployment levels in the Deaf Community	26
2.7 Irish Sign Language/English interpreters	28
2.8 Legislation and rights (promotion of the rights and dignity of the Deaf Community)	34
2.9 Codes of practice and Guidelines on accessibility of public information and services	44
2.10 Deaf awareness training	46
2.11 Hearing Assistive Technology Systems	47
2.12 Best international practices	50
2.13 Deaf Community support/advocacy/representative organisations	56
2.14 Summary	59
3 Consultation with the Deaf Community	60
3.1 Introduction	60
3.2 Experiences of Deaf Community in accessing public information and services	60
3.3 Current provision by public bodies	67
3.4 Suggested improvements	68
3.5 Summary	71
4. Data on access to public information and services by the Deaf Community	73
4.1 Introduction	73
4.2 St. Vincent's Deaf Citizens Information Centre, Deaf Village Ireland	73
4.3 Data on requests to SLIS for ISL interpreting services and IRIS usage	76
4.4 Summary	80
5. Survey of the Deaf Community	81
5.1 Introduction	81
5.2 Data analysis	81
5.3 Summary	94
6. Consultation with public service providers	96
6.1 Introduction	96
6.2 Public service providers	96
6.3 Summary	105
7. Conclusions and recommendations	107
7.1 Conclusions	107
7.2 Recommendations	112
Appendix 1 History of Irish Sign Language and of Deaf education in Ireland	120
Appendix 2 Bibliography	124

# 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 and Recommendations

## 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 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

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

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction

This Chapter describes the research objectives set out by the Citizens Information Board and the research methodology used by the researchers, Tom Martin & Associates/TMA, to address those objectives. The structure of the report is outlined in Section 1.4.

This report concerns the experiences of the Deaf Community in terms of accessing public information and public and social services. For the purposes of this study, the Deaf Community is defined as people who are Deaf and whose first language is Irish Sign Language (ISL). This definition is generally understood within the Deaf Community but less so outside it.

Defining what constitutes public information and public and social services is also problematic. The provision of public information and public and social services comprises a broad mix of funders, providers and delivery channels. While most public services are provided by government organisations, some are delivered by private sector providers (for example, GPs). Furthermore there is a tendency among Deaf consumers, particularly those in older age groups, to associate some private sector companies, for example: eir and TV3, with public services provision.

## 1.2 Research objectives and questions

The research objectives were to:

- i. Describe and analyse the experience of a sample of the Deaf Community in accessing information and services.
- ii. Describe and analyse the experience of key organisations which provide services to the Deaf Community in accessing services and information on behalf of their members/service users.
- iii. Identify the blocks and barriers to access to services and related information for the Deaf Community.
- iv. Describe the nature and extent of user involvement in the development of information services for the Deaf Community.
- v. Identify and analyse key components of international models of 'good practice' in information and service provision for the Deaf Community.
- vi. Identify if and how technology might be more effectively applied in Ireland to improve access to services and information for the Deaf Community.
- vii. Identify effective ways to improve access to public services for Deaf Irish Sign Language users.
- viii. Ascertain the views of the different stakeholders (Deaf Community, organisations working with the Deaf Community, providers of Sign Language Interpretation services, public service providers) on the extent to which the information needs of Deaf people are being met by current public service provision.
- ix. Identify the issues arising out of the analysis and make recommendations accordingly.

In addition, the following research questions were specified:

- What is the experience of the Deaf Community in accessing information and services from public bodies?
- What are the current provisions by Government agencies for meeting the information and public service needs of the Deaf Community?

- What are the experiences of different age groups of the Deaf Community in accessing information and services?
- What is the experience of Deaf people with literacy difficulties and/or underdeveloped IT skills in accessing information?
- To what extent does existing communication service provision for the Deaf Community meet demand?
- Is available communications technology for people with hearing difficulties fully optimised in Ireland?
- What technological developments can further inform the development of information systems for Deaf people in Ireland?
- What are the views/perspectives of stakeholders (users, interpreters, statutory and voluntary/community organisations) as to how services should be developed and operated?
- What are the barriers/difficulties encountered in accessing information about public and social services?
- What mechanisms should be put in place to ensure appropriate involvement of the key stakeholders?
- What are the main issues in developing more accessible information systems and services for the Deaf community in Ireland?

Section 1.3 below details the methodology used by the researchers to address the research objectives and questions.

## 1.3 Methodology

The researchers used a number of data collection approaches to collect information on the experiences of the Deaf Community in accessing public information and services. Their work programme was divided into seven stages which are detailed below.

- *Stage 1: Project initiation/supervision*  
The consultants participated in meetings of a steering group established by the Citizens Information Board (CIB) to support the study. The steering group comprised representatives from Citizens Information Board, Sign Language Interpreting Service, Dublin North West Citizens Information Service and representatives of the Deaf Community (Irish Deaf Society, DeafHear and Deaf Village Ireland) who provided valuable contacts and insights to the consultants.
- *Stage 2: Desk research/literature review*  
The researchers undertook an extensive review of published and unpublished data relating to the experiences of the Deaf Community in accessing public information and services. These data included statistics, legislation, policy statements, research reports and academic papers. The researchers also studied documents and reports relating to best international practice with regard to public service provision to the Deaf Community. A key emphasis of the desk research stage was on collecting data on the main public information sources and public services accessed by the Deaf Community.
- *Stage 3: Consultation with stakeholders*  
An intensive programme of interviews was held with members of the Deaf Community, Deaf Community representative/support/advocacy organisations, public sector providers and other relevant stakeholders. The meetings with the Deaf Community involved the use of an Irish Sign Language interpreter and were either held face-to-face or remotely via the Irish Remote Interpreting Service (IRIS). The interviews followed a semi-structured approach in that the researchers covered a set number of topics yet were flexible so as to permit the interviewees the opportunity to raise issues of concern to them.

- *Stage 4: Survey of the Deaf Community*  
An online questionnaire-based survey was undertaken of the Deaf Community to obtain their perspectives and experiences in terms of accessing public information and services. The questions to be included in the survey questionnaire were agreed by the steering group. Each question in the survey was presented in English and in Irish Sign Language; the video featuring the signed version was also subtitled. A short introductory video (also signed) was prepared to accompany the survey. An intensive information campaign was undertaken including the use of social media to promote awareness of the survey; the representative organisations for the Deaf Community, including members of the steering group, made a concerted effort to raise awareness of the survey among their service users.
- *Stage 5: Focus group sessions*  
The researchers held two focus group sessions with Deaf people on key issues facing the Deaf Community in obtaining public information and in accessing public and social services. The focus group sessions addressed areas of concern to Deaf people and also identified potential solutions.
- *Stage 6: Data analysis*  
The research team undertook a detailed analysis of the quantitative and qualitative information collected during the preceding stages of the research programme.
- *Stage 7: Report presentation*  
The researchers concluded their study by presenting their report to the steering group and then submitting it to the Citizens Information Board.

## 1.4 Report Structure

The report is structured along the following lines:

### *Chapter 2: Literature Review*

Provides an overview of the literature and legislative context on access by the Deaf Community to public information and to public and social services in Ireland and internationally.

### *Chapter 3: Consultation with the Deaf Community*

Outlines the main issues arising from the consultation with the Deaf Community and their representative/advocacy organisations with particular focus on access to public information and services.

### *Chapter 4: Data on access to public information and public services by the Deaf Community*

Describes data on the types of public information sought and public services accessed by the Deaf Community.

### *Chapter 5: Survey of the Deaf Community*

Provides an overview of the literature on access by the Deaf Community to public information and to public and social services in Ireland and internationally.

### *Chapter 6: Consultation with public service providers*

Reports on the consultation with public organisations in relation to their service provision to members of the Deaf Community.

### *Chapter 7: Conclusions and recommendations*

This chapter presents the researchers' conclusions and recommendations.

# Chapter 2: Literature review

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results of a review of publicly available documents such as international and national legislation, national strategies, research reports, academic papers and statistics relating to access by the Deaf Community to public information and services.

The documents reviewed in this chapter include Census of Population and other reports published by the Central Statistics Office and national disability strategy documents prepared by the government. The chapter also reviews statistics relating to the provision of education and employment supports to Deaf people and to the training of Irish sign language interpreters.

The chapter starts by examining definitions relating to the Deaf Community and an analysis of sign language, the first language of Deaf People. It finishes with a review of the services provided by Deaf representative and advocacy organisations.

## 2.2 Definitions

There are two common approaches to defining "deafness", medical and cultural.

### 2.2.1 Medical approach

The audiology interpretation or 'medical model' refers to deafness as a lack of hearing in the range of sound commonly perceived by most people. Hearing loss is expressed as mild, moderate, severe or profound. Corresponding sound-level ranges at and below which no hearing occurs are:

Mild: 25–39 decibels (whispered sounds; bird song);

Moderate: 40–69 decibels (ordinary conversation, or background music);

Severe: 70–94 decibels (busy restaurant noise up to underground railway sound);

Profound: 95+ decibels (the level of shouted conversation in an underground station).

A National Association for Deaf People (now DeafHear) publication indicated that approximately 17% of the population of Ireland have some form of hearing loss (see Table 2.1).

Table 2.1: Hearing loss within the population

Category	% Total Adult Population	Number of Adults
Mild	11.33%	399,201
Moderate	4.99%	175,818
Severe	0.54%	19,026
Profound	0.14%	4,933
Total	17%	598,978

Similarly, documentation<sup>1</sup> from the UK Action on Hearing Loss organisation (formerly the Royal National Institute for Deaf People [RNID]) states that more than 11 million people in the UK have some form of hearing loss, "one in six of the population".

1. <https://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/your-hearing/about-deafness-and-hearing-loss/statistics.aspx>

## 2.2.2 Cultural approach

The second approach defines "deafness" in cultural, social and linguistic terms to denote the unique group of people (the 'Deaf Community') who share a perception of the world through an emphasis on visual and kinaesthetic communication. This use of deafness is most commonly reserved for people who are profoundly deaf at birth as opposed to those deafened post-lingually (after having acquired speech and oral language); it is often signified by the use of a capital "D" in Deaf. Ladd (2003) contrasts deafness with Deafhood, a concept he introduced to describe the journey Deaf people make towards an understanding and appreciation of their own unique culture. The 2011 Census found that some 50% of the Deaf Community do not consider their deafness as a disability but view it as part of their identity as a linguistic and cultural minority group.

The term 'Hard of Hearing' denotes a degree of functional hearing loss (moderate to severe) that still allows the person, through residual hearing, to process acoustic information necessary for auditory-verbal communication. Hard of Hearing persons can thus communicate with hearing people through speech, and receive communication with or without amplification (hearing aids) and by using lip-reading (also known as speech-reading).

Research on lip-reading<sup>2</sup> has found that:

- Only 30–35% of spoken English is distinguishable on the lips, therefore lip-reading requires a lot of guesswork (as well as a lot of very tiring concentration);
- Using only their residual hearing, people with hearing loss understand 30% of speech;
- Using hearing aids or using lip-reading, they understand 65%;
- Using hearing aids and lip-reading, they understand 90%.

The vast majority of Hard of Hearing people identify with the hearing community though a small minority identify with the Deaf Community and/or transition back and forth between the Deaf Community and the hearing community.

## Deaf Community

One defining feature of the Deaf Community is its use of sign language as its primary and/or preferred mode of communication. The Deaf Community (which includes hearing children of Deaf parents<sup>3</sup> who may have learned sign language as a first language in childhood) form a close-knit group and take great pride in their language and culture. Authors such as Padden and Humphries (2005), and Holcomb (2012), paint vivid portraits of a vibrant Deaf culture.

However internally vibrant, the fact remains that, as a linguistic minority, they are exposed to the risks of discrimination, marginalisation and isolation from the larger community.

## 2.3 Deaf Community socio-economic data

### Population statistics

Over the last two decades the figure of 5,000 Deaf Irish Sign Language (ISL) users in Ireland has become a commonly used statistic in deaf literature. The original source for this estimate is Matthews (1996) who included both the ISL and BSL users in Northern Ireland in his estimate of 5,103 for the island. The statistic

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2. DeafHear <https://www.deafhear.ie/DeafHear/newsFeature.html?who=1074>

3. Also known as CODAs (Children of Deaf Adults).



tallies with the rule of thumb that the profoundly deaf cohort in any national population approximates to 0.1% (Conama, 2008).

A related rule of thumb puts the wider Deaf/Hard of Hearing cohort at 2% of the population. Leeson (2001) estimated that about 50,000 non-Deaf people also know and use Irish Sign Language (ISL) to a greater or lesser extent; these comprise family members, friends, co-workers and assistants/associates (such as interpreters) of the Deaf Community.

Many commentators believe that an opportunity was missed in the 2011 Census to get a definitive measure of the Deaf population. Based on responses to its question 15 on languages spoken at home other than English or Irish, the Census found that there were 1,077 Deaf ISL users in the country (plus 301 Deaf persons using other national sign languages). Deaf support organisations are sceptical of this low Deaf ISL figure, pointing out that the relevant Census question (Do you speak a language other than English or Irish at home? What is this language?) was poorly defined and misleading – an ISL user might well have omitted to tick the box if there was no one else at home who used ISL and also because ISL is not a spoken language. An additional factor suggested for the under-reporting of ISL-use is the low level of functional literacy coupled with the high level of social isolation that characterises many Deaf citizens. Due to financial constraints, virtually the same question was used again in the 2016 Census. Consultation is currently underway in relation to the wording of questions in the 2021 Census.

## Other socio-economic data

Despite the above caveats concerning the Census 2011 Deaf/Hard of Hearing data, the most comprehensive source of data we have on the Deaf Community is CSO's Profile 8 ("*Our Bill of Health*")<sup>4</sup>, one of a series of ten CSO reports interpreting various themes in the Census 2011 data. Profile 8 looked at health, disability and carers in Ireland.

Profile 8 examined disability data from the point of view of family status, living arrangements, education and work. For many of these perspectives it breaks out the disability data across 11 disability types, but, unfortunately, the Deaf Community data remains bundled with the severely Hard of Hearing cohort.

Profile 8 data show that:

- 595,335 persons (13% of the population) had a disability in April 2011, up 51.2% on the Census 2006 figure;
- 92,060 (2.1% of the population) were Deaf persons or had a serious hearing impairment (Deaf/Hard of Hearing);
- Approximately 15,000 Deaf/Hard of Hearing people aged 65 years or over lived alone (5,000 male and 10,000 female);
- Multiple disabilities: 46.7% of those with a hearing disability had no other disability making Deaf/Hard of Hearing the disability most likely to have on its own. For those Deaf/Hard of Hearing people who had a second disability, the most common was a difficulty that limited basic physical activities which was indicated by 34,033 people (37%).

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4. [http://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/census/documents/census2011profile8/Profile\\_8\\_Full\\_document.pdf](http://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/census/documents/census2011profile8/Profile_8_Full_document.pdf)

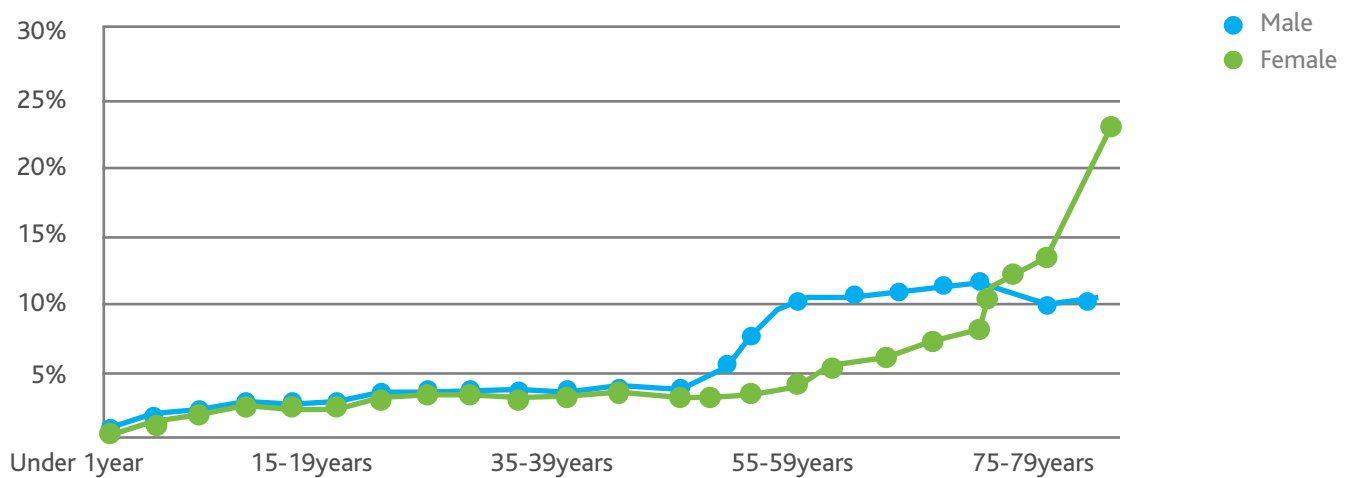
Table 2.2: Age profile of Deaf/Hard of Hearing people in Ireland

Age category	Population (%)	Population (number)
Under 20	4%	4,119
20–34	6%	5,521
35–49	10%	8,963
50–64	21%	19,118
65+	58%	53,438
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>92,060</b>

(Source: CSO)

Only 20% of the Deaf/Hard of Hearing cohort are under 50 years of age.

Figure 2.1: Percentage of Deaf/Hard of Hearing by gender and age



## Location of Deaf/Hard of Hearing people

The following table shows the distribution of the Deaf/Hard of Hearing population by region and by type of location.

Table 2.3: Geographic distribution and location of Deaf/Hard of Hearing people

Type of location	Region								Total	Total (%)
	Border	Midlands	West	Dublin	Mid East	Mid West	South East	South West		
<b>Towns</b>	4,213	2,632	3,211	24,345	5,352	3,700	5,280	8,246	56,979	62%
<b>Rural</b>	6,783	3,071	5,83	598	3,674	4,070	5,528	5,574	35,081	38%
<b>Total</b>	10,996	5,703	8,994	24,943	9,026	7,770	10,808	13,820	92,060	100%
<b>%</b>	12%	6%	10%	27%	10%	8%	12%	15%		

(Source : CSO)

Sixty-two percent of Deaf/Hard of Hearing people live in towns. Twenty-seven percent live in the greater Dublin area.

Other sources of data on the Deaf Community include:

- A Health Service Executive (HSE) National Audiology Review 2011<sup>5</sup> estimated that approximately 8% of the adult population have a permanent acquired hearing loss of a significant degree. In the over-70 age group the percentage rises to 50%. Thus, about 250,000 adults in Ireland have a permanent hearing impairment, due mainly to ageing and/or noise exposure, which affects their quality of life, communication, social activity and participation to varying degrees;
- National Physical and Sensory Disability Database Committee (2014) Annual Report<sup>6</sup> gives information on the Deaf/Hard of Hearing clients who have registered on their database;
- ESRI (2010), Quarterly National Household Survey (QNHS) Equality Module<sup>7</sup>;
- CSO National Disability Survey (2006)<sup>8</sup>;
- ESRI (2015), Educational and Employment Experiences of People with a Disability in Ireland: An Analysis of the National Disability Survey.

## 2.4 Sign language

As stated above, sign language is the primary and/or preferred mode of communication of the Deaf Community. Sign language is a visual-gestural (or visual-spatial) language which uses manual and other visual-gestural articulations to convey meaning, as opposed to the acoustically conveyed sound patterns of spoken language (aural-oral or auditory-verbal communication).

Sign language is signed or articulated within a confined 3D space in front of the signer known as the 'signing frame', extending from the top of the head down to about waist level (the 3D aspect means that a 2D video of signing does not capture the complete message). Signing involves much more than just manual signs (70% of the meaning in ISL is to be found elsewhere than in the hands). The key non-manual articulators (non-manual features NMFs) include the mouth, nose, chin, eyes, eye-brows, head, arms, shoulders and torso, also 'mouthings' (voiceless words of the spoken language formed with the mouth, as opposed to mouth gestures inherent in sign language). These visual articulations can be produced simultaneously unlike in speech which tends to be much more linear and sequential (writing is totally so). Sign language shares many similarities with spoken language, and linguists consider it to be a full language possessing an independent structure, lexicon, grammar, syntax and semantics, in contrast with, for example, mere 'body language' which can only be interpreted broadly.

National sign languages have many variations. Just as in spoken languages, one finds regional dialects, social registers and code-switching. Often there are also generational and gender variations. 'Village sign languages' (as found in Martha's Vineyard or Bali) develop in relatively isolated areas with high incidences of hereditary deafness, where most hearing people have deaf family members and therefore most signers are hearing.

'Contact sign' is a variety or style that arises from contact between a deaf sign language and an oral language (or the written or manually coded form of the oral language); contact languages also arise between different sign languages, although the term pidgin rather than contact sign is usually used to describe such phenomena.

It is important to distinguish sign language from signed versions of spoken language (sometimes termed

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5. <http://www.hse.ie/eng/services/Publications/corporate/AudiologyReview.pdf>

6. [http://www.hrb.ie/uploads/tx\\_hrbpublications/NPSDD\\_Annual\\_Report\\_2014\\_web.pdf](http://www.hrb.ie/uploads/tx_hrbpublications/NPSDD_Annual_Report_2014_web.pdf)

7. <https://www.esri.ie/pubs/BKMNEXT231.pdf>

8. [http://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/otherreleases/nationaldisability/National\\_Disability\\_Survey\\_2006\\_First\\_Results\\_full\\_report.pdf](http://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/otherreleases/nationaldisability/National_Disability_Survey_2006_First_Results_full_report.pdf)

'signed oral languages', 'manually coded languages' or 'signed supported speech SSS'). Unlike sign languages, which evolve naturally with their own unique grammar and syntax in Deaf Communities, manual codes are the conscious invention of deaf and hearing educators and mostly follow the grammar of the oral language - or, more precisely, of the written form of the oral language. Schick (Oxford Handbook, 2011) notes that the fact that children tend to have great difficulty in acquiring certain aspects of manually coded language suggests that converting a spoken language into a visual one is inconsistent with how visual languages work.

Variants of manually coded languages include:

- Fingerspelling;
- Signed Oral languages (using a word-for-word representation of the written form of an oral language); Signed English evolved differently in each English-speaking country, each borrowing signs from the local deaf sign language and inventing new signs to represent the words and grammar of English<sup>9</sup>;
- Sign Supported English (UK);
- Seeing Essential English, Signing Exact English and Conceptually accurate signed English (US);
- Cued Speech (used with mouthing where 'cued' hand shapes near the mouth are used to make clear the meaning of English words that look the same to a lip-reader).
- Authoritative sources offering accounts of the history of Sign Language development include:
  - The Oxford Handbook of Deaf Studies, Language, and Education, edited by Marc Marschark and Patricia Elizabeth Spencer [various Volumes and editions]
  - Gallaudet University's quarterly journal, *Sign Language Studies*<sup>10</sup>.

## Irish Sign Language

Irish Sign Language (ISL) is the first and preferred language of the Irish Deaf Community. Both ISL and British Sign Language (BSL) are used in Northern Ireland. A dialect of BSL called Northern Ireland Sign Language (NISL) is derived from BSL with an admixture of American Sign Language (ASL).

### ISL Classes

Grants are available for families of Deaf/Hard of Hearing children for sign language tuition. ISL courses (day and evening) are offered by several organisations including the Irish Deaf Society (Deaf Adult Literacy Services), IrishDeaf.com, the Centre for Sign Language Studies, Galway, Cork Deaf Association, and Deaf Community Centre, Limerick. Courses are also offered by several Colleges of Further Education.

The courses are provided for different levels of 'receptive' and 'productive' skills:

- The Irish Deaf Society provides QQI/FETAC<sup>11</sup>- accredited courses in ISL for both beginners and intermediate levels. All classes are provided by qualified ISL teachers from the Centre for Deaf Studies, Trinity College Dublin;
- The QQI/FETAC Level 3 course is for beginners and is 20 weeks in duration, one 2 hour class per week;
- The QQI/FETAC Level 4 course is for intermediate levels and for those who have successfully completed the Level 3 course. The course is 30 weeks in duration, one 2 hour class per week.

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9. See McDonnell (1997) for a discussion of signed English in an Irish context.

10. <http://gupress.gallaudet.edu/SLS.html>

11. The Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) was the former statutory awarding body for further education in Ireland. FETAC was dissolved and its functions were passed to Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) in November 2012.

Some organisations, including IrishDeaf.com and the Centre for Sign Language Studies, provide ISL courses with qualifications awarded by Signature (formerly the British Council for the Advancement of Communication with Deaf People) and accredited by Ofqual. Signature qualifications have been aligned with the Irish National Framework for Qualifications. Professional level awards NVQ Levels 3 and 6 in Irish Sign Language use the British National Language Standards (CILT, 2005). Successful completion of professional level courses can be used as evidence of the language skills needed to work professionally with Deaf people (for example, as teachers of ISL, trainee interpreters, social workers, workers within Deaf organisations and assistants in schools).

### **Sign Language teachers**

The Centre for Deaf Studies in Trinity College Dublin has offered a Bachelor in Deaf Studies (B.St.Su.) since 2009. This is a four-year full-time course leading to an honours degree (NFQ Level 8). The course is open to both Deaf and hearing students. It provides a comprehensive introduction to the Deaf community and Irish Sign Language (ISL) for those wishing to work with sign language users. No prior knowledge of ISL is required for entry. The Bachelor in Deaf Studies course has three streams, teacher training, interpreter training and deaf studies. There are 20 places on the course and there is some fall-out over the four years (the 2016/17 final year enrolment figures were 4, 3 and 3 students respectively).

### **Shortage of professionally-trained ISL Teachers**

Leeson and Lynch (2009) noted that there were only 22 professionally trained ISL teachers in Ireland, all of whom were Deaf. Four came from the EU-funded Horizon Programme (1992–94), three from the Cork Programme (1998–99), and the remaining fifteen from the Centre for Deaf Studies (2001–07). There are concerns with supply given the recent recognition of ISL. Even if bilingual education were introduced formally, there would not be a sufficient pool of Deaf ISL teachers in Ireland to meet demand. They also noted that the small number of professionally trained ISL teachers was leading to a clear rural-urban divide in access to ISL. The fact that there was no provision of matriculation level ISL (Level 5 Leaving Cert ISL) was reinforcing the scarcity of trained teachers.

## **2.5 Deaf education in Ireland**

### **Development of Deaf education policy in Ireland**

In any study on access to information and public and social services for the Deaf Community, access to effective education provision must be a priority area for investigation. Education plays a pivotal role in the development of communication capabilities, self-confidence and empowerment which, in turn, facilitate access to other information and services (providing of course the service providers discharge their obligations in making the service accessible). Of course education is not just about gaining access to services. A positive educational experience, attaining good literacy skills and academic achievement, is conducive to a successful social, emotional, cultural and work life.

Appendix 1 describes the background to Deaf education in Ireland, the debate over oralism (education focused on oral language) and manualism (educating through sign language). It also describes the different approaches to deaf education at primary and post-primary levels: full mainstreaming (inclusion); group mainstreaming/integration; and separation (separate schools for Deaf and Hard of Hearing children).

The first official policy document on Deaf education was a 1972 report by a Committee appointed by the Minister for Education. This endorsed the existing practice of prioritising the oral method of instruction. It was not until the turn of the millennium that any subsequent substantive policy documents were produced to address the persistent challenges facing Irish Deaf education.

In 2001 a submission by the National Educational Psychology Service to the Advisory Committee on Deaf Education stated that a large proportion of Deaf/Hard of Hearing students were not reaching satisfactory levels of academic achievement and their progress did not reflect their real potential.

The legacy of oralist education in Ireland is not just literacy deficits but, relatedly, markedly inferior educational outcomes. The submission by the Centre for Deaf Studies (2001) to the Advisory Committee on the Education of the Deaf stated that:

*"The Irish Deaf education sector has traditionally failed to deliver an holistic education to deaf students for whom ISL is a primary or preferred language. This is evidenced in the low literacy levels achieved by profoundly Deaf people, by the very small percentage of Deaf students who enter third level education and by the traditional exclusion of ISL as a part of the national curriculum, or as a means of delivering the national curriculum."*

The submission called for a new approach advocating:

- a clear philosophical framework be established to guide the development of bilingual education for Deaf children in pre-school, primary and post-primary settings;
- systematic review of the aims and objectives of Deaf education and the expected educational outcomes for Deaf children;
- a long-term strategy for recruiting and training Irish Deaf people as teachers;
- existing teachers be encouraged to attain an acceptable level of ISL (to be specified by the Department of Education) and to gain an understanding of "Deafhood" from a cultural perspective;
- longitudinal research on literacy achievements of Deaf students under bilingualism;
- ISL be afforded the same status as other European languages in the curriculum, and introduced for ordinary and honours level examinations at Leaving Certificate level;
- that the Irish language requirement for entry to teacher training be replaced with an equivalent ISL prerequisite for Deaf candidates;
- that the medical examination prerequisite for entry to teacher training colleges be removed;
- that deaf children's self-belief be nurtured at primary and post-primary levels in order to overcome the widely held belief that deaf children cannot achieve as much as other children;
- that there be Deaf role models in teaching positions in the schools for the Deaf.

Over the last few decades the accepted pedagogical wisdom (reflected in Irish legislation by the 1998 Education Act, and the EPSEN Act 2004) favoured the education of 'special needs children' locally in mainstream settings - with the important proviso that these settings are appropriately staffed and resourced to support the students' needs.

The introduction of mainstream options in Ireland resulted in a dramatic increase in the numbers of Deaf/Hard of Hearing students in these settings. It is estimated that over 90% of Deaf/Hard of Hearing students now attend mainstream schools and there is a corresponding decline in enrolment in schools for Deaf/Hard of Hearing children. The introduction in 2012 of a nationwide provision of new-born hearing screening in Ireland, facilitating early diagnosis and the option of audiological interventions, is predicted to be an additional factor in the growing uptake of mainstream schooling. However, the majority of pupils who use sign language as their only or preferred means of communication and whose parents wish them to be part of the Deaf community continue to opt for separate Deaf/Hard of Hearing schools.

## Education Partnership Group

When the Advisory Committee on Deaf Education was disbanded in 2007, an Education Partnership Group was formed, representing all the main Deaf organisations in the area of education, to promote a common agenda. It has been enlarged to include the parents of Deaf children in both specialist and mainstream schools. Members now include:

- Centre for Deaf Studies in Trinity College Dublin;
- Catholic Institute for Deaf People;
- DeafHear;
- Irish Deaf Society;
- St Joseph's School for Deaf Boys and St Mary's School for Deaf Girls;
- Sharing the Journey (a support group for parents and families of d/Deaf and Hard of Hearing children);
- Our New Ears (an organisation for parents of deaf children with cochlear implants).

The Education Partnership Group manages the Deaf Education Centre, which is based in Deaf Village Ireland, and in 2009 produced a comprehensive report outlining the issues that needed to be addressed by Deaf education policy. It highlighted continuing serious concerns with mainstream options because of the inadequate resourcing. The resourcing proviso was always expected to be a stumbling block in mainstream education for Deaf/Hard of Hearing children.

Mathews (2011) points out that the original mainstream manifesto, the 1994 UNESCO Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, had itself discounted full inclusion:

*"Owing to the particular needs of deaf and deaf/blind persons, their education may be more suitably provided in special schools or special classes and units in mainstream schools".*

Identifying the need to minimise delay in language acquisition as the overarching concern, Mathews indicated the existing deficits across the pre-school service provision by the Health and Education departments - deficits in identification of hearing loss, audiology tests and procedures, speech and language therapy, Visiting Teacher Service and in the ISL Home Tuition Scheme. Leeson (2012) found that no interpreter agency had been booked to provide interpreters in primary or post-primary settings.

## Educational attainment of Deaf students

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) commissioned the Marschark (2009) review. Marschark noted that there is an element of fluidity in the choice of placement along the educational career for Deaf children. There are cases where Deaf children use ISL for the first phase of education; then, perhaps following cochlear implantation, they may transition to a bilingual practice; some may eventually phase out sign language use. Alternatively, there are other cases where children begin in full mainstream placement but, after struggling to communicate solely with speech, their parents decide that they would fare better in a setting where sign language is the predominant means of instruction.

In 2011, NCSE presented their policy advice paper "The Education of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children in Ireland" to the Minister for Education and Skills. The paper argued that more resources were needed to augment its existing force of Special Education Needs Organisers (SENOs), Special Education Support Service (SESS), National Behavioural Support Service (NBSS) and Visiting Teacher Service (VTHVI).

NCSE (2011) made the point that their task was made greater by the fact that about one-third of children with permanent bilateral hearing impairment have other complex needs. Researchers including Fellingner and Holzinger (2011) and Rodgers and Young (2012) have found that Deaf children who have difficulties communicating with their hearing families are prone to depression and mental health issues.

The National Council for Special Education's (2011) policy paper declared its goal that Deaf/Hard of Hearing children should be able to leave school with levels of educational attainment on a par with their hearing peers of similar ability.

The first national study of the experiences of the Deaf Community, Conroy (2006), commissioned by the Irish Deaf Society, found low levels of educational attainment, despite the significant length of time Deaf people spent in the education system. The study found that the majority of those surveyed stayed at school until they were 18 (60%), yet a quarter of these adults came out of the system without an exam qualification.

Unfortunately, disaggregated data on the educational attainments of Deaf students are not available at the national level, a fact that has been highlighted by several Irish researchers in this field. Invariably, Deaf statistics are bundled either with those of the wider Hard of Hearing cohort or as part of total disability statistics.

For data on educational attainment we have to fall back on Census 2011 Profile 8's bundled statistics for the Deaf/Hard of Hearing cohort.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Age at which full-time education ceased***

Census 2011 data show that Deaf/Hard of Hearing people ceased their full-time education at an earlier age than the total population. Thirty-four percent of Deaf/Hard of Hearing people aged 15+ left full-time education before reaching the age of 15 years, compared with 11% for the State as a whole.

At the other end of the age range, only 6% of Deaf/Hard of Hearing people remained in education until the age of 25 or higher, compared with 8% of the general population.

### ***Highest level of education completed***

Figure 2.3 shows the highest level of education completed for Deaf/Hard of Hearing persons and the general population aged 15+ years:

- Among Deaf/Hard of Hearing persons 44% completed no higher than primary level education compared with 16% for the general population;
- The Deaf/Hard of Hearing percentages for lower and upper secondary schools were 18.9% and 13.5% compared with 17.4% and 21% for the general population;
- Deaf/Hard of Hearing persons were also much less likely to have completed post-secondary education, with 17% being educated to this level, compared with 37% of the overall population;
- Only 11% of Deaf/Hard of Hearing persons had degree-level education compared with 26% for people with no disability.

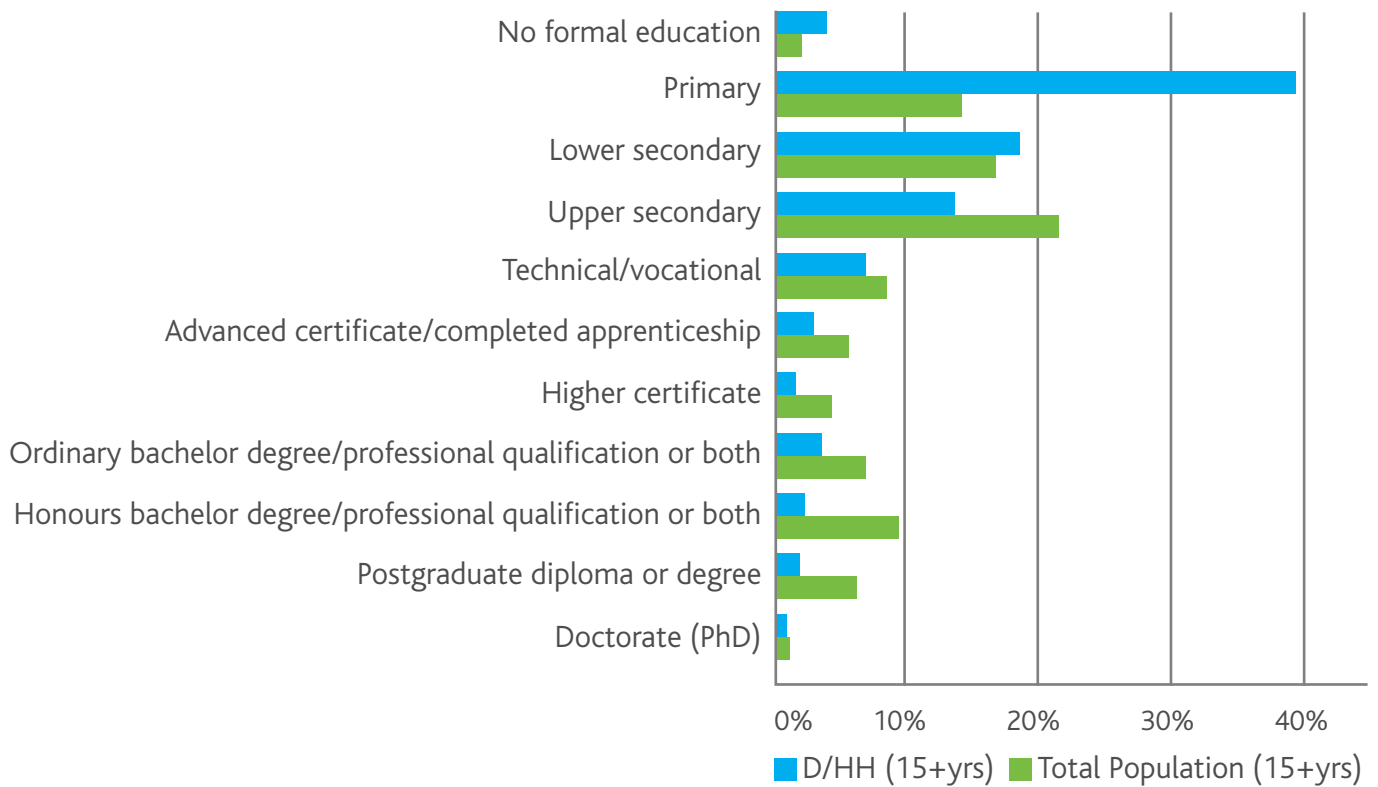
Coogan and O'Leary (2015) reported that 9% of their 301 sample group of Deaf women held a primary degree (not counting 4 who also held a master's degree), far below the general population's educational achievement where 41% of women hold a primary degree.

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12. Census 2011 Profile 8 Our Bill of Health – Health, Disability and Carers in Ireland



Figure 2.2: Highest level of education



The table below is taken from the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities (2016) and is based on Census 2011 figures.

Table 2.4: People with disabilities and with none 2011, by highest education received and impairment type

Category	None or primary	Lower Secondary-Junior Cert	Upper Secondary-Leaving Cert	Cert or Diploma	Degree
No disability	12%	25%	22%	11%	28%
All people with disabilities	37%	28%	15%	7%	13%
Sight	44%	24%	15%	6%	11%
Hearing	44%	26%	14%	6%	11%
Physical	46%	27%	14%	5%	8%
Intellectual disability	67%	20%	8%	2%	3%
Learning	50%	26%	13%	5%	7%
Mental health	32%	29%	13%	5%	7%
Other disability	36%	27%	15%	7%	14%

(Source: Census 2011)

## Deaf Teachers

There are very few Deaf teachers working within the educational system. Most Deaf people are employed as Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) who tend to work beyond their intended function by acting as interpreters in the classroom and by teaching their Deaf/Hard of Hearing students, as the teacher frequently cannot communicate directly with their pupils (Leeson and Lynch, 2009).

Leeson (Interpreters in Tertiary Educational Settings in Ireland) noted that a small pool of Deaf students had completed undergraduate degrees and gained access to the Higher Diploma programme in TCD which allowed them to teach in secondary schools. All Deaf graduates of the H.Dip were employed as teachers in the Dublin schools for the Deaf at the time the above research was carried out.

## Access to third-level education

### Participation data

Leeson has estimated that Deaf people were ten times less likely to receive a third level education in comparison with the national population.

The trend in Deaf/Hard of Hearing participation numbers is upwards. From just 81 Deaf/Hard of Hearing students for the academic year 1998/99, the number had grown to 235 by 2010/11 (the Deaf/Hard of Hearing participation figure for 2014/15 is 295).

Table 2.5: Trends in Third-Level Education participation

Academic year	Number of Deaf/ Hard of Hearing students
1998/99	81
2004/05	114
2009/10	207
2010/11	235

Leeson points out caveats with this data:

- There is no breakdown of Deaf ISL users;
- Data doesn't give any indication of how many of these students requested but failed to obtain interpreter services because of the limited pool of interpreters available;
- There is a high attrition rate among Deaf/Hard of Hearing students (because of inadequate supports).

### Access Policy: National Plans for Equity of Access to Higher Education

The Higher Education Authority established a National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education (from 2014 renamed the National Access Policy Office) in 2003 to facilitate educational access and opportunity for groups who are under-represented in higher education. The National Access Policy Office has published three National Plans for Equity of Access to Higher Education, covering the years 2005-07, 2008-13 and the current 2015-2019 plan. In preparation for the current plan the Higher Education Authority published a consultation paper, 'Towards the Development of a new National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education', which drew 60 written submissions.

## **AHEAD Participation Reports**

Beginning in 1993, Higher Education participation data has been collected - now on an annual basis - by AHEAD (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability). Their participation reports review the trend in participation numbers submitted by twenty-seven Higher Education institutions across eleven different disability groupings (including Deaf/Hard of Hearing), noting the statistics for new entrants, final year students, total undergraduates and total postgraduates. The reports monitor both full-time and part-time numbers. They also compare trends in the uptake of fields of study for each disability grouping.

Participation numbers, as currently reckoned (those who are registered with the Disability/Access Service and in receipt of the Fund for Students with Disabilities), are thought to seriously underestimate the total number of Higher Education students with a disability.

Reflecting on the Higher Education access deficits, the 2015 - 2016 report<sup>13</sup> queried the quality of career guidance received by students with disabilities in post-primary level education, and referred to the recent AHEAD research into the transition experience of students with visual impairments<sup>14</sup>.

## **Higher Education supports for Deaf/Hard of Hearing students**

Higher Education supports to improve access for people with disabilities include:

- Disability Access Offices in Higher Education institutions:  
The student provides evidence of his or her disability and registers; office carries out a structured needs assessment, agrees an action plan with student and applies for funding;
- Funding<sup>15</sup> includes:
  - FSD (Fund for Students with Disabilities), administered by the Higher Education Authority for students with a verifiable disability who are studying full-time, publicly funded courses which are rated at level 5 or above on the National Qualifications Framework. The host college is responsible for applying to this fund on the student's behalf and putting in place the requisite supports.
  - PATH, Programme for Access to Higher Education funding, which supports projects that increase access to initial teacher education
- Students can retain their Disability Allowance while in college and can also claim the Back to Education Allowance;
- Educational support workers (sign-language interpreters; note-takers);
- Assistive Technology - listening aids, loop systems;
- Speed Text Captioning, for example CART (Communication Access Realtime Translation) - open captioning real-time stenography, live transcription of what the lecturer is saying either on to a large screen in the lecture room or directly on to a laptop in front of the student;
- Reading supports (academic texts and proof-reading supports);
- Notes from lecturers;
- Reduced Central Applications Office (CAO) points - most Higher Education institutions have signed up to DARE (Disability Access Route to Education) which offers places with a reduced CAO points requirement to school leavers under 23 years who have the ability to benefit from and succeed in higher education;

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13. AHEAD (2017), Numbers of Students with Disabilities Studying in Higher Education in Ireland 2015/16. Dublin: AHEAD Educational Press. Available from: <https://www.ahead.ie/datacentre2016>

14. <https://www.ahead.ie/userfiles/files/Visually%20Impaired%20Research%20-%20Online%20Version.pdf>

15. <http://hea.ie/policy/national-access-plan/funding-the-plan/>

- Examination accommodation (extra time and separate exam room).

Leeson notes that, despite the development of these supports, the system is still far from ideal:

- Supports are provided for academic aspects of university life only, allowing for significant isolation in terms of the social aspect of university life;
- The funding model provides much less than the actual supports cost.

Leeson also pointed out that there are continuing problems with respect to the availability of ISL/English interpreters due to the limited pool.

## Access to Further Education

There is much less documentation on the access situation for Deaf/Hard of Hearing people at further education level; anecdotally it is much less organised than at third-level. Deaf students wishing to participate in full-time courses at QQI Level 5 and above in Colleges of Further Education may be eligible for ISL interpreters through the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) administered by the HEA. The Fund does not, however, cover full-time courses at QQI Level 4 or below or part-time courses offered by the Colleges of Further Education. Vocational training courses provided by the Education and Training Board Training Centres (the former FÁS training centres) are not eligible for FSD supports as they are not classified as educational centres. The FSD also does not provide any supports to Deaf people who want to undertake an apprenticeship as this is classified as a part-time programme.

Though ISL interpreters can be and are provided to Deaf students on full-time further education courses provided by Colleges of Further Education, there can be difficulties in accessing these supports for interviews during the application stage.

The National Learning Network (NLN) - a Rehab Group subsidiary - offers flexible training courses for people who need specialist support (including people with a disability) to prepare them for a job or to go on to further education. The NLN has formed a Disability Support Service (DSS) agreement with eight Dublin-based Colleges of Further Education to provide a wide range of supports to students with disabilities.

The Education Partnership Group (2009) policy document noted the significant need for access to QQI/ FETAC, Community Development Training and other adult education courses. It highlighted the need for access to adult literacy programmes funded via the National Adult Literacy Agency/IDS Link Up programme, also the Deaf Adult Literacy Services (DALs) funded by the Department of Education and Skills and provided by the Irish Deaf Society. Coogan and O'Leary (2015) pointed out that DALs now provide many other useful skills in addition to literacy.

The Education Partnership Group policy document noted that pre-university courses such as the Trinity Access Programme are not accessible to Deaf and Hard of Hearing students because, unlike Higher Education courses, these do not attract funding from the European Social Fund. Deaf/Hard of Hearing students require funding for support services to facilitate their full participation in higher and further education level and professional programmes; these services include interpretation, note taking, proof reading, reading support, and technical hearing aids, all of which are available at present only on an ad-hoc basis.

## 2.6 Employment and unemployment levels in the Deaf Community

Conroy (2006) found that, due to low educational attainment, the majority of Deaf employees were in low-paid and low-status jobs with little hope of gaining promotion.

She noted that participation rates for Deaf people are only marginally below those of hearing people - dispelling the myth that 'people with disabilities' were economically inactive.

ESRI (2015) echoes this finding for people with disabilities in general - What was striking in the analysis was the high level of interest in working among those people with a disability who were not employed at the time: results from the 2006 National Disability Survey indicate that over one-third (37%) would be interested in work if the circumstances were right.

Conroy found that Deaf people do not readily move jobs, do not seek or receive promotion, and experience vertical and horizontal blockages to movement in the jobs market. Far from being a source of emancipation for Deaf adults, work is a place of low pay, poor prospects and considerable isolation.

Conroy noted that, in contrast to participation rates, inequality for Deaf people was very pronounced in their unemployment levels: Deaf respondents experienced four times the national unemployment rate (12% for Deaf people versus the national average of 3%).

Unlike Conroy, Coogan and O'Leary (2015) found that their respondents tended to change jobs in a similar fashion to their hearing peers:

*"Our findings did however disagree with those of Conroy 2006, "Signing In and Signing Out", which found that Deaf people tended to stay in their workplace for the long-term, rather than change jobs like their hearing peers. Our survey results indicate that only five participants remained in the same job."*

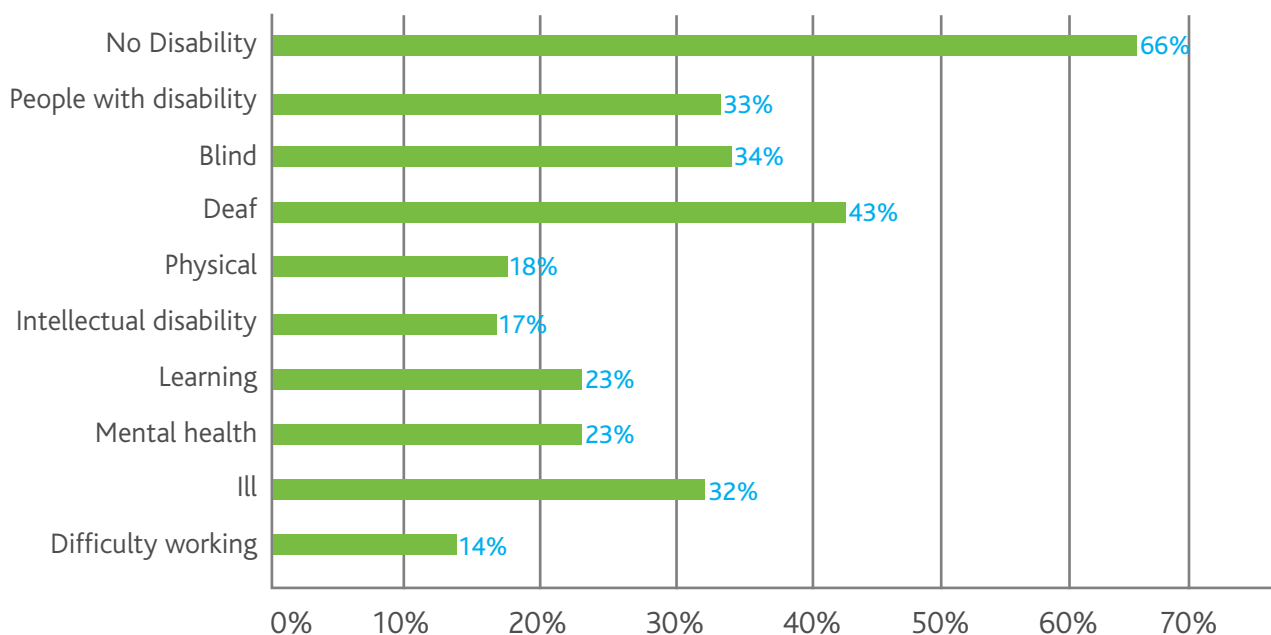
Coogan and O'Leary (2015) noted in their study that less than half of their respondents were in professional occupations. A number of Deaf women occupied lower paid jobs in the service or manufacturing industries. A significant number of respondents were employed on Community Employment (CE) scheme jobs run by SOLAS. Some of these jobs were with Deaf Agencies "who may not have funds to employ staff through the normal channels". The authors reported that there was growing unease within the Deaf community that the majority of the jobs in the CE scheme were at the lower end of the jobs market.

The CSO Profile 8 gives the 2011 data:

- Among the working age population (15-64 years age group), labour force participation rates were 78.3% for men and 64% for women. For people with disabilities the rates were 51% and 40% respectively. The labour force participation rate for Deaf/Hard of Hearing people (15-64 years) was 62.9% for men and 48.4% for women, averaging 56.9% for both genders, giving Deaf/Hard of Hearing the highest participation rate of all disabilities covered;
- Of the total of 542,277 people with a disability aged 15 and over, 112,502 or 21% were in employment. This compares with 50% of the overall population aged 15 and over who were in employment. In all, 6.2% of the people in employment in April 2011 had a disability;
- The unemployment rate for people with disabilities was 31%, compared with 19% for the overall population. The lowest rate of unemployment among people with disabilities was 25% for Deaf/Hard of Hearing persons. Unemployment was highest at 44% for those with a difficulty in learning, remembering or concentrating.

The recent Government of Ireland Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities 2015-2024 (CESPD) report<sup>16</sup> used the Census 2011 data to point out that people with disabilities have, on average, lower levels of education than the population at large, and this, in turn, affects their lower employment rate and earning capacity.

Figure 2.3: Employment rate of people with disabilities, 2011, by disability type



(Source: Census 2011)

In international terms, Ireland's employment rate for people with disabilities is low, even allowing for inter-cultural differences in how people report themselves as having a disability.

The CESPD statistics in Table 2 refer to the working age population. The employment percentage of people with disabilities for this cohort was 33% compared with 66% for people without a disability.

The employment percentage for the Deaf/Hard of Hearing cohort was 43%.

The government offers employment supports to combat this inequality in employment. ESRI (2015) listed the potential supports for people with disabilities, including flexible work arrangements such as reduced hours, modified job tasks, a Workplace Equipment/Adaptation Grant (WEAG) and a wage subsidy. Employers can avail of the Disability Awareness Training Support Scheme (DATSS) for grant assistance of 90% of eligible training to a max €20,000 in year 1 and 80% in subsequent years. This awareness training is especially important for line managers and supervisors. The government has funded a new online service for employers managed by a consortium of employer organisations - Chambers Ireland, IBEC and ISME - and funded through the NDA, as part of the CESPD.

The ESRI notes that for people with disabilities, particularly those whose disability emerged early in life, the main challenge is getting the first job. In this regard, one positive support is the reimbursement of employers who provide interpreters to facilitate job interviews.

16. <http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Comprehensive%20Employment%20Strategy%20for%20People%20with%20Disabilities%20-%20FINAL.pdf/Files/Comprehensive%20Employment%20Strategy%20for%20People%20with%20Disabilities%20-%20FINAL.pdf>

However, a critical shortcoming is the lack of support for ongoing provision of ISL interpreters for Deaf/Hard of Hearing employees; SLIS has called for the Workplace Equipment/Adaptation Grant (WEAG) to be expanded to include ISL interpreting. This contrasts starkly with the situation in the UK. There, the Department for Work and Pensions' Access to Work (AtW) scheme awards an annual grant of up to €48,800 for people with disabilities. In addition to covering special equipment and Deaf awareness training for colleagues, substantial funds can be claimed to defray the ongoing costs of a BSL interpreter. Deaf BSL-users are currently expressing concerns over the capping of the interpreter grant (hourly rate and annual grant) beneath the going rate for qualified BSL interpreters, pointing out the danger this poses for the quality of interpreters being provided. Deaf employees also have concerns about their unmet work needs for note-takers and speech-to-text reporting.

## 2.7 Irish Sign Language/English interpreters

A key factor for accessibility to public information and services for Deaf people is the provision of sign language interpreters. ISL-to-English interpreters provide a bridge between the Deaf and hearing communities - it is sometimes forgotten that both sides need this bridge.

### Sign language Interpreter Services: Irish Sign Link/SLIS

No formal sign language interpretation services existed in Ireland until 1998, when Irish Sign Link (ISL) was set up by the then National Rehabilitation Board<sup>17</sup>.

In 1999 Irish Sign Link was established as a limited company with charitable status by the National Association for the Deaf (now DeafHear), the Irish Deaf Society and the Irish Association of Sign Language Interpreters (IASLI). It operated as the national booking agency for sign language interpreters. Users included state and semi-state organisations, particularly the education sector, courts services and hospital services, as well as a range of voluntary and private organisations. It was also used for social situations.

Prompted by the first National Disability Strategy (2004) and the 2005 Disability Act, the then Department of Social and Family Affairs produced an initial Outline Sectoral Plan. This called on Comhairle (now the Citizens Information Board) to formalise sign language interpretation (SLI) services in Ireland. Comhairle commissioned the Prospectus (2006) study<sup>18</sup> to review existing SLI services and service requirements. Prospectus found a significant shortage of interpreters in many parts of the country outside Dublin. It also found that there was no formal accreditation or registration system of ISL/English interpreters in Ireland.

Following the report's recommendations, SLIS (Sign language Interpreting Service) was set up by the Citizens Information Board (CIB) in 2007 to ensure that Deaf people can participate as full and equal citizens under the Equal Status and Disability Acts. By promoting, advocating and ensuring the availability of quality ISL-English interpretation services in Ireland, SLIS seeks to ensure that Deaf people can access public, educational and social information and services as a right.

SLIS (from its inception in 2007 until 2011) acted as a booking agency for ISL interpreters. In this capacity, SLIS kept a register of interpreters and ran assessment and moderation processes to identify quality standards among interpreters. This is sometimes seen as a national register of interpreters. SLIS also provides a Code of Practice for interpreters.

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17. In line with government mainstreaming policy, the NRB was dissolved in 2000 and responsibility for its functions was transferred to a number of successor organisations/statutory bodies including the National Disability Authority, FÁS and Comhairle.

18. Review of Sign Language Interpretation Services and Service Requirements in Ireland, Comhairle, Sept 2006.

Due to a decision taken in 2010 by Revenue determining SLIS as a possible de facto employer of interpreters, SLIS effectively ceased its booking service for face-to-face interpreters and focused resources on acting as a referral agency and the provision of other services including a 24-hour service to contact interpreters in medical or legal emergencies.

SLIS reports regularly to CIB on its 'referrals', requests to link an organisation or Deaf person to appropriate interpreters to meet specific interpreting needs, and the subset 'access cases', referrals needing additional advocacy to ensure a Deaf person can access the requested interpretation services (these are predominantly for medical appointments, legal cases and job interviews). An analysis of SLIS data on referrals is presented in Section 4.

### **Other interpreting agencies and referral services**

In addition to the government-funded SLIS, there are a number of other ISL interpreting agencies and referral services in Ireland including:

- Privately owned bodies such as Bridge Interpreting and the Centre for Sign Language (CSL). There are also spoken language interpreting agencies such as Word Perfect and Translation.ie that include ISL interpreters on their books;
- Groups of interpreters who formed clusters in several regions in Ireland, for example, Sign Language Interpreters of Munster (SLIM), Sign Language Interpreting Northeast;
- Regional Deaf organisations who may offer referrals to interpreting providers, for example, the Kerry Deaf Resource Centre (KDRC).

### **Training of sign language interpreters**

The main source of qualified interpreters is the Centre for Deaf Studies (CDS) in Trinity College Dublin which provides a bachelor degree in Deaf Studies and has been the main pathway for qualified ISL/English interpreters in Ireland. The Deaf Studies course is 4 years in length and is a Level 8 qualification (honours degree). The number of qualified interpreters to emerge with a Bachelor in Deaf Studies from the CDS over the four years 2013-2016 was 23 (Leeson and Venturi, 2016), indicating that the CDS output is averaging 6 interpreters per year.

The Centre for Sign Language Studies (CSL) is another source of qualified ISL interpreters. It offers a Level 6 NVQ Diploma in Sign Language Interpreting based on the British National Occupational Standards in Interpreting (CILT, 2006) accredited by OFQUAL. This equates to a Level 8 (degree level) course at Irish universities. Signature is the awarding body. The first cohort of Signature Level 6 interpreters (4 students) graduated in the Republic of Ireland in 2016 (Leeson and Venturi, 2016).

### **Training in specialist domains**

Coogan and O'Leary (2015) stated that there were no procedures for interpreters to specialise in health or legal domains. The Centre for Deaf Studies is now collaborating with Interresource Group (Ireland) in two EU-funded projects, Medisigns and Justisigns, to build up expertise in these 'high risk interpreting' areas.

### **Shortage of interpreters**

The shortage of trained ISL interpreters has been and remains one of the key obstacles to the achievement of the Deaf Community's right to equal access to information and public services. The shortage is particularly acute outside Dublin<sup>19</sup>.

Leeson and Lynch (2009) summarised the output of Irish ISL interpreters for the years 1994-2010 (see Table 2.6).

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19. A 2006 research report commissioned by Comhairle (now CIB) noted that 60% of the interpreters on Irish Sign Link's database operated from Dublin.



Table 2.6: Ratio of ISL/English Interpreters to Deaf People in Ireland 1981-2010

Time period	No. of professional interpreters	Ratio of interpreters to Deaf population
1981 (UN International Year of Persons with Disabilities)	0	0: 6,500
1994 (Graduates from Bristol-Trinity Programme and NAD-RNID Course)	23	1: 283
1999 (Graduates from Bristol-UCC Programme)	23+9 = 32	1: 203
2003 (First cohort of ISL/Interpreters from Centre for Deaf Studies (CDS) graduate)	32+7 = 39	1: 167
2004 - CDS Graduates	39+14 = 53	1: 123
2005 - CDS Graduates	53+7 = 60	1: 108
2006 - CDS Graduates	60+5 = 65	1: 100
2007 - CDS Graduates	65+9 = 74	1: 88
2008 - CDS Graduates	74+5 = 79	1: 83
2009 - CDS Graduates	79+4= 83	1: 78
2009 - CDS Graduates	79+4= 83	1: 78
2010 - CDS Graduates	83+3= 86	1: 76

Of the 86 interpreters trained in this period, they observe that not all are still working as interpreters:

- For some, this comes down to financial stability and many opt to work in full-time posts rather than risk the financial instability that accompanies freelance work, particularly in regional and rural communities with smaller deaf populations;
- Some graduate interpreters have primary professions like teaching or nursing and return to these professions, adding their interpreting skills to their range of occupational competencies;
- Some graduates do not feel that their language skills or their interpreting skills are sufficient to meet the demands of simultaneous interpreting and in the absence of an established mentoring programme or a continuous professional development pathway, fall out of professional practice before they have had the opportunity to maximise their potential;
- The lack of full-time posts for ISL/English interpreters is a major deterrent for many who would otherwise wish to stay in the field, and it is clear that the field needs more interpreters;
- Given the demographic of the interpreting population in Ireland (the majority are younger women in their 20s and 30s), there is also a cohort who have young families and this impacts on their decision to take on some kinds of work, or to work outside their immediate geographic domain;
- Most interpreters are working in isolation. This has the potential to impact on skill development on the one hand, and attrition of skill on the other.

Even if all 86 ISL/English interpreters were working full-time in educational settings, the authors maintained that this still would not meet the actual need in education alone. There are no hard figures regarding the number of deaf students in vocational educational or adult educational settings where interpreting is not provided.

SLIS has submitted a paper to the National Skills Council drawing its attention to the precarious manpower and skills position in relation to the current shortage of practising ISL interpreters and the low number of graduates entering the profession. SLIS estimates that there are 75 sign language interpreters currently working in Ireland and given that over half of these do not work on a full-time basis, the capacity within the system amounts to 11,474 sign language interpreter days per year. It forecast that an additional 21 interpreters would be required to meet the demand for sign language interpreting services once ISL was given official recognition

### **Ratio of Interpreters: Deaf Community population**

Leeson and Lynch note that Sweden has a deaf population of approximately 10,000 who are served by a professional interpreting community of over 400 interpreters (a ratio of 1 interpreter to 25 Deaf people). Even with this degree of interpreter provision, access to interpretation is not guaranteed as demand continues to outweigh supply. In the Irish context, approximately 200 interpreters would be needed in order to provide a comparable service to that currently in Sweden.

In effect, Ireland has an effective ratio of approximately 1:100; in the U.K. the figures suggest a ratio of 1:140 (Comhairle, 2006).

### **Accreditation/Registration**

In the absence of a designated statutory accreditation body, Irish Sign Link conducted two interpreter accreditation rounds in 1998 and 2000. SLIS carried out a Quality Assurance accreditation round in 2009. Coogan and O'Leary (2015) noted that, since 2009, there has been no evaluation or monitoring of interpreters who have graduated from the Centre for Deaf Studies in Trinity College. There is no clearly defined pathway for Continuous Professional Development and there has been no monitoring or assessment of interpreters who have been in long-term practice.

SLIS has a goal to develop its register of sign language interpreters in Ireland in its strategic plan 2015-2020. SLIS commissioned the Leeson and Venturi (2017) report to review the literature and international practice on national and voluntary registers for sign language interpreters. The review found that interpreter registers were administered in most countries by one of three institutional types:

- Professional association;
- Government body;
- Academic institution.

It noted a global trend towards raising the minimum eligibility standard for registration. Both the US Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) and the European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters (efli) were moving towards setting it at university degree level. The statutory recognition of sign language in more and more countries was driving the higher registration eligibility requirement.

The focus of the review was on registration of entry-level candidates. It proposed that, at a later stage, the issue of specialist registration might be considered, particularly with respect to interpreting in legal settings and interpreting in health care settings.

The review noted that, while there was almost universal movement towards regulation of interpreting in either a voluntary or statutory capacity, there was very little data on reviews of attempts to ensure that only certified interpreters are hired. It offered the following recommendations:

- Establish a voluntary register of interpreters, which will allow for automatic registration of candidates who hold a recognised ISL/English interpreting qualification from an accredited body;
- A degree-level qualification or equivalent should be the minimum standard for any new entrants to the register. The Learning Outcomes of the European Forum on Sign Language Ints should be adopted in this regard;
- Just as for candidates admitted via a recognised Interpreter Education Programme (IEP), these individuals should be obliged to complete Continuous Professional Development and meet other criteria for continued membership of the register;
- The voluntary register should be administered by SLIS with independent and transparent processes for registration, with representation on the board from key stakeholders (Deaf Community, the Council of Irish Sign Language Interpreters (CISLI), interpreter educators, agencies) and other complementary bodies and independent experts;
- The work of the proposed registration body would be administered via SLIS while the registration process itself should be identifiable as a separate entity; SLIS and the key stakeholders should put in place a timeline for implementation of sign language-related services referenced in the UNCRPD.

### **Interpreter associations**

The Council of Irish Sign Language Interpreters (CISLI) was founded in May 2011, replacing its predecessor, the Irish Association of Sign Language Interpreters (IASLI).

The stated goals of CISLI are to:

- Advance the profession, rights and interests of sign language interpreters;
- Work in close partnership with IDS, the national Deaf-led organisation, for the future benefit of both Deaf people who use ISL and professional interpreters, Deaf and hearing, whose working languages include a signed language;
- Encourage and promote initiatives to improve standards of Sign Language interpreting and interpreter training on the island of Ireland;
- Work to secure recognition of the profession of Irish Sign Language interpreting.

Most ISL interpreters work as self-employed freelance interpreters and are 'on the books' of several booking/referral agencies. While all are clearly committed to the profession, the career is known to have stresses:

- The work is always onerous and exacts a mental and physical toll; this is exacerbated by the shortage of available interpreters;
- There is a high degree of job insecurity because of constrained demand due both to public service austerities and to a lack of recognition of Deaf people's rights to interpreter services. The bulk of regular interpreter work is based in the Higher Education sector where a budget is allocated for interpreter services. In contrast, funding for interpreter services in other settings is more uncertain;
- New entrants are discouraged by the undue burden placed on trainees because of the shortage of qualified interpreters;
- New competitive procurement agreements between agencies and large service providers may lead to downward pressure on pay rates.

## IRIS: Irish Remote Interpreting Service

In addition to promoting improved face-to-face interpreter services, the Prospectus report recommended the establishment of a remote interpreting service. IRIS (Irish Remote Interpreting Service) was initiated as a pilot scheme in January 2011 in a collaboration between the three Deaf organisations, Irish Deaf Society, DeafHear and SLIS. IRIS provides an online video link to an ISL/English interpreter based in the SLIS office using a video-chat programme such as Skype, ooVoo or Webex. IRIS can be used to provide a video relay service (VRS) - interpreter using video link to Deaf person and telephone link to service provider - but, more often it is used to provide a video remote interpreting (VRI) service with a video link between the remote interpreter and the other two parties (who may or may not be in the same location). The pilot proved successful and SLIS took over the role of developing IRIS, with funding from CIB. A Remote Interpreting Sub-group, comprising SLIS, IDS and DeafHear, advises on the service.

From June 2015 IRIS expanded from three to five days a week, from 10am to 4pm. There is a roster of 5 part-time interpreters equating to 1 full-time interpreter. There are seven 30 minute service slots with 10 minute break-times. Slots are pre-booked by text, email, phone, Skype or ooVoo. Online booking is being piloted. There is an online calendar indicating slot availability. IRIS is particularly suitable for a range of short assignments where information is exchanged; a face-to-face interpreter service is advised where a service is being delivered, for example, a doctor's consultation.

Demand for IRIS has grown significantly with the service currently operating close to or at full capacity every day. The 2016 SLIS Annual Report states that demand for IRIS continues to grow: 3,127 interpreting assignments were carried out in 2016, an increase of 1,904 on the 2015 total of 1,223.

In late 2015 SLIS commissioned a review of IRIS to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of the service with respect to its objectives as first outlined in the 2006 Prospectus Report and to assess the value of IRIS to key stakeholders to inform future development. The review by Ann Clarke, Evaluation of the Irish Remote Interpreting Service (IRIS), was published in June 2016.

Clarke found the slow but accelerating uptake of the IRIS service reflected the experience of other countries that had introduced a similar service. More worrying was the fact that the uptake was almost exclusively driven by the Deaf Community and not by service providers. Feedback from her survey of Deaf users was broadly positive. The main advantage cited was that IRIS allowed them to be proactive in their access to information and services. The Report recommended the establishment of a Deaf users' forum to provide ongoing feedback.

Clarke found there was a need to strengthen the IRIS technology base in terms of capacity, consistency of quality and reliability. Crucially, there was a need to provide for more staff and extended service hours (8am to 8pm and weekend service). The ultimate goal should be immediate access as is currently on offer in the United Kingdom (for example, Sign Video<sup>20</sup>) and U.S. (Purple Communications on-demand VRI<sup>21</sup>). The review found that many providers were still unaware of their legal obligations in this area or are using the 'reasonable accommodation' clause to circumvent compliance.

Clarke recommended the formulation of a strong marketing strategy to increase awareness of legal obligations and the SLIS/IRIS solutions among service providers in both public and private sectors. She suggested market segmentation with customised information packages, and the prioritising of geographic areas where the Deaf Community was clustered. Within the healthcare setting she felt that a segmented approach would also work best, with a particular focus on primary healthcare centres as these were the

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20. <http://www.signvideo.co.uk/our-story/>

21. <https://signlanguage.com/vri/>

access point to secondary and tertiary health services. The head bodies of different services and professions should be targeted, offered national turn-key service, and asked to include information on the IRIS service in their literature and disability awareness programmes. An awareness campaign was also needed for the Deaf Community as SLIS had only 148 unique service users in 2015 (this represented less than 5% of the estimated 3,500 Deaf ISL client base which in turn is a subset of the estimated 5,000 Deaf ISL users). Clarke recommended continuation of the public-private mixed-funding business model. IRIS is funded mainly by CIB. It is free to individual Deaf users, the Irish Deaf Society, DeafHear and CIB partner organisations: their calls are charged to the other party. A pricing structure is in place for these other organisations (both for receiving and initiating calls) with current costs set at €43 per 30 minute slot, with block booking at reduced rates, and a six month pre-paid subscription offering unlimited use by public services for €600.

The uptake by government departments, agencies, corporates and voluntary organisations has been slow and its acceleration is a priority goal of the SLIS marketing strategy.

A video in Irish Sign Language with subtitles and audio in English shows how IRIS works (<https://www.youtube.com/IRISvideo>).

### ***Other providers of VRS and VRI services***

Apart from IRIS, VRS and/or VRI services are either being offered or explored by other organisations serving the Deaf Community including the Kerry Deaf Resource Centre and the Centre for Sign Language Studies (CLS).

## **2.8 Legislation and rights (promotion of the rights and dignity of the Deaf Community)**

In the context of access to public information and services for the Deaf Community the key pieces of Irish legislation are:

- The Disability Act 2005;
- Equality Acts (Employment Equality Acts 1998-2016; Equal Status Acts 2000-2016);
- The Education Act 1998;
- The Education (Welfare) Act 2000;
- The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004;
- Citizens Information Act;
- Criminal Justice Act 1984 and European Convention on Human Rights Act 2003;
- Broadcasting Acts 2001 and 2009;
- Assisted Decision-making Capacity Act 2015;
- Irish Sign Language Act 2017.

Other pieces of Irish legislation which may be relevant are:

- Data Protection Act 1988 and as amended in 2003;
- Freedom of Information Act 2014.

## **International legislation**

In addition to national legislation, a number of UN conventions and EU charters and directives are relevant to the Deaf Community:

- UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD);
- UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights;
- EU Charter of Fundamental Rights;
- European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), formerly European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms;
- EU Directive 2010/64/EU on the right to interpretation and translation in criminal proceedings;
- EU Proposal for Revision of the Directive on Television Without Frontiers.

## **The Disability Act 2005**

The Disability Act contains a number of specific provisions relating to accessibility of public services for people with disabilities, including accessibility to Departmental Offices; accessibility of services; accessibility of goods and services supplied and accessibility of information services.

The main provisions in the Act are:

- An independent assessment of individual needs, a related service statement and independent redress and enforcement for persons with disabilities;
- Access to public buildings, services and information;
- Sectoral Plans for six key Departments to ensure that access for people with disabilities will become an integral part of service planning and provision;
- An obligation on public bodies to be proactive in employing people with disabilities;
- Restricting the use of information from genetic testing for employment, mortgage and insurance purposes;
- A Centre for Excellence in Universal Design.

### **Part 3: Access to Buildings and Services and Sectoral Plans**

#### **Mainstream public services (Section 26, Access to services)**

There is a statutory requirement on public bodies to integrate, where practical and appropriate, their services for people with disabilities with those for other citizens.

In some cases, assistance to access the service will be available to people with disabilities, following a request. "Access Officers" will be appointed in each public body to co-ordinate these arrangements.

#### **Communications (Section 28, Access to information)**

Communications by a public body to a person with a hearing or visual impairment must, as far as practicable, be provided in an accessible format, following a request. Information provided electronically must, as far as practicable, be compatible with adaptive technology. Published information relevant to persons with intellectual disabilities must be made available in easy-to-read formats.

## Codes of Practice (Section 30)

The Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform may request the National Disability Authority (NDA) to prepare Codes of Practice specifying what public bodies must do to comply with their obligation to make their mainstream services, information resources and heritage sites properly accessible. The codes of practice, as required under sections 26–29, were prepared by the NDA following a request from the Minister.

## Sectoral Plans (Sections 31–37)

Sectoral Plans give information on the services, facilities and activities which come within the remit of each of the six Departments. The plans highlight how the functions of the Departments, and the key bodies which they oversee, serve the needs of people with disabilities and set out a programme for future development. Each plan must include arrangements for complaints, monitoring and review procedures.

Section 31 (4) (d) of the Disability Act 2005 provides that reports on progress in implementing the Sectoral Plans should be completed at intervals of not more than 3 years from the date of publication.

Under Part 5 (Public Sector Employment) of the Disability Act 2005, a statutory employment target of people with disabilities of 3% was established for all public bodies. Compliance with this target is monitored by the National Disability Authority and the Department reports annually on its compliance. The compliance figure is based on self-disclosure by staff members.

Universal design principles<sup>22</sup> are about designing things so that they can be used by everyone regardless of age, size, ability or disability. The Centre for Excellence in Universal Design (CEUD) was established by the National Disability Authority (NDA) in January 2007 under Part 6 of the Disability Act.

## The Equal Status Acts 2000–2016

While all public bodies have a legal obligation under the Disability Act, the Equal Status Acts 2000–2016 require both public and private providers of goods and services not to discriminate on the basis of disability and to accommodate the needs of people with disabilities through making reasonable changes in what they do and how they do it (provided the cost is no more than nominal), where, without these changes, it would be very difficult or impossible for people with disabilities to obtain those goods or services.

## The Employment Equality Acts 1998–2016

The Employment Equality Acts 1998–2016 require that employers do not discriminate against a person because they have a disability. The Acts state that the employer shall take appropriate measures, where needed in a particular case, to enable a person who has a disability to have access to employment, to participate or advance in employment and to undergo training.

Employers are obliged to make reasonable accommodations for employees with disabilities. Reasonable accommodation may typically consist of modification to work tasks, to start and finish times, changes to the workplace or workstation, or the provision of assistive technology. 'Reasonable' in this context means that the provision of such changes does not constitute a disproportionate burden on the employer.

Under EU legislation, employers are not obliged to provide special treatment or facilities if the cost of doing so is excessive or disproportionate.

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22. <http://universaldesign.ie/What-is-Universal-Design/The-7-Principles/7-Principals-.pdf>

## The Education Act 1998

Section 7 of the Education Act 1998 stipulates:

Each of the following shall be a function of the Minister under this Act:

- To ensure, subject to the provisions of this Act, that there is made available to each person resident in the State, including a person with a disability or who has other special educational needs, support services and a level and quality of education appropriate to meeting the needs and abilities of that person;
- To plan and co-ordinate such support services.

In the Interpretation section of the Education Act 1998, there is the following definition of support services:

*'Support services' means the services which the Minister provides to students or their parents, schools or centres for education in accordance with section 7 and shall include...*

*"Provision for students learning through Irish Sign Language or other sign language, including interpreting services".*

The paper by the Centre for Deaf Studies (2001) - see page 19 of this report - noted however that, while the Act makes reference to ISL, its use in the education of deaf children is presented as a support tool to oral-based language teaching and sits in opposition to a philosophical notion aimed at fully embracing and supporting the inclusion of ISL across the curriculum for all deaf children.

## The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004

The key message in the EPSEN Act is that children with special educational needs should be educated, wherever possible, in an inclusive environment with children who do not have special educational needs. The EPSEN Act goes on to clarify that there are two exceptions to this commitment to educate all children together in an inclusive environment.

- The first exception is where an assessment, carried out under the EPSEN Act, finds that this would not be in the best interests of the child with special needs;
- The second is where this would not be in the best interests of the other children with whom the child is to be educated.

## Citizens Information Act 2007

The Citizens Information Act 2007 changed the name of Comhairle to the Citizens Information Board (CIB). CIB is the statutory agency responsible for supporting the provision of information, advice and advocacy to the public on a broad range of social and civil services. The Act empowers CIB to 'support the provision of, or to provide directly, advocacy services to individuals, in particular those with a disability, that would assist them in identifying and understanding their needs and options and in securing their entitlements to social services.

The Act provided for a Personal Advocacy Service (PAS) to be established by CIB. One of the functions of PAS was to support or assist people in making applications and appeals in respect of the assessment of need under the Disability Act. A Government decision was taken in 2008 to defer establishment of PAS due to the constraints on public resources.



Subsequently, the National Advocacy Service for people with disabilities (NAS) was established by the Citizens Information Board in 2011. NAS provides an independent, confidential and free representative advocacy service that works to ensure that when life decisions are made, due consideration is given to the will and preference of people with disabilities and that their rights are safeguarded. The primary target group for NAS is more vulnerable people with disabilities; it has a particular remit to support people with disabilities who are isolated from their community, have communication difficulties, are inappropriately accommodated, live in residential services, attend day services and have limited informal or natural supports.

In 2016 NAS provided a full casework service offer to 1,000 people, and provided one-off information, advice and advocacy to 3,152 people. There were also almost 2,000 calls to the national line. The main groups of people that NAS supported were people with an intellectual/learning disability; people with physical/sensory disabilities; people with mental health difficulties; and people on the autistic spectrum.

## **Criminal Justice Act 1984 and European Convention on Human Rights Act 2003**

In general, the rules and procedures as to how you must be treated while in custody are derived from Regulation 8 of the Criminal Justice Act 1984 (Treatment of Persons in Custody in Garda Síochána Stations) Regulations 1987 and 2006.

Where an arrested person is deaf or there is doubt about his hearing ability, he shall not be questioned in relation to an offence in the absence of an interpreter, if one is reasonably available, without his written consent (and, where he is under the age of seventeen years, the written consent of an appropriate adult). The right to an interpreter in Garda stations and in criminal cases in court is clearly set out in the European Convention on Human Rights and was incorporated into Irish law in the European Convention on Human Rights Act 2003, Articles 5 and 6, Right to liberty and security and Right to a fair trial. The interpreter will be provided free of charge. Article 6 requires that an interpreter be fully competent for the task assigned.

Under the 2010 EU Directive on the right to interpretation and translation in criminal proceedings, EU countries are called on to ensure that qualified legal interpreters and translators are available; to set up a register of qualified translators and interpreters; and to make it available to legal counsels and relevant authorities.

In civil family law court cases, an interpreter may be provided at the discretion of the presiding judge. In other civil law court cases, it is up to the plaintiff or defendant to pay for an interpreter.

## **Broadcasting Act 2001**

Section 19 of the Broadcasting Act 2001 provided for Access Rules to be established. In February 2005 the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland (BCI) officially launched its Access Rules. These Rules refer to the actions that broadcasters must take to enhance access to their services among people with visual and hearing difficulties. The rules took effect from 1st March 2005. They have been updated in 2015 (see 2.11 below).

## **UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) was found not to be sufficient to enable people with disabilities to have their rights vindicated, prompting a new convention, UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), to be adopted in 2006 which specifically related to disability. The Convention adopts a social model of disability.

Napier and Leeson (2016) note that non-discrimination on the basis of language and linguistic rights is mentioned in many segments of the Convention, including in the preamble, and sign languages are mentioned 8 times in 5 different articles:

Article 2	-Definition
Article 9	-Accessibility
Article 21	-Freedom of expression and opinion, and access to information
Article 21(e)	-Recognising and promoting the use of signed language (particularly relevant in the context of the Irish Sign Language Act)
Articles 24.3 (b), (c) and (e)	-Education
Article 30	-Participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport

They identified two references which are particularly relevant. Article 9, which focuses on “Accessibility” notes that persons with disabilities shall have the right to “Participation in all the levels of society”. This Article also emphasises the right to freely access communication and have access to communication and information through intermediaries. This Article makes explicit reference to the provision of sign language interpreters. This reference to “professional sign language interpreters” suggests that States that ratify the convention have responsibilities to promote and develop sign language interpreter training, and by inference, regulate the provision of interpreters; they would also be expected to facilitate interpreter services and to promote access to sign language interpreters.

UNCRPD was signed by Ireland in 2007, ratification is dependant on various legislative provisions being in place to underpin the Convention including the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015 which was signed into law on 30 December 2015. A Roadmap to Ratification of the Convention was published in 2015 setting out legislative and administrative work needed in order to meet the Convention’s requirements. A Disability (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2016 is intended to address the remaining legislative barriers to Ireland’s ratification of the Convention. The Bill has been debated at second stage in the Dáil and will be referred to Committee Stage with the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice and Equality.

## Recognition of Irish Sign Language

Recognition of a country’s sign language can lead to positive developments such as:

- Sign language being taught in schools alongside spoken languages;
- Increasing access to information, goods and services;
- Legislation to uphold Deaf people’s rights to communicate in their first or preferred language.

Deaf advocates point out that the right to use one’s own language is an important human right. Like all linguistic minorities, members of the Deaf community have different degrees of access to the majority language of the wider community. For many, English is only a second or even third language, for some inaccessible. Consequently, in addition to spoken communication, written materials are often inaccessible to Deaf people.

Irish Sign Language (ISL) is recognised by the European Union as a natural language. Although the European Parliament has passed three resolutions in 1988, 1998 and 2016 calling on Member States to recognise their respective national sign languages, only five EU countries had done so (before Ireland recently enacted the Irish Sign Language Act): Denmark, Finland, Portugal, Sweden and the UK.

The Northern Ireland Assembly has put provisions in place to recognise both Irish Sign Language and British Sign Language (though not Northern Ireland Sign Language) but they don't yet have the same status as the province's two official minority languages, Irish and Ulster Scots. The Good Friday Agreement provided for the official recognition of Irish Sign Language by both the North and the South.

The provision of an interpreter is explicitly mentioned in the following Irish legislation and Statutory Instruments:

- Equal Status Acts 2000 to 2016;
- Disability Act 2005;
- Criminal Justice Act 1984;
- Employment Equality Act 1998;
- Education Act 1998.

### ***Irish Sign Language Act 2017***

ISL received official status in Irish legislation in December 2017 after a long campaign. The lack of recognition was believed to be holding up full access to information and services to the Deaf Community as an equal right. The Act sets down principles to guide the operations of public bodies; to require public bodies to prepare and implement action plans on Irish Sign Language; to provide for classes for the parents of deaf children; to permit the use of Irish Sign Language in legal proceedings; to provide for making sign language interpreting services available; to introduce statutory targets regarding the accessibility of television programming; to provide for the regulation of Irish Sign Language interpreters, deaf interpreters and Irish Sign Language teachers; to provide for the establishment of registers; to provide for continuing education requirements; to provide for offences; to amend the Broadcasting Act 2009; and to provide for related matters.

## **National Disability Strategies**

This sub-section examines national disability strategies with particular reference to their applicability to the Deaf Community.

### ***National Disability Strategy 2004***

Legislation such as the Disability Act 2005, and Sectoral Plans, were key elements of the National Disability Strategy which also includes commitments around advocacy and multi-annual funding for high priority disability services.

The Sectoral Plans covered the key service sectors and set out, in detail, service provision for people with disabilities, the measures to facilitate access to these services and planned improvements. The Plans were intended to ensure that the needs of people with disabilities were central to the future strategic planning of Government Departments and public bodies.

The first National Disability Strategy was launched in September 2004 as an over-arching strategy to support the equal participation of people with disabilities in Irish society. The Strategy provided a legal framework for the roll-out of the legislation and the mainstreaming of public services adopted by government in 2000. It comprised the following key elements:

- The Disability Act 2005;
- The Citizens Information Act 2007;
- The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) 2004;
- Sectoral Plans prepared by six government departments;
- A multi-annual investment programme worth €900 million targeted at high priority disability support services which ran until 2009.

### Sectoral Plans

Part 3 of the Disability Act 2005 required six government departments to prepare sectoral plans setting out how they would deliver specific services for people with disabilities. Section 31 of the Act provided a statutory basis for the preparation and publication of these plans. The Plans set out the programme of measures to be taken in relation to the provision of services for people with disabilities, and contained information in relation to complaints, monitoring and review procedures and other matters prescribed under the Act, for each of these Departments and the public bodies that they support.

Section 31 (2) required government departments to consult with representatives of people with disabilities in the preparation of their sectoral plans. Implementation was to be monitored by a high-level group of senior officials reporting directly to a Cabinet Committee chaired by the Taoiseach (see Figure 2.4 below).

Section 31 (4) (d) provided that reports on progress in implementing the Sectoral Plans should be completed at intervals of not more than 3 years from the date of publication.

Figure 2.4: Departmental Consultative Committees



Each Department with a Sectoral Plan was given a tight time-frame for the establishment of a Consultative Committee. The Oireachtas approved the six sectoral plans in October 2006, and the plans were published in December 2006.

The Sectoral Plan of the Minister for Social and Family Affairs (now the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection) was geared to developing services that give persons with disabilities financial security and encouraging maximum participation in society. Initiatives included a Service Delivery Modernisation programme. The Plan identified the key actions which would be underpinned by co-operation across agencies to develop service provision for persons with disabilities.

The Committee in the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection is the Disability Consultative Forum which has been in place for many years; it has representatives from the Disability Stakeholders Group (DSG) and wider disability movement as well as departmental officials. The group meets once a quarter and discusses issues both from a policy and operations perspective.

The Sectoral Plan of the Minister for Health included plans for delivery of services by the Health Service Executive, the arrangements for the implementation of Part 2 of the Disability Act 2005 and a Multi-Annual Investment programme underpinning expenditure on services for people with disabilities. The linkages with the initiatives arising under EPSEN Act 2004 were set out. The Plan focused on cross-departmental and cross-sectoral protocols to ensure the necessary liaison across the health services, housing, income support and training and employment fields.

The Sectoral Plan of the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (now Minister for Enterprise, Business and Innovation) included proposals for a Comprehensive Employment Strategy for people with disabilities. A key aim was the promotion of equal opportunities for people with disabilities in the open labour market supported by enhanced vocational training and employment programmes.

### ***Departmental Reviews of Sectoral Plans***

Departmental reviews were mandated to record progress in implementing the plans. They followed publication of consultation papers inviting stakeholder submissions.

The Progress Report for the Sectoral Plan 2006 to 2009 of the then Department of Social and Family Affairs noted:

- The Citizens Information Board (CIB) continued to develop the Assist Ireland website and telephone help-line in partnership with other agencies;
- CIB established the Sign Language Interpreting Service (SLIS) as an independent limited company and the service commenced in April 2007;
- The Department also provided courses, in conjunction with the Irish Deaf Society, on deaf awareness and an introduction to Irish Sign Language.

### ***National Disability Strategy Implementation Group***

Implementation of the 2004 Strategy was overseen by a National Disability Strategy Implementation Group (NDSIG) comprising senior officials from the key government departments, agencies, local government and the Disability Stakeholder Group (DSG) made up of the main disability umbrella bodies and individuals with lived experience of disability. The National Disability Authority provides the secretariat for the DSG.

The successor to the 2004 strategy was published in July 2013 as the first part of a ten year National Disability Strategy Implementation Plan 2013–2022 to fully implement the National Disability Strategy

and provide a whole-of-government approach to advancing social inclusion of people with disabilities. The NDSIP's National Disability Strategy Implementation Group included a newly-established Disability Stakeholder Group. The representation of government departments was wider<sup>23</sup> than the original six Departments designated under the 2005 Disability Act. A key feature of the NDSIP was the insertion of strong oversight mechanisms to ensure delivery of its actions.

## National Disability Inclusion Strategy (NDIS)

The new National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021 is the most recent disability strategy and was launched in July 2017. A comprehensive consultation process on its draft objectives was completed over a two year period and interested parties were invited to make suggestions in key areas including service provision, accommodation, health, employment, and education. CIB made two submissions during the consultation process, as did several Deaf representative organisations. The strategy aims to take a "whole-of-Government approach to improving the lives of people with disabilities" and comprises eight themes, including equality, choice, joined-up policies and public services, education, employment, health, independent living and transport. Across these broad strategic themes, Minister McGrath identified "clear priorities, not just because of the potential that they have to transform people's lives when fully implemented, but because when taken together they have the power to promote a fundamental culture shift in relation to disability".

These priorities include:

- the extension and further resourcing of the Irish Sign Language remote interpretation service
- an examination of the recommendations of the Make Work Pay Working Group
- the implementation of the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (including an increase in the public service employment target from 3% to 6%)
- a review of transport supports to determine the type of cross departmental transportation options that will best help people with a range of disabilities to get to work
- an examination of the recommendations of the report of the Personalised Budgets Task Force, with a view to introducing the option of availing of a personal budget as one approach to individualised funding
- the development of Codes of Practice to support the implementation of the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015
- the full implementation of the Transforming Lives programme, with particular reference to advancing the 'Time to Move On' agenda (with regard to de-congregation), the New Directions programme (in the context of reforming adult day services), and the move towards person-centred planning for residential and day services

The Strategy includes the following commitments specifically in relation to sign language provision:

- To extend hours of Irish Sign Language (ISL) remote interpretation service to evenings and weekends. (Responsibility assigned to DEASP)
- To resource the Sign Language Interpretation Service to increase the number of trained Sign Language and Deaf interpreters, to put a quality-assurance and registration scheme for interpreters in place and to provide on-going professional training and development. (Responsibility assigned to DEASP)
- To support legislation to ensure that all public bodies provide ISL users with free interpretation when accessing or availing of their statutory services. (Responsibility assigned to Department of Justice and Equality)

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23. Additional Departments: Finance; Education and Science; Justice, Equality & Law Reform.

## 2.9 Codes of practice and guidelines on accessibility of public information and services

As directed under Section 30 of the Disability Act 2005, codes of practice and guidelines on accessibility have been developed by organisations such as the National Disability Authority (NDA), the Health Service Executive (HSE) and the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP).

### *NDA Statutory Code of Practice on Accessibility of Public Services and Information Provided by Public Bodies*

The NDA Code of Practice on Accessibility states that hearing impairments can range from minor difficulties with hearing normal speech or particular sound frequencies to profound deafness.

All public services are expected to be designed and delivered in ways that include people with disabilities. Section 28 (1)(a) 2005 requires each public body to ensure, as far as practicable, that information which is orally provided to the public is provided in an accessible format, where so requested by persons with hearing impairments.

## Accessibility guidelines

### *Citizens Information Board*

Comhairle (now the Citizens Information Board) published *Access to Information for All* in 2005, guidelines on removing barriers and improving access to information. It notes that Deaf/Hard of Hearing people communicate in a variety of ways and refers to the need for all information providers to be aware of Deaf people's culture and language and the role of ISL and other communication-enhancing tools for people who are profoundly deaf.

The guidelines were re-configured in 2009 as a series of fact sheets and are available on the CIB website with links to further resources on relevant websites.

### *Health Service Executive*

*National Guidelines on Accessible Health and Social Care Services: a guidance document for staff on the provision of accessible services for all*, were developed by the Health Service Executive (HSE) in 2016 in partnership with the National Disability Authority following a comprehensive consultation process with staff, service users and organisations.

The guidelines note that the ethos of accessibility is reinforced by A Future Health, A Strategic Framework for Reform of the Health Service 2012–2015, and by legislation such as the Disability Act 2005, the Equal Status Acts 2000–2008, by the National Healthcare Charter 'You and Your Health Service' and many other health and social care policies and procedures.

The guidelines describe a standard which "we can aspire to". They are written in the knowledge that services may not have financial resources to implement all measures outlined; however, there is an obligation on individuals to ensure that they know what is required of them by law.

The guidelines are divided into two sections. Part One includes eight guidelines for use in all health and social care settings. Guideline 4 on Communication contains sections of particular relevance for the Deaf Community:

- 4.8 Communicating with a person who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing
- 4.9 Communicating with a person who lip reads
- 4.10 Communicating in writing with a Deaf or Hard of Hearing person
- 4.11 Communicating with a person who uses Irish Sign Language
- 4.12 Irish Sign language interpreters
- 4.13 Deaf interpreters
- 4.14 Irish Remote Interpreting Service (IRIS)

Guideline 4 notes that patients and service users are entitled to request and be provided with a qualified sign language interpreter. An interpreter may also be necessary if the primary carer or advocate of a patient/service user is Deaf, for example, Deaf parents with a child who can hear.

While the onus is on the service user to request an interpreter, it is the responsibility of staff to make the arrangements. Staff should routinely let service users know that:

- they have the right to an interpreter to assist in communication;
- there is no cost to the service user;
- staff will arrange for the interpreter.

The guidelines specify that it is considered good practice for services to arrange an interpreter without being prompted in cases where repeat visits are necessary or where it is known in advance that the service user needs one.

Dr Jane Pillinger in her 2012 review of the Guidelines provides an extremely useful overview of the findings from her literature review on how to improve accessibility for people with disabilities when accessing healthcare. Its References section gives a very comprehensive list of accessibility guidelines.

### **Irish College of General Practitioners**

In 2005, the Irish College of General Practitioners published *A Guide to Interpretation Services and Cultural Competency*<sup>24</sup> to help GPs in the following areas:

- Identifying situations where an interpreter is necessary;
- Developing an efficient and practical system for using interpretation services in daily practice.

Although drawn up in relation to care in a multicultural society, the guide is relevant in relation to working with Deaf patients also.

### **NDA best practice guides**

The NDA has produced an extensive toolkit of best practice guides:

*Accessibility Toolkit*<sup>25</sup> :

*Make your information more accessible*<sup>26</sup>

*Make your Services more accessible*<sup>27</sup>

*Ask Me: Guidelines for Effective Consultation with People with Disabilities*<sup>28</sup>

### **NDA Web accessibility techniques**

The NDA Centre for Excellence in Universal Design (CEUD) was established by the National Disability Authority (NDA) in January 2007 under the Disability Act 2005.

24. <http://www.icgp.ie/go/library/catalogue/item/61DC8671-CF90-4D5B-8FAEA9020248FA58/>

25. <http://nda.ie/Resources/Accessibility-toolkit/>

26. <http://nda.ie/Resources/Accessibility-toolkit/Make-your-information-more-accessible/>

27. <http://nda.ie/Good-practice/Codes-of-Practice/Code-of-Practice-on-Accessibility-of-Public-Services-and-Information-Provided-by-Public-Bodies-/4-Core-Elements-of-the-Code/>

28. <http://nda.ie/nda-files/-Ask-Me-Guidelines-for-Effective-Consultation-with-People-with-Disabilities1.pdf>



Resources on web accessibility techniques provide practical advice and direction for anyone involved in web development, design and content.

## Consumer Protection Codes

For financial institutions such as banks and insurance firms, the Central Bank has set out a Consumer Protection Code stating that they must provide 'vulnerable customers' with any "reasonable arrangements and/or assistance" to help them in their dealings with a company. According to the code, a vulnerable customer can be someone who has the capacity to make their own decisions but might need assistance to communicate, which would include Deaf or Hard of Hearing people and those with speech difficulties.

## 2.10 Deaf awareness training

Some government departments, statutory and voluntary agencies have provided Deaf awareness training for their staff in order to bolster their customer care, provide more effective communication with Deaf service users and avoid unintentional discrimination.

The Department of Social Protection (now Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection), in conjunction with the Irish Deaf Society, has provided courses on deaf awareness and an introduction to Irish Sign Language.

A key aspect of awareness training is to make front-line staff aware of the statutory rights of Deaf clients in terms of access to public information and services. Then it is a matter of learning through the training guidelines how best to facilitate the communication process and how to be proactive in this process. Some commentators believe that, excluding the shortage of qualified interpreters, the attitude and skills of front-line public service staff are important factors in achieving successful access by the Deaf Community to information and services. Appropriate top-level policies and plans have been formulated but there is a disconnect with the front-line staff, the 'gate-keepers'. Others say the problem rests with middle management who have to juggle very tight budgets and some customer services are therefore being long-fingered or relegated to contingency budgets.

Deaf awareness training is provided by several Deaf organisations including the Irish Deaf Society, DeafHear and regional Deaf resource centres. Some courses provide training certificates. Training sessions typically last a day and it is recommended that they are repeated at semi-annual or annual intervals because of staff turnover or to refresh the skills of previous trainees.

DeafHear offers Deaf And Hearing Awareness Training (DAHAT) courses tailored to the needs of individual service providers.

Participants are taught to be able to:

- List the ways in which Deaf/Hard of Hearing people communicate;
- Identify the barriers that Deaf/Hard of Hearing people face in daily living;
- Understand and demonstrate how to implement positive methods of communication, and offer an equal service to Deaf and Hard of Hearing people;
- Know when and how to book a sign language interpreter;
- Know the key assistive communication technologies used by Deaf/Hard of Hearing people.

The length of courses depend on the existing extent of participants' knowledge.

## 2.11 Hearing Assistive Technology systems

Hearing Assistive Technology systems (HATs) or Assistive Listening Devices (ALDs) are umbrella names given to all devices that help overcome hearing loss. Usually the term ALDs is applied to personal devices that transmit, process, or amplify sound, but the term may also refer to alerting devices.

Many of the new communication technologies in general use are of great assistance to the Deaf Community:

- Smartphone for texting and video calls (Skype, ooVoo and other similar applications); the combination of smartphone, internet and VoIP applications (Voice Over Internet Protocol, or phone service over the Internet) such as Skype or ooVoo enable 'total conversation' - the International Telecommunications Union standard of simultaneous video, voice and text service - which represents Universal Design principles applied to the field of telecommunication;
- Personal computers, laptops and tablets with webcams enable video calls;
- Email;
- Online live chat service;
- Back in the 1970s before the era of emails, the fax machine was also a great help to the Deaf/Hard of Hearing community.

### **Text Telephone**

The Text Telephone (denoted TTY; also TDD, Telecommunication Device for the Deaf) is a special device that enables Deaf/Hard of Hearing people to use the telephone to type messages back and forth to one another. A TTY system is required at both ends of the conversation. To use a TTY, a telephone handset is placed onto special acoustic cups built into the TTY, and the message that the person types is sent over the phone line. The other person's typed response can be read on the TTY's text display. One such TTY device was the Minicom which arrived in Ireland in the early 1990s.

Teletype systems (and subtitling) can help overcome the auditory barrier, but they assume good literacy skills and speed of reading and understanding on the part of the users in their second language.

### **Irish Text Relay Service**

The Irish Text Relay Service (ITRS) was introduced in 2017 and translates text into voice and voice into text to facilitate a person with a hearing disability in making and receiving calls in the Republic of Ireland. Calls are relayed through ITRS agents who perform this translation. The service is available 24 hours a day. ITRS customers can make and receive text relay calls through a range of Personal Computers or mobile media devices, this new service is a supplement to the existing Minicom service. The ITRS service is available to customers of eir, Sky, Tesco Mobile, Three, Virgin Media and Vodafone and is funded by each of these operators. The ITRS website offers a step by step guide to using the service.

As part of the work of ComReg's Forum on Services for People with Disabilities, ComReg has commissioned several consumer surveys:

- ComReg Trends Survey 2007 (using Amárach Consulting) for research on the experiences of electronic communications services by users with disabilities;
- ComReg Trends Survey 2010 (using Millward Brown) to update the 2007 survey;
- Deaf/Hard of Hearing Telecommunication Access Survey 2015 (using Red C).

## Speech To Text Reporter

A speech-to-text reporter (STTR), also known as an electronic note-taker or captioner, is a person who listens to what is being said and inputs it, word for word (verbatim), using an electronic shorthand keyboard. The keyboard is linked to a computer, which converts the shorthand syllables to properly spelled words. The reproduced text can then be read by Deaf/Hard of Hearing people on a private or shared screen. The system is also referred to as Communication Access Real-time Translation (CART), open captioning, real-time stenography, or real-time captioning.

## Remote captioning

Remote captioning allows Deaf/Hard of Hearing people to follow what is being said, as it is being said, without the need for the STTR or electronic note-taker to be in the same room. The STTR listens to what is being said using either a telephone or internet system such as Skype. They type what they hear and this text appears on a secure internet service so it can be read. The text can be displayed on a laptop, large screen, smart phone or tablet, enabling Deaf/Hard of Hearing people to participate actively in education, the workplace and at events. Since it doesn't require the STTR to be present, it is more flexible and discreet.

## Subtitling/captioning

This refers to on-screen text that represents what is being said on the screen. It can be open or closed. 'Open' subtitling is subtitling that remains on the screen at all times, 'closed' subtitling can be added to the picture or taken away as viewers wish.

Captioning and subtitling are sometimes used interchangeably; however, there are differences:

- With subtitling, there are differences in formatting that are designed to assist the interpretation and understanding of the text and to link it more accurately with the onscreen action. For example, the colour of the text changes to alert the viewer that a different person is speaking in the scene. There are also standards with regard to the font size, number of characters, number of lines of text carried on the screen at one time;
- Captioning on the other hand is a more basic representation of what is being said on-screen and does not include this formatting.

## Subtitles and access rules of the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI)

Following public consultation BAI recently issued updated targets for its Access Rules<sup>29</sup>. These rules govern the level of subtitling, sign language and audio-description that Irish television broadcasters must offer to the public. Under the changes to the rules, RTÉ 1 is required to reach a subtitling target of 87-92% by 2018. In the case of TV3, a subtitling target of 51-55% must be reached. Subtitling targets are also set for the first time for the three RTÉ television services established in 2011, RTÉjr, RTÉ Plus 1 and RTÉ News Now.

The new rules have been developed taking into account changes in broadcasting schedules and advances in technology including the switch over to Digital TV in 2012.

One of the central objectives of the new rules is to enhance the reliability and quality of subtitling. The BAI is proposing that, rather than seeking to simply ensure a designated target quota of subtitled programmes, broadcasters should be encouraged to enhance the subtitles available.

Respondents to the Coogan and O'Leary (2015) study felt that, in recent years, Ireland's national television station, RTE1, had made great advances in the quantity of captioned programmes, and in the immediacy of

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29. <http://www.bai.ie/en/bai-makes-changes-to-rules-on-television-subtitling-sign-language-and-audio-description/>

captioning, although they still fell short of the projected targets. However, the other local stations (RTE2, TV3 and UTV) remained very unsatisfactory in comparison with the benchmark BBC standards. Some cable television services were found to suffer from interference on their captions.

In addition to administering subtitle targets, the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland has another role that could impact on the Deaf Community. BAI is responsible for administering the Sound and Vision funding scheme<sup>30</sup>.

This scheme, financed from the Broadcast Fund (7% of the annual net receipts from television license fees), has a number of objectives including the development of high quality programmes based on Irish culture, heritage and experience and the development of these programmes in the Irish language. To achieve these objectives, the Scheme offers grant funding to new television and radio programmes which deal with the themes of Irish culture, heritage and experience; improving adult or media literacy; raising public awareness and understanding of global issues impacting on the State and countries other than the State; and/or any of the above in the Irish language. The Deaf Community feel that its interests should be represented in this innovative programming.

### **Other assistive technologies**

There is a number of other relevant assistive technologies, some of which are related to the telephone:

- Amplified telephones, specially designed for people with a hearing loss. The most powerful of these may amplify the signal as much as 50 decibels;
- Hearing aid(s) for one or both ears come in different options (ITE In-The-Ear hearing aid, ITC In The Canal, BTE Behind The Ear, Completely In the Canal (CIC));
- Telecoil: Hearing aids are usually fitted with a telecoil ('T-switch'). This is a small copper coil that is built into hearing aids and cochlear implant processors. The telecoil is activated by a t-switch on the hearing aid or cochlear implant. When using the telecoil setting it turns off the hearing aid's microphone so that it only picks up the electromagnetic signal and cuts out the ambient acoustic noise.

### **Cochlear implants**

A cochlear implant sends an electrical message through a wire called an electrode directly to the auditory nerve, bypassing the damaged or absent hair cells. This means that, provided that the auditory nerve is still working, profoundly Deaf people can hear sound. The cochlear implant consists of two parts, a surgically implanted internal part and an externally worn part called a processor. Where hearing aids work by making ordinary sound louder ('amplification'), which may be all that is needed for people with mild or moderate to severe hearing losses, amplification may not help for people with more severe or profound losses because the damaged or absent hair cells cannot pick them up.

A detailed assessment by an audiology team is needed to find out whether someone is likely to benefit from a cochlear implant. Criteria include a strong motivation to pursue the strenuous rehabilitation process and having a good support network from family, friends, or other professionals.

### **Alerting devices**

A variety of alerting devices are available to wake a Deaf/Hard of Hearing person, indicate a caller at the door or make them aware of an emergency. They have at least one of these three types of signals: visual - a flashing light; vibro-tactile - a vibrating component; or auditory - increased amplification and lower frequency sounds.

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30. <http://www.bai.ie/en/broadcasting/funding-development-3/sound-vision-3/#al-block-5>

## Hearing Loop

A Hearing Loop system has a special amplifier connected to a PA system or television, which transmits a magnetic signal to a hard-wire loop that is installed underfloor or around the boundary of a room. The signal is picked up by people in the room who are wearing hearing aids with an induction coil (T-Coil or T-switch). People without hearing aids can listen through special portable headsets. This system is most commonly used in large group areas.

## Frequency modulation (FM) systems

FM systems use radio waves to transmit sound from the sound source to a receiver worn by a Deaf/Hard of Hearing person. The FM system can be fitted to behind-the-ear hearing aids with special snap-on “boots” that pick up sound directly from a microphone. The microphone can be set up in front of the person speaking or worn around the speaker’s neck. FM systems are useful in many settings including classrooms, senior centres, theatres, places of worship, museums, corporate conference rooms and convention centres.

## Infrared systems

Infrared systems are often used in the home with television sets but, like the FM system, they can also be used in large settings like theatres. In this system, the sounds are converted to infrared waves and then back to sounds again by the listener’s infrared receiver.

## Bluetooth Neckloop

A Bluetooth Neckloop is suitable for wearers of a ‘T coil’ hearing aid or a cochlear implant who wish to use a mobile phone or listen to music. Sounds from Bluetooth-compatible mobile phones go directly to the hearing device via the Neckloop, blocking out interfering sounds.

## Video Interpreting Services (VIS):

This refers to two types of interpreter service that enable communication between Deaf/Hard of Hearing people and those who use spoken English:

- Video Remote Interpreting (VRI): is a video-telecommunication service that uses devices such as web cameras or videophones to facilitate a Deaf person to communicate with a hearing person. An interpreter working from another location provides the ISL/English interpretation over a video-phone or web camera;
- Video Relay Services (VRS): is a video telecommunication service that allows Deaf people to communicate in real-time over video telephones or similar technologies with hearing people, via a sign language interpreter.

## 2.12 Best international practices

This sub-section illustrates a number of best international practices to assist Deaf people to access public information and services.

### Recognition of national sign languages

The extent of the official recognition of sign languages differs across countries; in some, the national sign language is an official state language; in others it has a protected status in certain areas such as education; some countries have yet to recognise them at all.

Extending legal recognition is one of the major concerns of the international Deaf community. They argue that sign languages should be recognised and supported not merely as an accommodation for people with disabilities, but as the communication medium of language communities.

The European Parliament adopted resolutions on sign languages in 1988, 1998 and 2016 that acknowledged them as the preferred languages of Deaf people. The sign languages of various countries subsequently gained official recognition in their respective countries.

Finnish Sign Language was among the first to be officially recognised when, in 1995, it took its place alongside Finnish, Sami and Swedish in Finnish legislation. Later, progress has been made in a number of other countries:

- British Sign Language (BSL) was recognised by the British government and devolved Scottish parliament in March 2003;
- Austrian Sign Language was recognised by the Austrian Parliament in 2005;
- New Zealand Sign Language became the third official language of New Zealand in April 2006, joining Māori and English when the bill was passed in the New Zealand Parliament;
- Spanish and Catalan Sign Languages were recognised by the Spanish Parliament to be official languages in Spain in June 2007;
- Danish Sign Language gained legal recognition in May 2014. The Danish Parliament established the Danish Sign Language Council “to devise principles and guidelines for the monitoring of the Danish Sign Language and offer advice and information on the Danish Sign Language”;
- Norwegian Sign Language is recognised by law in education;
- Irish Sign Language was recognised in Ireland in December 2017.

The Council of Europe’s European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages of 1992 contains a definition of a non-territorial minority language which, from its wording, can be applied to most, if not all Deaf sign languages. Several Member States considered including their national sign language in the system offered by the Charter when ratifying it (for example, Denmark, Sweden and the United Kingdom).

## Registration of interpreters

Leeson and Venturi (2017) provide a comprehensive overview of the interpreter registration arrangements in place in the UK, Canada, US, Finland, New Zealand, Austria, Sweden, Belgium-Flanders, and Brazil.

Their report presented information on a number of aspects including:

- The population size of the country/region and that of the Deaf sign language using community;
- The status of the sign language, and whether or not interpreter education is available, whether there is a voluntary or statutory register in place, if indeed any exists;
- The competency level tested (for example, entry specialist skill/mastery of skill);
- The pre-requisites that apply for testing in that jurisdiction;
- Figures relating to pass rates for tests and numbers on registers;
- Accreditation processes in place vis-à-vis interpreter education programmes.

## Provision of Video Remote Interpreting (VRI) services

Clarke (2016) presented the findings of a survey by the European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters (efsli) of 30 national Associations of Sign Language Interpreters (not including Ireland) regarding the use of Video Remote Interpreting services [Alberdi (2013)].

Of the 17 countries that responded, 14 indicated that VRI was in use, mainly for video relay service (where the interpreter uses a telephone link to the hearing party). Alberdi reported that VRI training was provided by the interpreting agencies in Denmark, Finland, Germany, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.

In terms of application domains:

- Workplace VRI was the most frequent use of VRI in Belgium, the Czech Republic, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, and notably in Norway;
- A third of respondents used VRI in healthcare settings, particularly Belgium, Denmark, Sweden and Switzerland, but only Denmark used it on a regular basis;
- Belgium, Germany, Switzerland and Norway indicated that VRI was used in educational settings; in Germany, it is more or less confined to use in universities. Poland was the only country which mentioned the use of VRI in public institutions and offices;
- In Belgium, Czech Republic, Poland, Spain and Switzerland, VRI is used in commercial/business settings such as banks and insurance companies. Shops and travel agents were also cited as occasional VRI users.

### VRI in healthcare settings

Clarke looked at research on the use of VRI in healthcare settings in Canada, New Zealand and the USA:

- Canadian experience with VRI found that it improved access, improved the quality of care service delivery, increased patient satisfaction and reduced the use of ad hoc non-professional interpretation, for example, by family members. They also found that it generally reduced the workload of healthcare professionals;
- In New Zealand barriers to uptake of VRI (and face-to-face interpretation services) included lack of awareness of the services and inadequate procedures in place to accommodate them;
- A US study on the case in favour of VRI found that poor healthcare communication for patients with limited English language proficiency (including Deaf ASL users) resulted in increased costs due to lower use of preventative services, increased use of testing, misdiagnosis, increased admissions and poor patient compliance. The scarcity of face-to-face interpreters was leading to longer waiting times. The US study noted that, in California, a co-operative of nine public hospitals with their associated services (for example, community clinics) was established to implement a VRI centre using a combination of trained in-house and freelance interpreters. The approach was found to improve interpreter productivity and to be more cost effective than face-to-face interpretation or telephonic interpretation.

International trends in VRI services include:

- Growth in 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year services;
- Growth in immediate access services;
- Development of payment based on minutes of interpreting used;

- Use of volume-based discounts;
- Use of a broad range of devices, for example, iPads, laptops, tablets, smart phones;
- Development of software apps for phones as part of access strategies;
- Extended use of VRI in a range of settings, for example, legal, educational, workplace, business, healthcare, personal.

Clarke found the following variety of funding models for VRI provision:

- State funding of the service, for example, Germany;
- Commercial funding based on charging all users for services, for example, USA;
- Mixed funding models using private funding and public service contracts, for example, the UK;
- Funding that follows the individual, for example, Norway uses this model for work-related remote interpreting, Finland.

Different approaches and strategies used by different countries include:

### **Australia**

The Victorian Deaf Society (VicDeaf) and Deaf Services Queensland have developed a not-for-profit joint venture called Auslan Connections to provide free VRI services to the Deaf community. Responsibility for organising VRI rests with the organisation with whom the Deaf person wishes to communicate. Deaf service users can access an interpreter within one hour of booking. The service is available from 8am to 6pm on weekdays but not at weekends.

Nationally, employees can access funding for VRI under Employment Assistance Funding.

In 2014 the Australian Department of Human Services, through its Multilingual Language Service Programme, developed an Access and Equity Framework to ensure that services provided by it or funded by it are accessible to all citizens. It contracted a joint venture between Auslan Connections and Victoria Interpreting and Translating Services (VITS) to deliver all its interpreting services including face to face, telephone, video relay and video remote interpreting. Bookings can be made using an online booking system, automated telephone booking or immediate access to telephone interpreting if required. Cancellations are charged for on a sliding time scale. Payment for the service is mainly by way of allocated credit lines which Human Services provides to each division or funded organisation. Organisations wishing to use the service that are not funded by the Department must contact Auslan Connections directly and pay a fee.

VITS also provides an automated telephone system which give access for Deaf people to the first available telephone interpreter (known as Video Relay Service or VRS). This service can also be pre-booked.

### **New Zealand**

New Zealand provides a VRI service to enable access by the Deaf community to government staff in key departments including education, health and employment. The service is operated by New Zealand Relay under a contract with the Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment. The service is free of charge and is very popular in rural areas and in some cities where there is a shortage of qualified interpreters. The service operates Monday to Friday from 9am to 5pm. Clients must pre-book at least two days prior to their appointment.



## Finland

In 2014, Kela (Finland's social welfare department) was the first national government body to pilot the use of VRI to access its customer services division by remote connection from home. Following correction of some technical difficulties the service was mainstreamed free to all Kela clients.

## U.K

The UK government provides funding for access to VRI by Deaf employees who wish to hold conversations with work colleagues or customers. The government pays the cost of VRI via the Access to Work scheme.

A Deaf person who is not in employment but who has an interview for a job can apply for VRI through the Direct Payment/Personal Budget Scheme, where again the Exchequer pays.

SignVideo is an example of a social enterprise VRI provider. It was established in 2005 by a Deaf entrepreneur to provide sign language interpreting services and the organisation is staffed primarily by people from the Deaf community. It provides instant access (within 30 seconds) to a BSL interpreter by way of a live button on its web contact page and requires no pre-booking. It uses apps that can be downloaded onto any device to support outreach workers dealing with BSL customers and it uses web hyperlinks to link customers directly to service providers. The service is available Monday to Friday 8am to 6pm.

SignVideo has developed strategic alliances with Capita, the largest UK spoken language interpretation agency, and Sign Lingual UK, which is part of a network of BSL interpreting organisations that enables the SignVideo service to be more widely available. Technology partners include Cisco, Tandberg, Prodec, 9Dots and iVes.

SignVideo's strategy has been to partner with a range of commercial organisations and it is now addressing government departments and local authorities. Islington Council became the first local authority to offer SignVideo on-line interpreting services to its residents. SSE is the first energy company to offer its customer service via BSL in partnership with SignVideo using secure video interpreting. Similar services are offered by Barclays Bank, Sky, O2, Vodafone, Sainsburys and BT. Recently Barclays launched its first in-branch VRI using iPads.

SignVideo has also been successful in getting the National Health Service and the Department of Work and Pensions to sign up to its services. A VRI pilot is underway that can be accessed via hyperlinks on the gov.uk website. This means that the link acts as a 'call' button for BSL users making VRI instantly available with no pre-booking required.

Other VRI service providers offer similar services based on no pre-booking and instant access to one-to-one VRI. They also use links on the 'contact us' part of their websites to allow calls with Deaf customers through a qualified BSL interpreter which means that companies only pay per minute of call rather than for interpreting sessions of a fixed duration.

Despite these developments, the corporate sector in the UK has been slow to take up remote interpreting services. A survey of the websites of the six big energy suppliers found that while all had text phone numbers and an accessibility page, only one offered remote interpreting as an option, and only half had useful information about accessibility for Deaf and Hard of Hearing customers.

## US

The United States uses a commercial model of VRI provision. Different price packages are offered depending on the customer. Some service providers are based on the Deaf person having access to a computer with webcam, while others install videophone technology as part of their service. Price plans tend to be based on per minute rates so that only the interpreting time used is paid for. Services are available 24 hours a day and 7 days a week and are used for all aspects of daily living and in work, health, legal and educational settings.

## Ireland and Finland: A Comparative Study of two Deaf Communities

Conama, in his 2004 article<sup>31</sup> comparing the Deaf Communities in Ireland and Finland, notes that in terms of the Esping-Andersen typology of welfare states, the Social Democratic model favoured by Scandinavian countries has led to a much more structured service for its Deaf Community. In the case of Ireland's Conservative model, social welfare developments were held back by a paternalistic administration, and services for the Deaf Community were developed on an ad hoc and piecemeal basis.

Recognition of the Finnish sign language, FinSL, came as early as the late 1980s and it was officially declared a minority language in the 1995 constitution. Bilingualism was introduced in a 1987 government curriculum document. This led to a significant improvement in literacy achievement; where before, 15-year old Deaf pupils were leaving school with a literacy level the equivalent of that of eight year old hearing pupils, after bilingualism was introduced the literacy standard of pupils who had enjoyed home acquisition of FinSL was approaching the national average. Bilingualism also led to an increase in students entering third level education. An issue remained about the lack of Deaf teachers and a deficit in the bilingual competency of hearing teachers. In Ireland, apart from the handbook for the Model School for the Deaf (founded in Templeogue in 1997), there was no mention of bilingualism in Ireland until considerably later.

At the time of Conama's report Finland had two full-time Interpreter Training Centres and 20 Interpreter Referral Centres. It also had two ambitious VRI pilots underway.

### *Finland's Voucher System for Interpretation services*

A new Act on Interpretation Services for the Deaf-Blind, Hard of Hearing People and Persons with a Speech Disorder took effect in September 2010. The responsibility for organising and financing these services was transferred from the municipalities to the Social Insurance Institution of Finland. It means that the state now bears full responsibility for financing the interpretation services. The Act does not change the rights to interpretation services, but only the administration of the services and the responsibility for financing them. Since January 2007, people with combined vision and hearing impairments have the right to obtain a minimum of 360 hours of interpretation services a year, and persons with hearing and speech impairments a minimum of 180 hours a year. The amount of interpretation services may vary according to the person's individual needs, for example, when the person is studying. The new Act also clarified people's right to get interpretation services when staying abroad. Municipalities are still in charge of arranging other social and health services and support that persons with disabilities might need.

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31. Conama, John Bosco (2004), Ireland and Finland: A comparative study of two Deaf Communities, in McDonnell, Patrick, ed. (2004). Deaf Studies in Ireland: An Introduction, pp. 152–171. Douglas McLean Publishing, Gloucestershire, UK 2004. Deaf Studies in Ireland: An Introduction, pp. 152–171. Douglas McLean Publishing, Gloucestershire, UK

## 2.13 Deaf Community support/advocacy/representative organisations

### Sign Language Interpreting Service (SLIS)

Sign Language Interpreting Service (SLIS) is the national sign language interpreting service for Ireland, set up in 2007 following a review of sign language services in Ireland conducted by Prospectus Consultants on behalf of the Citizens Information Board. It is the primary response of the state to meeting the interpretation needs of the Deaf Community.

Its mission is to ensure Deaf people can participate as full and equal citizens by promoting, advocating and ensuring the availability of quality interpretation services to Deaf people in Ireland so they can access public and social services.

As set out in its strategic plan, the main goals that SLIS is striving to achieve during the period 2015-2020 include:

- High quality interpreting services that allow Deaf people to participate fully in all aspects of public life;
- Continuing the development of Irish Remote Interpreting Service (IRIS);
- Promoting and encouraging good practice and professional standards across all interpreting services offered to Deaf People;
- Increasing availability of interpreting services in key areas of daily life, particularly where Deaf people are accessing their rights or entitlements;
- Advocating for the needs of Deaf People in relation to access to interpretation to allow them to participate in key aspects of life; most particularly public services.

At the core of the provision of interpreting services is ensuring Deaf people can live as full and equal citizens. The Irish Remote Interpreting Service (IRIS) was developed as part of the response to reduce or eliminate inequalities that Deaf people face in relation to accessing information, entitlements and rights. Public services, such as health, education and employment supports, are crucial to social inclusion of the Deaf community, yet many services are not fully accessible to all citizens in accordance with legislation (for example, Equal Status Acts, Disability Act).

One of the five priorities in the SLIS strategic plan 2015-2020 is *"To support and promote consistent standards of service and quality in sign language interpreting services"* and one of the goals under this priority is to develop a register of sign language interpreters in Ireland. This will enable SLIS to:

- Ensure that the work and role of interpreters in the Deaf Community is recognised and that there is an accurate source of current information about interpreters and their availability;
- Provide an online facility on the SLIS website where Deaf and hearing people can locate interpreters and find contact and professional information about interpreters with a view to engaging them for services.

### DeafHear

Previously the National Association for Deaf People, DeafHear is a not-for-profit voluntary organisation providing services to people who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing. It has a national network of resource centres providing a range of core services including family support, information and advocacy, community support, and deaf and hearing awareness training.

DeafHear's vision is of an inclusive society where Deaf and Hard of Hearing people are fully integrated, with equality of opportunity and participation.

The organisation's mission is to seek to achieve this vision by:

- Developing and providing services fully accessible to Deaf and Hard of Hearing people and their families;
- Encouraging others to provide services fully accessible to Deaf and Hard of Hearing people and their families;
- Striving to make public and private sector organisations, and society at large, more Deaf aware.

DeafHear also campaigns for their right to equal access to services and to promote awareness of the impact of hearing loss on individuals and the public health. Key services include Specialist Information, Family Support Service, Assistive Technology and Community Services. During 2016, DeafHear provided personalised therapy and community services to almost 5,500 Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals.

In addition to its three Dublin offices, DeafHear has branches in Letterkenny, Sligo, Castlebar, Galway, Limerick, Killarney, Waterford, Wexford, Kilkenny, Tullamore and Dundalk.

DeafHear works closely with other Deaf organisations to develop services and responses to meet the needs of members of the Deaf Community. It is a member of the group of organisations involved in Deaf Village Ireland.

DeafHear is also a member of the Deaf Education Partnership which is focussed on developing better education services for Deaf and Hard of Hearing children. The organisation also collaborates with the Sign Language Interpreting Service (SLIS) and Irish Deaf Society (IDS) in the development of Irish Sign Language remote interpreting services.

Deaftech is a national assistive technology service specialising in equipment for Deaf and Hard of Hearing people run by DeafHear which provides information on non-medical technical appliances and equipment to the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community, their families and professionals involved in supporting people with hearing loss.

## Irish Deaf Society (IDS)

The Irish Deaf Society is a Deaf-led national advocacy organisation that recognises Irish Sign Language as a means towards Deaf empowerment and equality. The IDS works to support the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community, promoting education and access as both citizens of Ireland and individuals.

The mission statement of the Society is as follows:

*"The Irish Deaf Society seeks to achieve and promote the Equality and Rights of Deaf people in Ireland. On the grounds of the Irish Constitution and Human Rights and international legislation, the ambition of full access to citizenship and society is sought through the empowerment and mobilisation of the Deaf community. With an awareness of their identity and their rights as individuals, Deaf people in Ireland are enabled to celebrate their culture and to fight for the recognition of Irish Sign Language (ISL), and break down the barriers of discrimination."*

The core values of IDS are:

- **Irish Sign Language (ISL)** Deaf people have the right to use ISL as their primary language, enriched with Deaf culture, where linguistic oppression must be a thing of the past;
- **Human Rights** Deaf people have the right to live as equal citizens on a par with hearing people. Discrimination, which is a violation of their rights, is illegal;
- **Education** Deaf children have the right to be educated in ISL in a bi-lingual environment and Deaf people have the right to full access to all third level institutions;
- **Social inclusion** The provision of qualified ISL interpreters must be utilised, which would enable Deaf people to independently access and participate within the public domain in society;
- **Equal opportunities** Deaf people have the right to equal employment opportunities on both a management and professional level;
- **Quality living conditions** Deaf people have the right to equitable living standards as the rest of society, where nothing hinders their participation;
- **Families** Families of Deaf children have the right to receive comprehensive information with access to the Deaf Community, its culture and language;
- **Empowerment** Deaf people have the right to represent the Deaf Community at a local level;
- **Social and political partnership** The government and state agencies must involve Deaf people and Deaf-led organisations in the community, education, health, legal and social fields.

Established in 1995, the IDS National Council is an umbrella group, comprising of local Deaf organisations in Ireland, to maintain a network of local and national organisations. The Council identifies the primary concerns and priorities affecting the Deaf Community, leading to the policies and the approaches to lobbying for equality and rights of Deaf people. Through this Council, the IDS have established policies of empowerment and independence among Deaf people.

The IDS provides a range of services including Deaf Awareness Training, an adult literacy service and ISL classes.

## Catholic Institute for Deaf People (CIDP)

The Catholic Institute for Deaf People (CIDP) is an enabling organisation which seeks to support the development of the Deaf Community.

The Catholic Institute for the Deaf (CID) was established as a charitable institution in 1845. In 2007, the name was changed to the Catholic Institute for Deaf People (CIDP). It is a voluntary, not for profit organisation providing enabling services to the Deaf Community. CIDP focuses on the areas of education, care and pastoral work. The Roman Catholic Archbishop of Dublin is the President of the company and appoints the Board members.

CIDP provides national chaplaincy services to the Deaf Community, manages St Joseph's and St Mary's boarding schools, residences in Cabra and St Joseph's Residence in Stillorgan for vulnerable Deaf and Deaf Blind adults and is the trustee for the specialist Deaf schools in Cabra.

CIDP also manages the Deaf Education Centre in partnership with DeafHear, IDS and the Centre for Deaf Studies, Trinity College.

The National Deaf Village Sports and Leisure Company Limited, which now trades as the Inspire Fitness Centre, is a subsidiary company of CIDP.

## Deaf Village Ireland (DVI)

Deaf Village Ireland is an inclusive social, administration, religious, community, sports, heritage and educational complex providing a range of facilities for both Deaf and hearing people. It is a collaborative initiative involving all Deaf representative organisations in Ireland. Both Irish Sign Language (ISL) and spoken English are used. Members include the Irish Deaf Society, DeafHear, SLIS and the St Vincent's Deaf CIC which is supported and funded by the Citizens Information Board.

Deaf Village Ireland is a limited company set up to manage the DVI complex through a central support structure and aims to provide a location where the Deaf community can thrive and work together. The facilities are used by a wide variety of other Deaf groups such as the Deaf scouts, schools, drama and football groups.

Over 2,200 people use the sporting and leisure facilities in DVI on a regular basis. The complex employs approximately 70 people, of which over 50% are from the Deaf Community.

## 2.14 Summary

This chapter reviewed publicly-available information on the Deaf Community in terms of accessing public information and services.

The Deaf Community is defined as comprising people who are deaf and whose first language is Irish Sign Language. The size of the Deaf Community is estimated at between 3,500-5,000 people.

The Deaf Community show lower levels of educational attainment compared with the hearing community; many young Deaf people leave school without an exam qualification and are significantly less likely to attend higher education. As ISL is their main language of communication, members of the Deaf Community have lower literacy rates compared with the hearing community.

The Deaf Community is heavily reliant on ISL interpreters to communicate with public service providers. There is a shortage of ISL interpreters and this is particularly acute in rural areas. This shortage is compounded by the low numbers entering the ISL interpreting profession.

New information technologies have the potential to enhance the capability of the Deaf Community to interact with government bodies and vice versa; the review of the literature reveals a lack of investment in the use of such new technologies by public bodies.

A review of international good practice highlighted the Finnish voucher system where Deaf people have the right to obtain a minimum number of hours of interpreting a year and the comprehensive provision of video remote interpreting in the UK and text relay services in the US.

The literature review also indicates insufficient progress in implementing international and national legislative and disability policy commitments that would improve the situation of the Deaf Community. The Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice and Equality found that the current experience of the Irish Deaf community is one of extreme marginalisation due to the lack of sign language recognition and provision (October 2016).

However, National Disability Inclusion Strategy commitments and the recent state recognition of ISL as an official language mark a significant step change in the provision of services by government bodies.

# Chapter 3: Consultation with the Deaf

## Community

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the feedback from the programme of interviews and focus group meetings with members of the Deaf Community, Deaf representative/advocacy organisations and Deaf support organisations and service providers (for example, Irish Sign Language interpreters).

The meetings followed a semi-structured format which allowed the researchers to elicit information on a set list of key issues while at the same time providing the opportunity for interviewees to raise issues of concern to them.

The majority of meetings were face-to-face though some were conducted by video over the internet using software applications such as Skype or ooVoo. The consultants also carried out a number of interviews with members of the Deaf Community using IRIS.

It should be noted that in some cases the appointments for interviews with members of the Deaf Community had to be made many weeks in advance so as to ensure the availability of ISL interpreters.

### 3.2 Experiences of the Deaf Community in accessing public information and services

#### 3.2.1 Access to information on public services

The Deaf Community interviewees were unanimous in pointing out the immense challenges they faced in accessing public and social information. They say that only a very small fraction of government information provision uses Irish Sign Language (ISL), which is the main and preferred language of the Deaf Community.

The standard means of communication that government organisations use such as websites, printed documents (leaflets) or telephone are either difficult for the Deaf Community to use due to the fact that the data is provided in English which is not their first language or, in the case of telephone-based information provision, virtually impossible.

The Citizens Information Board's website, [citizensinformation.ie](http://citizensinformation.ie), is a valuable and continuously updated information portal that is widely used by members of the public. However, its use by members of the Deaf Community is constrained by the fact that the information provided is not available in signed ISL format. CIB offers the facility to communicate online by text via its Live Advisor service; while this is an effective service, it requires the Deaf person to write down their query in English when their main and preferred language is ISL.

CIB supports an ISL information service in Deaf Village Ireland where the Dublin North West Citizens Information Service (CIS) operates the St Vincent's Deaf Citizens Information Centre (CIC) which provides information, advice and advocacy services to both hearing citizens and the Deaf Community. The CIC has a trained ISL Information Provider who can respond to queries posed by members of the Deaf Community who call into the centre in person or who can use a video chat computer software application such as Skype to make a query remotely over the internet - the latter option is increasingly being used by members of the Deaf Community living outside Dublin.

The Deaf representative organisations acknowledged the positive contribution of CIB in funding both SLIS and IRIS.

### ***Barrier: Public organisations seldom consult with Deaf representative bodies with regard to their communication provision to the Deaf Community***

Though the members of the Deaf Community and their representative bodies interviewed as part of this study appreciated the efforts of public organisations to use Irish Sign Language as part of their information provision, for example, through the provision of signed videos on their websites, they would prefer if these organisations would consult with Deaf representative bodies on the format and content of such ISL-based information provision. Where the input from the Deaf Community is absent, there is a perception among Deaf people that the public websites that incorporate ISL are merely a token gesture rather than indicative of a genuine understanding of their needs.

The Deaf Community say that this perception of tokenism on the part of government organisations in terms of their approach to Irish Sign Language is best illustrated by the unfailing use of ISL interpreters to sign at major public events but not at other times when a Deaf Person might want to interact with a government body.

Representative/advocacy organisations for the Deaf Community point out that government organisations quite often provide information on their services in a variety of languages, but not in ISL.

### ***Barrier: CIC information services using ISL-qualified Information Providers not available outside Dublin***

Stakeholders within the Deaf Community consulted for this study greatly value the information, advice and advocacy services offered by St Vincent's Deaf CIC but query why other CICs do not offer an information service via Irish Sign Language. In particular, they ask the question why CICs in large urban areas such as Cork, Galway and Limerick cannot provide an ISL-based information, advice and advocacy service. The Deaf Community also acknowledges the progress of some CICs and MABS in registering with the IRIS service and urge that this IRIS uptake is rapidly completed across the CIS and MABS networks.

### ***Barrier: Lack of signed information in public places***

Accessing information in public places can be problematic for members of the Deaf Community. One example is visiting public offices where there is no signed information that can point them in the right direction. Equally, the lack of signed information in bus or train stations or airports or sea-ports can result in Deaf people not receiving vital information about their transport connections or being uninformed about safety notices.

On a related issue, Deaf people raised the lack of on-board information displays on public transport, for example, trains and buses, to alert them to the next stop. This is a particular problem on transport services outside Dublin as Dublin Bus and the Luas system currently provide this information.

### ***Barrier: Public organisations do not use Deaf-friendly means of communication***

Many government service providers offer a telephone number that members of the public can use to obtain information on services or entitlements; for members of the Deaf Community this service has no value or utility. The Deaf person has to rely on a family member, neighbour, friend or Deaf support organisation to make the telephone call on their behalf to the public organisation, which makes them feel disenfranchised and diminishes their perception of self-worth.



The Department of Social Protection has been rolling out the new Public Services Card (PSC) to replace the discontinued Social Services Card. To validate their new PSC the recipient must telephone a DSP office and confirm their identity to an official. The researchers have been told of concerns by a number of Deaf support organisations that have made a call to DSP on behalf of their service users. Even though officials have been informed that the PSC applicant is a member of the Deaf Community, some clients have been asked to make a sound over the telephone to verify their identity. The support organisations have been highly critical of this approach saying that it demeans the Deaf person.

Few public bodies offer a texting service that can facilitate the Deaf Community to communicate with them. This form of communication can allow members to send short messages to government bodies to elicit information or to respond to a query. Members of the Deaf Community say that by offering a text-based communications facility, government organisations provide a means for mobile phone users to communicate with them, albeit in their second language.

Some public service providers (for example, Irish Water) offer a text relay service using Minicom to their Deaf customers though this form of communications device is no longer popular within the Deaf Community.

### ***Barrier: Public bodies mostly communicate with members of the Deaf Community in their second language***

Written communication from government organisations is also problematic for the Deaf Community whose average English language literacy levels are low given that their first language is ISL. Here too Deaf people must ask family members, friends, neighbours or deaf support organisations for assistance in interpreting the content of letters, leaflets or forms. Responding directly to written communications by telephone - which for the hearing population is generally a routine task - is not feasible for members of the Deaf Community. This presents difficulties for the Deaf Community who have to respond to written communications in many situations such as notices of hospital appointments, especially if an appointment date, time or location has to be changed. The Deaf Community point out that some members can use email to respond to written communications from public sector bodies but this facility is not always an option for Deaf people, particularly older people who have no computer experience. They also assert that there can be long delays in public organisations responding to email messages.

Tax office... went in asking questions and left tax office... no clue to what the lady said. I just nodded because she talks very fast.

- Deaf male online respondent

Members of the Deaf Community point out that the situation with regard to the provision of information by public bodies in ISL is slowly changing; the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection provides a signed video on its website that informs Deaf people how to use it. This is a navigation aid – as such, there is still a language barrier issue when they arrive at the target web page.

The consultation with the Deaf Community found that in relation to television broadcasting there was a general perception that the public service broadcaster, RTE, had made progress in providing sub-titling for its television programme output. But there was dissatisfaction with the continuing deficiencies in the provision of sub-titling by some other TV stations.

The Deaf Community conclude that they will continue to experience difficulties accessing public information until public sector information providers recognise - and take on board - that the first language of the Deaf Community is Irish Sign Language, not English or Irish.

## 3.2.2 Access to public services

A number of issues were raised in the consultation process with the Deaf Community representatives in regard to barriers encountered in their experiences of accessing public services.

### ***Barrier: Lack of trained ISL Interpreters***

The main issue raised by Deaf people and their support organisations was the lack of trained ISL interpreters to enable Deaf people to communicate with public officials. In situations where the publicly-funded organisation, for example, a hospital, knew that a deaf person had an appointment with a member of staff and an ISL interpreter had been booked, the onus often rested with the deaf person to contact the interpreter to ensure that they had been contracted to sign at the meeting and to confirm that they would be attending.

The experience of the interviewees from the Deaf Community was that in the vast majority of cases when they visited a public organisation to either obtain information or to access a service, there was no ISL interpreter available to sign the conversation/meeting. In this scenario, the options open to the Deaf Community are to have a hearing companion with them, or write notes, or resort to lip reading. The Deaf Community indicate that there is a presumption among hearing people - particularly office staff - that Deaf people have a superior capacity to lip read and this eliminates the need for an interpreter, even though research indicates that even the best lip-reader can only correctly interpret a third of speech. Some Deaf representative organisations say that public officials pressurise Deaf people to lip read as they wish to avoid incurring ISL interpreting costs or, in the case of some senior medical consultants, they do not want to have to prolong a consultation with sign language interpreting.

The unwillingness of publicly-funded organisations such as hospitals and schools to pay for the provision of ISL interpreters has a number of adverse consequences for Deaf people.

One deaf woman had to ask her teenage daughter to accompany her for a medical appointment in a hospital and translate a meeting with a doctor.

Deaf parents attending a parent-teacher meeting asked their child - the subject of the meeting - to translate as the school declined to provide an interpreter.

The interviewees reported that there were seasonal variations in the availability of interpreters. There are difficulties in securing the services of ISL interpreters during the academic year as many opt for the regular income stream associated with providing interpreting services to third level students.

### ***Barrier: Lack of awareness among frontline staff of organisational commitment and budget to provide ISL interpreters***

Members of the Deaf Community visiting public offices say they are regularly made to feel that it is their fault that officials cannot understand or communicate with them. When it is explained to officials that it is the relevant Department's policy to provide sign language interpreting services to members of the Deaf Community, the response from some officials is that they are unaware of that commitment. This points to a gap between departmental policy aspirations for service provision and the reality on the ground as experienced by Deaf people with respect to the provision of ISL interpreters.

## Experiences in accessing public information or services

### Good experiences:

I went to the tax office in Dublin city centre one time and was impressed when it was my turn for an appointment, that they, upon finding out I was deaf, promptly got a member of staff who was deaf aware and knew sign language to deal with my queries satisfactorily.  
Staff in some organisations for example Junior Certificate Schools Programme Co-ordinators, know I am deaf and always organise an interpreter for me. They are deaf friendly.

### Bad experiences:

Refuse to provide remote interpreting  
Refuse to provide or book ISL interpreter  
Refuse to communicate one-to-one in private room  
Speak publicly with glass wall separating us making communication difficult for me and people staring in my direction  
No show of respect or sensitivity for communication needs

Some public organisations, while not having ISL interpreters on call, have sought to identify staff members with Irish Sign Language capabilities (such as a staff member who is a son or daughter of a Deaf adult) who could be called upon to provide some level of ISL interpreting to deaf clients accessing their services. Though this is not an ideal response as the staff member may only have a limited grasp of ISL and not possess any formal qualifications in ISL interpreting, the Deaf Community recognises that it may suffice in emergency cases or where professional ISL interpreting is not readily available at short notice.

The interviews with Deaf Community representative organisations and service providers indicate that there is a disconnect between what the customer policy statements/access guidelines of large public organisations say will be provided to members of the Deaf Community and what they actually experience at a local level. The organisational customer service plan might indicate that an ISL interpreter will be provided on request but front-line managers may not always be familiar with this commitment, leading to situations where Deaf people are frustrated and/or are made to feel that they have been unreasonable in seeking what they were entitled to.

Members of the Deaf Community and their representative organisations point to the burden of having to book interpreters well in advance of any communication with public service providers - in some instances, three weeks in advance - and the difficulties that can arise if the latter have to change the date and/or time of the interaction.

There are examples of good practice (see 'Good Experiences' in Box above) where public sector organisations are conscious of the need to provide ISL interpreters for Deaf service users. Often these good practice examples have come about as a result of pressure applied by Deaf support organisations. In some cases, this welcome approach to the use of ISL interpreters depends on the enlightened approach of an individual manager who recognises the importance of ISL interpreting to the Deaf Community. However, it sometimes happens that the manager is transferred to another part of the organisation and the good practice lapses with their departure. The Deaf support organisations, particularly those based outside Dublin such as the Kerry Deaf Resource Centre, see a major part of their work as trying to convince public sector bodies of the need to provide ISL interpreting services to Deaf service users. Where the public body is a health service provider such as a hospital, the support organisations emphasise that unless doctors communicate via an ISL interpreter with their Deaf patients, there is the potential for an inappropriate clinical procedure.

The Higher Education Authority (HEA), third level institutions and colleges of further education are perceived as having a good approach to the provision of ISL interpreters for Deaf students. Deaf people seeking to access full-time higher or further education courses at QQI Level 5 and above may be eligible for ISL supports under the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) initiative administered by the HEA. The Deaf representative organisations report that accessibility supports for Deaf people are much less advanced in the vocational training sector and hope that the new SOLAS-ETB structure will quickly move to match the enlightened arrangements in the Higher and Further Education sector.

The Deaf Community was happy to acknowledge that some public service providers had developed a keen appreciation of their needs. The Intreo office on the Navan Road was singled out for praise in this regard. As a result of a proactive initiative by the Kerry Deaf Resource Centre, the HSE Kerry Local Health Office (LHO) has developed a policy and procedures for Deaf People to access sign language interpreting services when visiting a GP for non-routine ailments. The purpose of the policy is to ensure that there is a standardised approach to the provision of access to sign language interpreters for Deaf people when visiting a GP within the area administered by the Kerry LHO. In a related initiative, SLIS has recently embarked on a pilot programme with the HSE to organise ISL interpreters for members of the Deaf Community with medical cards for visits to their GP - this programme will prove a vital public service to many Deaf people.

### **Barrier: Regional gaps in availability of ISL interpreters**

Feedback from Deaf Community representatives indicated that members who lived in areas other than Dublin and other major regional urban centres were experiencing acute difficulties in securing the services of ISL interpreters because of the fact that most interpreters were based in urban locations. This introduced the risk of a self-reinforcing cycle of marginalisation and isolation.

This issue was particularly acute where the member of the Deaf Community seeking to interact with public organisations had a specialised query, for example, a legal or medical enquiry, and needed an interpreter with qualifications and/or experience in these specialist areas.

No interpreters available even though I tried to organise one 3 weeks in advance

- Female Deaf respondent, Kildare

## **Experiences of different age categories within the Deaf Community**

The researchers found a number of differences between younger members of the Deaf Community and older members in terms of access to public information and services.

The younger members were more focused on access to information and services relating to education, training and employment and tended to be less concerned with other issues, for example, health, that were of concern to their elders. For the younger generation of Deaf Community members, obtaining information on supports to help them attend higher or further education was a key concern. Looking ahead, they also highlighted the importance of finding information on interview and workplace supports. Finding and obtaining information on education, training and employment supports was not a significant challenge as this cohort of the Deaf Community tend to be technology-savvy and were better equipped to search Web-based data sources than their older counterparts.

The younger generation perceived the higher education institutions - the universities in particular - as having adequate support services such as the provision of ISL interpreters and note-taking. The same perception was not true, however, of the Education and Training Boards which were seen as being slow to facilitate Deaf students seeking to pursue vocational training opportunities.

### ***Barrier: Lack of vocational training and employment supports***

Younger Deaf Community members expressed concern with the range of supports to help them participate in job interviews and, if successful, to participate fully as an employee. They indicated that while there were grants to provide ISL interpreters at job interviews, the long lead time needed to book an ISL interpreter posed a challenge, particularly when prospective employers were under pressure to fill a position. Representative organisations expressed the view that in addition to the provision of ISL interpreters, Deaf job applicants should be provided with specialised interview skills training to maximise their chances of obtaining employment.

There was a perception among the younger generation that there was a mismatch between what was provided by the public sector to assist them in the workplace and what they actually required. Workplace Equipment/Adaptation Grants are available towards the cost of equipment to make the workplace more accessible. However, the view expressed by the Deaf Community was that the provision of ISL interpreting supports was more relevant to their needs than equipment or workplace adaptation. They contrasted the lack of assistance in this regard with the Access to Work programme in the UK where significant annual funding was available for interpreter services. They held the view that the lack of ISL interpreter supports contributed to the higher rates of unemployment among young Deaf people compared with their UK counterparts.

Older members of the Deaf Community were more likely to be concerned about access to information and services relating to health, housing, transport and local issues. They also had concerns about difficulties accessing education information and services with respect to their children. Here, obtaining ISL interpreters for parent-teacher meetings emerged as a contentious issue for Deaf parents.

Many older Deaf people have literacy difficulties. Many are concerned about their health care as they age and the need for appropriate care for them, particularly in residential settings. It is essential that they can communicate with carers and other residents, both for their physical and mental health.

As a general rule, members of the Deaf Community in the older age groups had difficulties in using technology-based information services and were thus less likely to use services such as Skype or have smart phones. Deaf representative organisations identified issues accessing web-based public services by Deaf people living in rural areas due to poor broadband facilities. These technology challenges are of course not unique to the Deaf Community but it requires much greater effort on the part of Deaf people to set about learning how these challenges can be overcome.

## **Irish Sign Language interpreters**

### ***Barrier: Issues in relation to Qualifications/Expertise of ISL interpreters***

An issue raised during the researchers' consultation with the Deaf Community was that, among the public service providers that did arrange for ISL interpreters to sign at meetings, in some cases the quality of the interpreters provided was not of the required standard. One informant noted that large service providers such as the HSE often procured all of their interpreting services (for both spoken languages and sign languages) via a framework contract. The upshot is that interpreting service providers for whom spoken language interpreting accounts for the vast majority of their business may be more familiar with the quality standards of their spoken language interpreters and less so of the ISL interpreters on their books.

This means that with these providers there is less vetting of people claiming to be proficient in Irish Sign Language interpreting.

Consideration should be given to tendering for sign language interpreting services separately from foreign language interpreting.

This variation in the quality of ISL interpreters used by public organisations is intensely frustrating to the Deaf Community. Members have become exasperated to find that, given that very few public sector service providers offer an ISL interpreting service, some of the ones that do are using interpreters who are not able to provide an acceptable service. For the Deaf Community this presents a risk that the key messages being communicated during meetings are being lost or misinterpreted.

It should be pointed out that the Deaf Community do not have an issue with the quality of properly certified ISL interpreters who they acknowledge provide a professional service.

### ***Barrier: Small numbers graduating from ISL interpreter courses***

The very small numbers of ISL interpreters graduating is currently a significant concern among the Deaf Community. The fear was expressed that if ISL legislation was passed, there would not be anything approaching the number of interpreters needed to meet the anticipated demand. Some respondents believed the small budgets allocated by public sector bodies - with the possible exception of the higher education institutions and the colleges of further education - contributed to the precarious income position that ISL interpreters experience. This in turn did not paint an attractive career path for would-be entrants into the interpreting profession.

The Deaf Community believed that increased resource allocation to the provision of ISL interpreters would address what they perceived as a vicious circle. There was a concern among stakeholders that, even for the modest number of students being attracted by the ISL interpreting courses, the final numbers crossing the line as qualified interpreters was a small fraction of that, and this was a major cause for concern.

The representative organisations for the Deaf Community demanded immediate action on the part of the Department of Education and Skills to address the very low number of qualified ISL interpreters entering the sector. They also sought urgent action to induce ISL interpreters who had retired or who were pursuing other career opportunities to return to the profession.

## **3.3 Current provision by public bodies**

### **Irish Remote Interpreting Service (IRIS)**

Given the lack of availability of ISL interpreters, particularly in non-urban areas, the provision of a remote interpreting service represents a new and cost effective mode of communication access. The Deaf person can communicate via the remote interpreter with a public service provider, either from home or sitting with the public service provider. Dublin-based interviewees were generally aware of the Irish Remote Interpreting Service (IRIS) provided by SLIS. This was not always the case for members of the Deaf Community outside the capital. The consultation process indicates that older members of the Deaf Community were more likely to be unaware of IRIS.

The IRIS service is perceived as offering a number of advantages:

- It removes the necessity for the Deaf person, the interpreter and the third party to be in the same location, and this is particularly advantageous for members of the Deaf Community living outside large urban areas.
- The service does not require a significant investment on the part of Deaf people to access.
- The service is free (or at least very low cost) to the Deaf user.

### **Barrier: IRIS's restricted hours of availability**

Both Deaf Community stakeholders and the SLIS-commissioned review of IRIS indicated that the main drawback with the IRIS service was its restrictive hours of availability. They also pointed out that there were technical difficulties using the IRIS service, for example, firewalls. Booking a time-slot on IRIS was not perceived as being user-friendly; and the delay in obtaining a booking slot was perceived as very long.

#### **Comments on IRIS by online survey respondents**

I would prefer more choice with interpreters.  
More flexible with time - evening, weekend.  
I am Deaf 24/7.

### **Barrier: Low number of public service providers registered with IRIS**

Interviewees also expressed disappointment with the low number of public and private sector service providers taking up IRIS. They voiced their disappointment that the IRIS service was not widely available in DEASP/Intreo offices; the same criticism was levelled at the CIS and MABS networks. The SLIS Annual Report for 2016 states that IRIS is in use in 15 Citizens Information Centres. It is planned for IRIS to be rolled out to all CISs and MABS by the end of 2018 as new hardware is being put in place throughout the networks.

## **Technology**

Information technology has brought about major benefits to the Deaf Community, particularly in terms of video-based apps (Skype, Facetime and similar applications) on computers and smart phones which allow Deaf people to sign to each other.

Advances in IT have also led to the development of new services such as IRIS which enable the Deaf Community to communicate remotely and with public and private service providers.

The increased mobile phone usage among the general population offers service providers the opportunity to transmit and receive short messages. Mobile phones have one obvious advantage for the Deaf Community; they can send and receive text and also, in the case of smart phones, video messages. The general consensus among the Deaf Community is that public service organisations have not embraced this technology or are unaware of its benefits in relation to their communications with Deaf service users. Very few public sector organisations have availed of the potential of their websites or Facebook pages to communicate to the Deaf Community using ISL videos.

## **3.4 Suggested improvements**

Members of the Deaf Community and their representative organisations made a number of suggestions for improving the provision of public information and services. These are outlined below.

## Involvement

There were calls for public sector bodies to involve the Deaf Community in shaping their information and service provision. The stakeholders welcomed the efforts of a small number of government organisations that had produced ISL signed videos either on their website or in their public offices. It was pointed out, however, that had these organisations involved the Deaf Community with regard to their plans, the value, reach and effectiveness of these videos could be greatly enhanced.

## Deaf awareness training

The Deaf Community highlighted the pressing need for increased provision of deaf and Irish Sign Language awareness training for managers and frontline staff in public sector organisations. The interviews undertaken by the researchers with public service providers revealed a lack of awareness of the needs of the Deaf Community compared with the needs of Hard of Hearing service users - for example, some interviewees mistakenly believed that the provision of induction loops in public places was relevant to the needs of the Deaf Community whereas they are only of help to Hard of Hearing people who use hearing aids fitted with a telecoil.

While all staff should have basic awareness training, more specific training should be provided where appropriate. For example, in Intreo offices, reception and security staff should have basic training so that they can direct Deaf service users to correct services in the office. Intreo case officers should have more in-depth training including awareness of IRIS; policy of not asking family members to interpret; more awareness of how to communicate directly so that a relationship can be built up; how to advocate with potential employers and how to explain reasonable accommodation implications.

There was also a recognition that deaf awareness training would not just be provided on a once-off basis but would be delivered on a regular basis given the need for refresher courses and because of the movement of staff within public sector organisations. The Deaf Community called for regular briefings to be given to front-line staff to remind them of organisational commitments to provide ISL interpreting to Deaf service users.

It was emphasised that Deaf awareness training programmes should be designed in consultation with the Deaf Community.

## IRIS

The great value of IRIS as a communications mechanism was recognised by members of the Deaf Community and their representative organisations but this led to frustration with its limited hours of availability. There were calls for IRIS to adopt best international practice and be available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

The Deaf Community also advocated for increases in the number of ISL interpreters working in IRIS so that current booking delays could be reduced.

Increasing the number of public sector service providers registered with IRIS was another suggested improvement; as already stated, members of the Deaf Community expressed particular disappointment with the low take-up of the service.

There were also calls for IRIS to be better promoted within the Deaf Community, particularly in areas outside the main urban centres.



All of these suggestions regarding IRIS service enhancements have been identified and promoted in an independent report “Evaluation of the Irish Remote Interpreting Service” (2016) commissioned by SLIS and funded by CIB.

## Funding for ISL interpreter services

Members of the Deaf Community and their representative organisations praised the voucher system used in Finland which allows Deaf people to use the services of an interpreter for a specified number of hours every month. This funding scheme empowers Deaf people to engage sign language interpreters to communicate with both public and private sector service providers, and also for social purposes. The voucher system also has a beneficial impact on the sign language interpreting sector in that it provides them with a higher level of financial security, which in turn helps to attract new entrants into the profession.

Young members of the Deaf Community urged the introduction of a scheme similar to the UK’s Access to Work programme (where a grant of up to €48,800 per annum is available to a Deaf employee for interpreter services), where the cost of ISL interpreters would be met by the Exchequer, in order to reduce the costs to businesses of employing Deaf people.

SLIS has received funding from the HSE for the payment of ISL interpreting services for GP visits by members of the Deaf Community holding a medical card. The Deaf Community hopes that this pilot scheme will be a success and will be rolled out nationally as soon as possible.

## Budgets for ISL interpreter provision

The Deaf Community suggested that one significant improvement that public sector bodies could make would be to have a dedicated and identifiable budget for ISL interpreting provision. They pointed out that many government organisations do not have any budget for ISL interpreter provision and if they do it is aggregated with spoken language translation services.

Specifying a dedicated ISL interpreter budget would enable the Deaf Community to measure how public sector bodies are meeting their information and service provision obligations to their Deaf service users.

## Citizens Information Services (CISs)

The provision of information to the Deaf Community by St. Vincent’s Deaf Citizen Information Centre (CIC) in Deaf Village Ireland is greatly valued. A number of suggested improvements were made and included increasing the hours in which an Information Provider with ISL might be available. There were also calls for a booking system to be introduced in St. Vincent’s as queries presented by members of the Deaf Community took considerably longer to process - even relatively straightforward queries - than those submitted by the hearing community. Such a booking system would avoid situations where queues would form and, given the limited opening hours, avoid the risk of people in the queue not seeing an Information Provider.

Representative organisations/service providers based outside Dublin called for the provision of ISL-qualified Information Providers in other CICs in locations such as Cork and Galway. This plus an expanded IRIS service would greatly improve access by Deaf people outside Dublin to public information. IRIS is currently available in 15 CICs; the Citizens Information Board plans to expand availability of IRIS to include all CISs by the end of 2018.

The comments above in relation to CIC service enhancement for the Deaf Community may also be applied to the MABS network. The Citizens Information Board plans that all MABS offices will have IRIS capability by the end of 2018.

## Addressing the shortage of ISL interpreters

The Deaf Community are very conscious of their dependence on ISL interpreters to communicate with the hearing world. They have a concern that the modest numbers of ISL graduates from TCD and the precarious earnings situation facing existing interpreters will continue to have a negative impact on their capability to interact with public service providers.

The suggestions coming from the Deaf Community include:

- Better career guidance information in secondary schools;
- Introduction of a voucher system for the provision of interpreting services could spur the demand for interpreters; the use of such a voucher system has been promoted in other areas of public service provision, for example, vouchers for legal and financial services in the context of mortgage arrears and insolvency;
- The recent recognition of ISL should also increase the demand for interpreters.

## Increased and better use of information technology

Representative organisations for the Deaf Community and Deaf individuals are disappointed that, despite the improvements that information and communication technologies have brought about, public organisations have been slow to appreciate their potential to improve information provision and service delivery to the Deaf Community:

- Public bodies could use signed videos on their websites to provide vital information to the Deaf Community at a low cost. Very few public sector organisations have used this facility; the good practice examples found have been the websites of non-governmental organisations - some of which are funded by the Exchequer;
- The provision of signed display screens in public buildings, for example, airports, train stations, is regularly found in other countries but not in Ireland;
- Better on-board information display screens on public transport services outside major urban areas;
- Public organisations should provide a text-based service to facilitate members of the Deaf Community to send text messages from their mobile phones;
- Public bodies should embrace the opportunities afforded by IRIS and should register as an IRIS service provider;
- The use of out-dated technologies such as Minicom should be avoided.

It is recognised that the increased use of IT-based information and service provision may offer particular benefits to the younger, more technology-literate section of the Deaf Community, but provision to the older age cohort may require other innovative solutions.

## 3.5 Summary

The consultation with the Deaf Community reveals that Deaf people face a number of barriers in accessing public information and services. One such barrier is that very little public information is provided in ISL, the main communication language of the Deaf Community.

Deaf people face significant challenges in accessing public services because very few government organisations provide ISL interpreters. Members of the Deaf Community say they even struggle to get interpreters in those public organisations that have a commitment to the provision of interpreters. The shortage of ISL interpreters is of major concern to Deaf people in terms of accessing public services

especially to members of the Deaf Community living outside the main urban areas. The Deaf Community is also worried at the low numbers of ISL interpreting graduates.

In the absence of ISL interpreters, Deaf people must use family, friends and Deaf support organisations to interact with public organisations, which diminishes their sense of self-worth and participation in society.

Young Deaf adults are critical of the lack of interpreter supports for accessing training and employment. Though information technology offers the Deaf Community new ways of communicating with public organisations, Deaf people say that its use in Ireland has suffered from lack of investment and has not reached its potential.

The Deaf Community had plenty of ideas of how their access to public information and services could be improved.

# Chapter 4: Data on access to public information and services by the Deaf Community

## 4.1 Introduction

One of the aims of the study was to identify the information needs of the Deaf Community and the main types of information on public services sought. The challenge here is that there is no one monitoring agency reporting on data on the types and sources of public information used by the Deaf Community.

It is possible however to obtain information from a number of service providers to paint a broad picture of the types of government information that is sought by the Deaf Community and the types of public services that they wish to access.

In addition to the survey on information needs and the focus group discussions, the two sources of information examined by the Consultants were:

- Information queries presented by members of the Deaf Community to the St. Vincent's Deaf Citizens Information Centre (CIC) located in Deaf Village Ireland (DVI);
- Requests for the provision of ISL interpreter services submitted to Sign Language Interpreting Service (SLIS) by members of the Deaf Community.

Both data sources provide an indication of the main categories of public and social information that are of interest and relevance to members of the Deaf Community. However, the data presented in Section 4.2 below should not be construed as representing the types of information sought by the Deaf Community nationally. Although the majority of people using the services of St. Vincent's Deaf CIC in Deaf Village Ireland are Dublin-based, many Deaf people from outside Dublin come to Deaf Village Ireland to socialise and use the services of the many Deaf-related organisations based there, including St. Vincent's Deaf CIC, as they know they have access to an interpreter there. This means it is a national service to a certain extent. In the absence of other national data, the data outlined in this section can be viewed as a proxy for the national picture.

In addition, caution must be used in analysing the SLIS data presented in Section 4.3 as it includes requests for the provision of ISL interpreters to communicate with private sector service providers whereas the focus of this study is on access to information and services provided by the public sector.

One further source on this topic is the Coogan and O'Leary (2015) report which reviewed the range of situations where women accessed interpreters. The 301 Deaf women respondents identified the following main interpreter domains: educational settings; parent teacher meetings; training courses; third level colleges; health services; maternity services; access to family GP; legal settings; court cases; solicitors; family law cases; job interviews; government services; and theatre.

## 4.2 St. Vincent's Deaf Citizens Information Centre, Deaf Village Ireland

Members of the Deaf Community can use the services of the St. Vincent's Deaf CIC which is located in Deaf Village Ireland (DVI) for assistance with queries relating to public and social services. The CIC has a part-time Information Provider<sup>32</sup> who is an ISL interpreter who provides information, advice and advocacy

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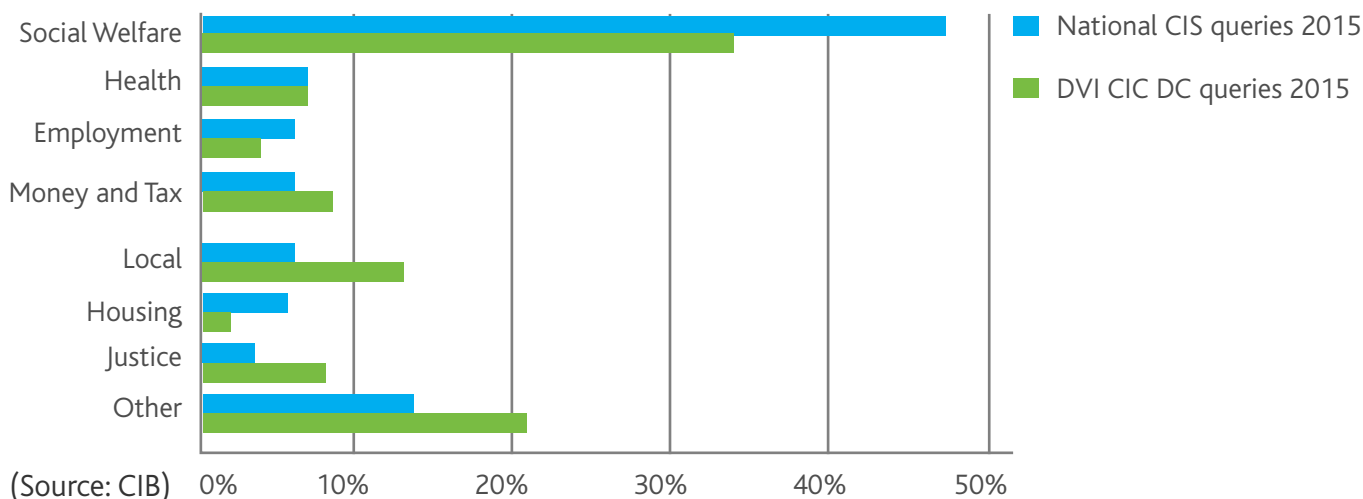
32. An Information Provider is a person who works in a Citizens Information Centre (CIC) and whose role is to provide a free, impartial, confidential and non-judgmental information, advice and advocacy service to the public on their rights and entitlements.

services to both hearing and Deaf people. The St. Vincent’s Deaf CIC is part of the Dublin North West Citizens Information Service (CIS).

An analysis of the information queries presented by members of the Deaf Community to the St. Vincent’s Deaf CIC during 2015 indicate that over a third relate to Social Welfare, 14% to Local issues and 9% to Money and Tax. Queries relating to Health and Justice amounted to 8% each.

Figure 4.1 and Table 4.1 below contrast the type of queries presented by members of the Deaf Community to St. Vincent’s during 2015 with all queries presented by members of the public to CICs nationally.

**Figure 4.1: Analysis of queries presented by members of the Deaf Community to St. Vincent’s Deaf CIC in Deaf Village Ireland (DVI) and queries presented to all CICs nationally in 2015**



**Table 4.1 :Analysis of queries presented by members of the Deaf Community to St. Vincent’s Deaf CIC and queries presented to all CICs nationally in 2015**

Categories	Total national queries, 2015	Queries presented by the Deaf Community at St. Vincent’s Deaf CIC, 2015
<b>Social Welfare</b>	46%	34%
<b>Health</b>	8%	8%
<b>Employment</b>	7%	3%
<b>Money and Tax</b>	7%	9%
<b>Local</b>	7%	14%
<b>Housing</b>	6%	3%
<b>Justice</b>	4%	8%
<b>Other</b>	15%	21%
<b>Total</b>	100%	100%

(Source: CIB)

There are a number of marked differences between the categories of queries presented by members of the Deaf Community at St. Vincent’s Deaf CIC in Deaf Village Ireland and the queries presented on a national basis. Social Welfare accounted for 46% of queries nationally but only 34% of queries presented by members of the Deaf Community.

Local issues accounted for 14% of the queries presented at St. Vincent’s Deaf CIC but represented only 7% of the queries presented nationally. A detailed analysis of the queries presented by members of the Deaf

Community under this heading found that many of these related to Caranua, the independent state body set up to help people who, as children, experienced abuse in residential institutions in Ireland and who have received settlements, Redress Board or Court awards. A number of Caranua-related queries were also included in the Justice category which also received a higher proportion of queries from Deaf people (8%) compared with the national picture (4%). The provision of information on education and other options for young people also represented a significant proportion of the queries presented by Deaf people in the Local category.

The Deaf Community had a higher percentage of queries in the Other category (21%) compared with 15% nationally. This category included information queries relating to Education and Training, Consumer Affairs, Travel and Recreation and Death and Bereavement.

There was a higher percentage of queries presented nationally during 2015 in the Employment (7%) and Housing (6%) categories compared with the Deaf Community (3% each for both categories).

Health queries accounted for 8% of queries presented by the Deaf Community in St. Vincent’s Deaf CIC and also for all queries presented nationally.

Figure 4.2 and Table 4.2 present an analysis of the information queries presented during 2015 by:

- Members of the Deaf Community to St. Vincent’s Deaf CIC in DVI;
- Members of the hearing community to St. Vincent’s Deaf CIC in DVI;
- Members of the public to all CICs operated by the Dublin North West Citizens Information Service (including St. Vincent’s Deaf CIC);
- Member of the public to all CICs nationally.

Figure 4.2: Analysis of queries presented at St. Vincent’s Deaf CIC in Deaf Village Ireland by members of the Deaf and hearing Communities, at CICs in Dublin North West CIS and at all CICs nationally in 2015

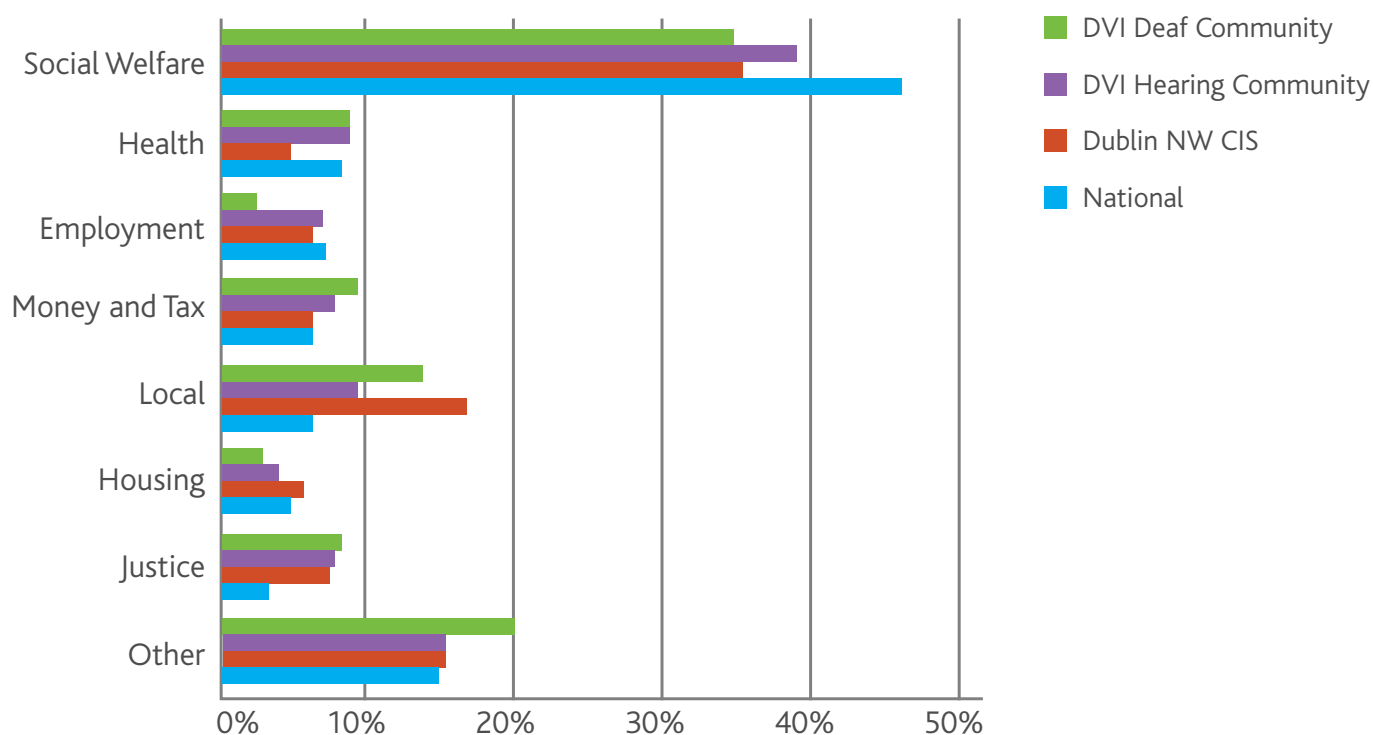


Table 4.2 Analysis of queries presented at St. Vincent’s Deaf CIC in Deaf Village Ireland by members of the Deaf and hearing Communities, at CICs in Dublin North West CIS and at all CICs nationally in 2015

	DVI Deaf Community	DVI Hearing Community	Dublin NW CIS	National
<b>Social Welfare</b>	34.1%	38.9%	34.5%	46.2%
<b>Health</b>	8.5%	8.4%	6.1%	8.1%
<b>Employment</b>	3.4%	6.5%	6.4%	7.1%
<b>Money and Tax</b>	8.9%	7.9%	6.5%	6.6%
<b>Local</b>	13.6%	9.8%	16.8%	6.6%
<b>Housing</b>	3.4%	4.9%	6.4%	6.0%
<b>Justice</b>	8.1%	7.5%	7.3%	3.7%
<b>Other</b>	20.0%	16.1%	16.0%	15.7%
<b>Total</b>	100%	100%	100%	100%

(Source: CIB)

Though there are many similarities in the queries presented by both the Deaf Community and the hearing community to St. Vincent’s Deaf CIC there are some differences, particularly in relation to Social Welfare which represents a higher proportion of the queries presented by the hearing community (39%) compared with the Deaf Community (34%). The Local category features prominently with regard to queries from the Deaf Community (14%) compared with the hearing community (10%) - as explained earlier, requests for information on Caranua formed a large proportion of queries presented under this category and also under the Justice category.

The ‘Other’ category represented a fifth of all queries submitted by the Deaf Community in St. Vincent’s but only accounted for 16% of the queries presented by the hearing community.

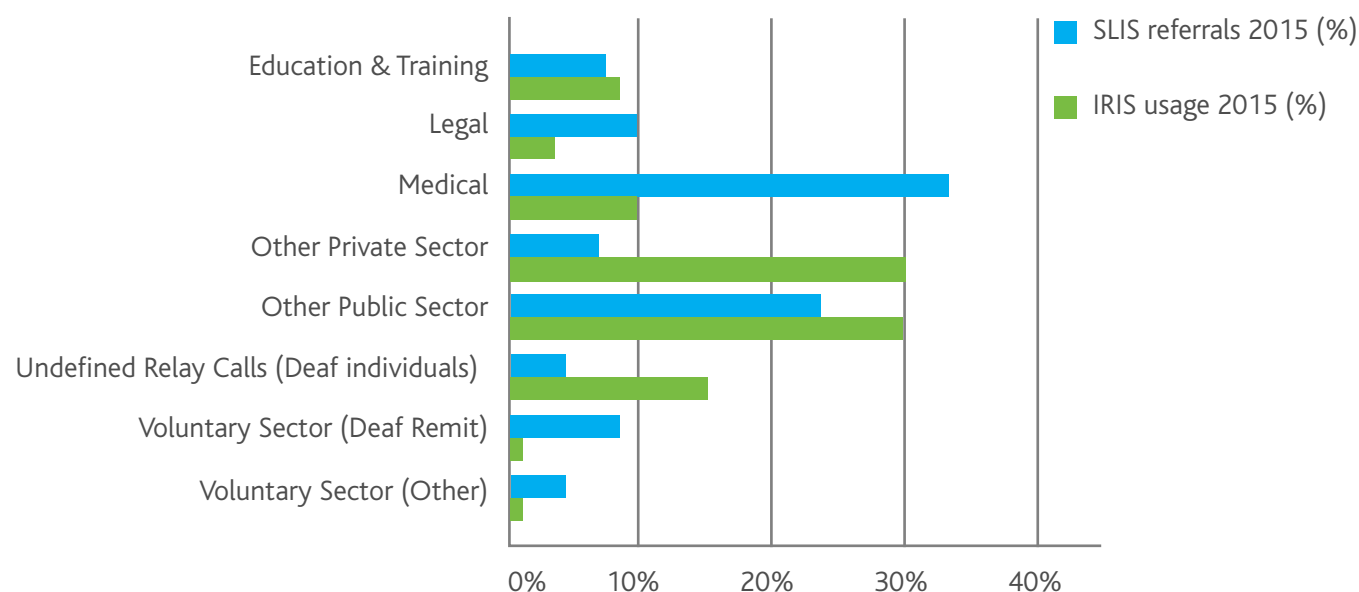
## 4.3 Data on requests to SLIS for ISL interpreting services and IRIS usage

SLIS compiles statistics on the number of ISL interpreter requests from members of the Deaf Community broken down by the different public sectors, and it also compiles statistics on the organisations/services with which members of the Deaf Community communicated using IRIS.

Both sets of data can be used as a proxy for the types of public sector organisations from which members of the Deaf Community regularly seek information and services. A number of caveats need to be entered here: firstly, members of the Deaf Community may use other organisations for booking ISL interpreters. They may also use other methods of communication to interact with public service providers such as Deaf support organisations, family and friends.

SLIS referrals and IRIS usage reports give the following information categories for 2015 and 2016. These reports show the categories members of the Deaf Community required an ISL interpreter for in face-to-face communications and remotely via IRIS.

Figure 4.3: SLIS referrals and IRIS usage by major category (%)



(Source: SLIS)

Table 4.3: SLIS referrals and IRIS usage by major category (%)

Category	SLIS referrals 2015 (%)	IRIS usage 2015 (%)
Medical	33%	10%
Other Public Sector	23%	31%
Legal	10%	3%
Voluntary Sector (Deaf Remit)	9%	1%
Education and Training	8%	9%
Other Private Sector	7%	30%
Undefined Relay Calls (Deaf individuals)	5%	16%
Voluntary Sector (Other)	5%	1%

The medical sector headed the list of categories for which the Deaf Community requested ISL interpreters from SLIS with 33% of all referrals in 2015. The 'Other Public Sector' category accounted for 23% of all requests followed by Legal (10%) and Education and Training (9%).

The voluntary sector (Deaf remit) and voluntary sector (Other) together represented 14% of all requests/referrals to SLIS. The 'Other Private Sector' category accounted for 7% of requests/referrals. Undefined Relay Calls amounted to 5%.

The analysis of IRIS usage in 2015 shows a different pattern: here the 'Other Public Sector' category represented 31% of all communications through IRIS whereas Medical only accounted for 10%. The 'Other Private Sector' represented 30% of the conversations that the members of the Deaf Community had through IRIS. The Education and Training and Legal categories accounted for 9% and 3% respectively of IRIS communications.

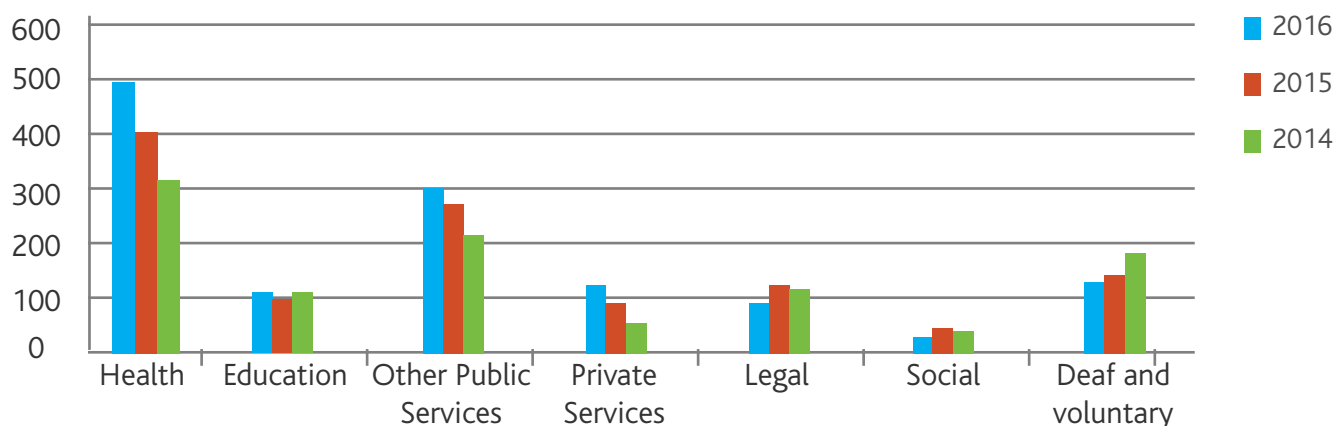
Though the combined Voluntary sectors accounted for 14% of requests for ISL interpreters, they only represented 2% of IRIS usage.



SLIS provides a referral service by putting booking clients (mainly public service providers) in touch with suitably qualified interpreters. According to the 2016 SLIS annual report, SLIS responded to 1,355 requests for support in finding suitable interpreters that year. This is a 10% increase on 2015. 70% of support calls were for health settings (37%), education (9%), and other public services (24%).

SLIS was able to match interpreters to assignments in 605 of the 1,355 cases – less than half of all requests, partly due to lack of availability of interpreters. The serious shortage of interpreters means that interpreting services available are inadequate to meet the routine needs of Ireland’s 5,000 Deaf ISL users. This is especially acute in rural areas.

Figure 4.4 : Requests for support by sector, 2014 to 2016



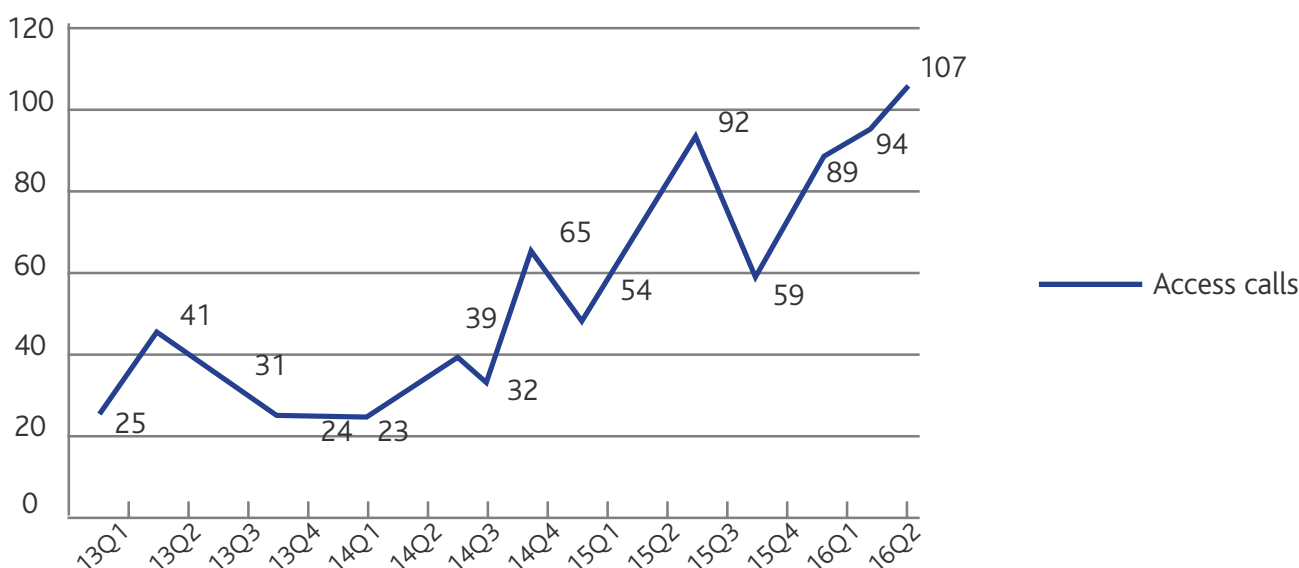
Source: SLIS 2016 Annual Report

The analysis of both the St. Vincent’s and SLIS datasets provides an indication of the relative weights of importance the Deaf Community attaches to public information and services relating to Social Welfare, Health, Education and training, Justice and Local issues.

## Access cases

Included in the 1,355 calls to SLIS in 2016 are 'Access Referrals', where additional supports are required to persuade services to allow or book interpreters, for example for health appointments, job interviews and access to public services. This part of SLIS’s work is increasing (also up 10% on 2015) and is in effect an everyday occurrence. In 2016, SLIS responded to 358 (27%) Access or Emergency requests from Deaf citizens, a significant increase from the previous year.

Figure 4.5: SLIS access cases, 3rd quarter, 2013 to 2nd quarter, 2016



(Source: SLIS Advocacy/Access Work: Memo to CIB 25 July 2016, unpublished)

## Experiences in accessing public information or services

### SLIS Access cases - positive examples:

- The HSE has a pilot project for organising interpreters for GP / Primary Care appointments with Deaf Medical Card holders. This has improved access to GPs and primary care, reducing the number of medical access cases with SLIS since its introduction in October 2016. However, the pilot is restricted to medical card holders only, and all Deaf patients have a right to interpreting in health settings.
- DEASP had agreed at the time the research was carried out to install remote interpreting services in 13 Intreo Offices in 2017 and then to all 60 Intreo offices.
- The Irish Remote Interpreting Service (IRIS) offers remote access to an interpreter via video link (e.g. Skype). Caranua, EmployAbility Services, Irish Cancer Society, Rabobank, Trinity College and 123.ie regularly use this service to serve their clients. However, other public services and commercial organisations are slow to adopt this technology.

### SLIS Access cases - negative examples:

- Health Insurance companies refuse to pay for interpreters for private hospital clinics.
- Health services and GPs refuse to arrange interpreters, instead relying on family members to interpret (including children) or lip-reading.
- Front-line health staff too often unaware of responsibilities to book interpreters or of the medical risks of not having an interpreter present.
- Deaf people avoid medical and GP appointments because no interpreters are provided.
- Deaf people unable to contact hospitals or clinics by text or email as they are only given a landline telephone number option.
- Difficulties getting access to interpreters for parent teacher meetings.
- Deaf clients refused interpreters in family and criminal courts.
- Solicitors unwilling to book and pay for interpreters.
- Deaf people are not provided with interpreters for driving lessons.
- Deaf people refused interpreters for Education and Training Board courses and private courses.
- Cases of some interpreting agencies using unqualified interpreters.
- Banks almost never book interpreters for meetings with their Deaf customers.
- The policies of banks and insurance companies cause significant barriers to Deaf people, with some regularly refusing to accept calls from Deaf customers through Irish Remote Interpreting Service (IRIS).

## 4.4 Summary

The analysis of both the St. Vincent's and SLIS datasets provides an indication of the relative importance the Deaf Community attaches to public information and services relating to Social Welfare, Health, Education and Training, Justice, Housing, Money and Tax, and Local issues.

In the case of St Vincent's CIC, Social Welfare is revealed as the predominant information category for the Deaf Community; this mirrored the overall national CIC picture. The Employment queries percentage for the Deaf Community was only half the corresponding percentage for the overall national results, perhaps reflecting the relatively smaller involvement of the Deaf Community in employment. The 'Local' category features prominently with regard to queries from the Deaf Community (14%) compared with the Hearing Community (10%), reflecting the importance of Caranua services to the Deaf Community.

Analysis of the SLIS and IRIS results showed that medical information/services were an important part of the SLIS referrals story (33% of total SLIS referrals) but only represented 10% of IRIS business, indicating that in-situ interpreters are more appropriate for Health issues. Likewise, Legal issues represented 10% of SLIS referrals but only 3% of IRIS requests, again reflecting the importance of face-to-face interpreting for this domain. Results for the private sector saw a clear differentiation between SLIS referrals (7%) and a substantial 30% for IRIS, reflecting the fact that IRIS is particularly suitable for relatively quick and 'low-risk' queries associated with private service providers.

The Access referrals outlined by SLIS highlight the difficulties Deaf people have in accessing an interpreter for both routine and significant events in their lives, thereby leaving them at a disadvantage participating in society compared with the hearing population, despite some recent improvements.

# Chapter 5: Survey of the Deaf Community

## 5.1 Introduction

As mentioned in Section 1.3 above, the researchers undertook an online survey of the Deaf Community to elicit their views and opinions on their access to public information and their access to public and social services.

The list of questions included in the survey was informed by the consultation with the Deaf Community (Chapter 3) and by an analysis of the St. Vincent's Deaf CIC and SLIS data presented in Chapter 4.

Each question in the survey was presented in two languages: English and Irish Sign Language (the questions were signed by a Deaf interpreter and videoed. Sub-titles were then added to the videos before the survey was hosted online).

An introductory video was placed at the start of the survey to explain the purpose and background to the questionnaire.

A number of information channels were used to promote awareness of the survey to the Deaf Community. These included the websites and Facebook pages of national and regional Deaf organisations. A number of the organisations represented on the project steering group also arranged to assist their members/service users - particularly those with low computer skills - to complete a hard copy of the questionnaire.

## 5.2 Data analysis

This section presents an analysis of the responses by the Deaf Community to a series of questions on their experiences accessing public/social information and services. A total of 230 valid responses were received.

### *Information on public/social services*

The first question asked Deaf Community respondents to indicate if they had looked for information from a specified list of public/social services (see Table 5.1).

**Table 5.1: Number and percentage of Deaf Community respondents seeking information about public/social services (n = 220)**

Category	No.	%
Social welfare	160	73%
Health/HSE	149	68%
Money and Tax	132	60%
Employment (Intreo, EmployAbility)	109	50%
Education and Training services	109	54%
Transport	108	49%
Justice/Legal rights	98	45%
Housing services	75	34%
Other	51	23%

The public/social service attracting most responses was Social Welfare. A total of 160 respondents said they looked for information on social welfare issues, representing 73% of all respondents to this question.

Following close behind in second place was Health/HSE. 149 respondents or 68% of all respondents said they sought information from this sector.

The third most popular category where Deaf Community respondents sought information was Money and Tax with 132 respondents saying that they looked for information. This cohort represented 60% of all those who responded to the question.

Education and Training services was identified by 119 respondents; this category represented 54% of respondents. A slightly smaller number, 109, said they looked for information on Employment (Intreo, EmployAbility) while virtually the same number sought information on Transport.

The numbers of Deaf Community respondents seeking to obtain information on Justice/Legal rights and Housing services amounted to 98 and 75 respectively.

51 respondents (23% of all respondents) identified other public/social services; service providers in this category included Irish Water, Bord Gais, ESB/Electric Ireland, eir/Eircom, Garda, Local Authorities and the Ombudsman.

### **Ease of access to public information**

Deaf Community respondents were asked to answer a series of questions on how easy it was to access public information; see Table 5.2 below.

**Table 5.2: Ease of access to public information (n = 200)**

Question	Yes	No	No.
<b>Is information on public organisation websites provided in a Deaf friendly way?</b>	20%	80%	188
<b>Is this information in Irish Sign Language?</b>	19%	82%	194
<b>Is information from public organisations easy to understand (for example letters, leaflets, documents and information videos)?</b>	25%	75%	194
<b>Do public organisations offer you accessible ways to contact them (for example, text messaging, Skype)?</b>	14%	86%	193
<b>Do public organisations reply quickly enough to your questions?</b>	12%	88%	192

Asked if information on the websites of public organisations was provided in a Deaf-friendly way, four-fifths of respondents said it was not, while one-fifth said it was.

Eighty-two per cent said the information on public organisations' websites was not offered in Irish Sign Language. A quarter of respondents said information (letters, leaflets and other similar publications) from public organisations was easy to understand but three-quarters disagreed.

The Deaf Community respondents did not believe that public organisations offered them accessible ways (text messaging, Skype) to contact them; 86% of respondents disagreed that public organisations provided such accessible forms of contact.

Deaf Community respondents were unhappy with the speed with which public organisations responded to their questions: 88% said that public organisations did not respond quickly to their information requests while only 12% were happy.

### **Experience in meeting with staff face-to-face in public service organisations**

This question sought to find out the experience of Deaf people when visiting public service organisations and meeting with staff face-to-face.

**Table 5.3: Experience in meeting with staff face-to-face in public organisations (n=183)**

Question	Yes	No	No.
Do the staff you meet with in public organisations have a positive attitude to the needs of Deaf clients?	34%	66%	173
Do hearing staff have good Deaf-awareness?	11%	89%	180
Are public services good about booking interpreters?	20%	80%	176
Are public services good about booking interpreters for repeat appointments?	18%	82%	175
Are the interpreters offered suitably qualified?	49%	51%	158
Do public organisations offer Irish Remote Interpreting Service (IRIS)?	10%	90%	168

Only a third of respondents characterised the attitude of public service staff to the needs of the Deaf Community as positive. Almost 90% believed that staff lacked good deaf awareness. Eighty percent of respondents felt that public service organisations are not good in terms of booking interpreters or re-booking interpreters for repeat visits. Only half of the respondents thought that the interpreters provided by public service organisations were suitably qualified. Ninety percent of respondents stated that, in their experience, public organisations were not providing the IRIS service.

### **Respondents' experience in accessing public services**

The respondents were asked to rate their experiences in accessing the major public services on a scale of Very good, Satisfactory, Poor or Very poor. The results are presented in Table 5.4 below.

**Table 5.4: Respondents' experience in accessing different public services [n = 172]**

Public service category	Very Good	Satisfactory	Poor	Very Poor	No.
Social Welfare	13%	26%	40%	21%	149
Employment (Intreo, EmployAbility)	9%	20%	39%	31%	118
Health Service Executive (HSE), for example, Hospitals, Primary Health Care Centres, Doctors/GPs	9%	19%	39%	34%	162
Education and Training services	8%	30%	33%	30%	131
Housing services	9%	17%	39%	36%	115
Tax office/Revenue	7%	22%	36%	35%	142
Other, for example, Courts, An Garda Síochána, County and City Councils	7%	15%	36%	42%	121

In terms of their experiences of accessing public services, the Health/HSE sector attracted the largest interest from the respondents. A total of 162 respondents gave a rating for their experiences of accessing this sector. The Health sector generated a high proportion of Poor (39%) and Very Poor (34%) ratings from respondents and only 9% of them gave it a Very Good rating. A fifth of respondents said their experience of accessing health services was Satisfactory.

Social Welfare attracted the next highest number of respondents with 149 giving a rating. Over 60% of these gave it a Poor (40%) or Very Poor (21%) rating. Social Welfare received a Very Good rating by 13% of respondents; this is the highest Very Good rating among all of the public service categories rated by the respondents.

The third most rated public service was Revenue. Over 70% cited a negative experience in accessing taxation services: 36% gave a Poor rating while 35% gave a Very poor rating.

Education and training services was the fourth most rated category. Two-thirds of respondents said their experiences of accessing education and training was Poor or Very poor. A third said it was satisfactory with 8% giving it a Very good rating.

Overall, the answers to this question indicate that respondents gave a poor rating of their experiences of accessing public/social services with approximately two-thirds indicating it was Poor or Very Poor.

### ***Good/bad experiences when looking for public information or services***

Respondents were asked to give examples of good or bad experiences when seeking public information or services. A selection of the responses are provided in the boxes below. By far the majority of the responses related to negative experiences that they had experienced when accessing information or services from public organisations.

#### **Experiences when looking for public information or services**

##### **Good experiences:**

I usually have good experiences with the HSE as the hospital were reliable in providing interpreters.

I find the websites, especially CIC is in very plain English and easy to follow but that's only because I have a good level of English.

The Coombe Hospital was very good at providing an interpreter.

### Bad experiences:

Activation of Public Service Card. When I got a new public service card, I was told that I needed to make a phone call to someone to activate my card. I asked for alternatives, and was told that there is none. I was told that I could ask someone to answer the security questions on the phone. But I was concerned with that because I am giving this person my private information.

Refusal by services to communicate by email. Face to face meetings demanded and no supports offered despite request for support in writing. No access in MABS. No access in CIC offices. Very poor access in DSP offices.

No access to Visiting Teacher of the Deaf - very poor and discriminating attitude by some visiting teachers.

Employment services poor including Employability services.

Trying to get Interpreter funding for Doctor visits. Have to know when you're sick so you can book in advance.

When appointment was made for hospital - ISL interpreter was requested - the hospital stated that they would not provide an interpreter nor would they fund it - so it took a lot of effort between myself/SLIS to get it sorted in the end. Another occasion when interpreter was required at GP - an interpreter assigned by HSE was unqualified but luckily I enquired in advance - I put a stop to this and rejected the use of the interpreter who was unqualified to interpret in a medical situation - this was only resolved when I wrote to the HSE to complain. They eventually provided me with a registered medical qualified interpreter after a lot of effort to get it resolved.

The overwhelming impression from the responses is a serious deficit in Deaf awareness and empathy from staff of major public service providers. Undoubtedly these officials are often under significant pressure to get through their daily workload but this does not excuse the instances of impatience, insensitivity, and sometimes even antipathy recounted by a good number of respondents. The poor attitude is further aggravated by a lack of training in how to communicate with Deaf clients, for example, addressing the client from behind a glass partition, failing to make eye contact to facilitate lip-reading, not knowing how to book an interpreter, not proactively booking an interpreter for return visits.

Unaccommodating website design from the 'productive' side comes in for universal criticism in terms of lack of ISL usage and lack of plain language. Then, from the 'receptive' side, Deaf clients fault the unthinking assumption that the website readership can make contact by telephone when what is needed for Deaf clients is a live chat service (and even that suits only those who have a functional level of literacy).

The shortage of interpreters and the resulting booking delays for both accompanying interpreters and IRIS is also a common source of vexation for Deaf people who cannot enjoy the same spontaneous communication options with service providers as their hearing peers. This can be particularly distressing in times of sudden 'unplanned' illness when immediate communication is required.

The experience of Deaf people in interactions with the Court services has also been reported as being very negative. In civil cases the Deaf person is told by the court clerk that permission to bring an interpreter into court has to be obtained directly from the judge. Apart from the extra trips involved in securing this permission, it invariably results in case adjournments which can be over six months in duration.

The communications inequality recounted by Deaf respondents in seeking public information and services extends across all public departments. In the private sphere the onerous experience with GP appointments and visits has been mentioned several times, particularly the trouble around organising payment for interpreter services. An accompanying obstacle associated with access to many of these public and private services can be the 'simple' matter of negotiating the car-park intercom system for Deaf people.



## Supports used to get information about public services

This question explored the different supports used by Deaf people to assist them in obtaining public information and services.

Table 5.5: Supports used to get information on public services (n=154)

Information source	Number	%
Family/Friends	109	71%
DeafHear	81	53%
Irish Deaf Society (IDS)	77	50%
Deaf clubs/Deaf associations/Deaf resource centres	70	45%
Public organisation websites	57	37%
Citizens Information Centres (CICs)	44	29%
St. Vincent's Deaf CIC [in Deaf Village Ireland]	41	27%
Sign Language Interpreting Service (SLIS)	41	27%
Public organisation leaflets	39	25%
Citizens Information Board website	38	25%
Irish Remote Interpreting Service (IRIS)	32	21%
Other	16	10%

Some 70% of respondents selected Family/Friends as a support they use. Approximately one half of respondents cited DeafHear as a resource, and one half cited the Irish Deaf Society; Deaf Centres/Clubs were mentioned by 45%. Thirty-seven percent of respondents indicated public organisation websites as a source for their information. Citizens Information Centres in general and the St. Vincent's Deaf CIC in Deaf Village Ireland were each selected by just under 30% of respondents, as was the Sign Language Interpreter Service (SLIS). The CIB website was cited by one quarter of respondents as were public organisation leaflets. IRIS was flagged by 21% of respondents and 16 respondents (10%) listed other supports including interpreters, DeafHear social workers, the National Chaplaincy for Deaf People, residential support workers, local T.D. clinics, and local and national newspapers.

## Communication methods used to contact public services from home or workplace

This question examined the communication technologies used to contact public service organisations from the Deaf person's home or workplace (these were not mutually exclusive options).

Table 5.6: Communication methods used to contact public services from home or workplace (n=141)

Communications method	Number	%
E-mail	95	67%
Text messaging (mobile phone)	74	52%
Letter	55	39%
Other (please name):	25	18%
Video relay (Irish Remote Interpreting Service - IRIS)	23	16%
Skype/ooVoo	19	13%
Text relay	12	9%
Textphone (Minicom)	7	5%

Two thirds of respondents selected email as one communication method that they use to contact public service organisations. Just over half indicated text-messaging from their mobile phones as a means of communicating with public services. The traditional letter was still used by 39% of respondents. The Irish Remote Interpreting Service (IRIS) was used by 16%, while Skype or ooVoo was indicated by 13% of respondents. The text relay service was used by 9% of respondents and 5% used Minicom.

Twenty-five respondents availed of the “Other” option to submit a comment on their communication situation: about half of these said they had to rely on family or friends because, while they would be delighted to contact public services by some of the listed technologies such as email, SMS, or text relay, these facilities were not usually provided by the public organisations; they stressed that having to rely on family or friends was a serious infringement of their independence and privacy. Several others commented that they had to resort to going in person to meet the service provider staff face-to-face. One commented on the delay associated with IRIS bookings, saying it meant that IRIS was not a practical solution for them. Two respondents commented positively on the provision of a live customer chat service by Virgin Media and Laya Healthcare.

### **Satisfaction when meeting with staff in public organisations**

Respondents were asked about their satisfaction when meeting with staff in public bodies. A number of issues were explored including if the staff booked an ISL interpreter, whether the quality of the ISL interpreters booked by the staff was acceptable and who paid for the interpreter (Table 5.7 below).

**Table 5.7: Level of satisfaction when meeting with staff in public organisations (n=141)**

	<b>Always</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Never</b>	<b>Number</b>
<b>They have booked an interpreter?</b>	12%	46%	42%	137
<b>The quality of these interpreters is acceptable?</b>	24%	52%	24%	129
<b>Do the public organisations pay for these interpreters?</b>	33%	41%	26%	126
<b>Do you yourself ever have to pay for these interpreters?</b>	2%	20%	78%	129

When asked if staff in public bodies had booked an interpreter, 12% of respondents said they always did and 46% said they sometimes booked an interpreter. 42% of respondents stated that the staff never booked an interpreter for the meeting. Where an interpreter was provided for meetings with staff in public bodies, 74% said they were either always or sometimes happy with the quality of the interpreters while 24% said they were never happy with the quality.

The respondents stated that public bodies generally paid for the interpreter though 26% of respondents said this was not the case.

When asked if they ever had to pay for interpreters when meeting with staff in public organisations, 78% said this was never the case though a fifth stated that they sometimes had to bear the cost.

### **Irish Remote Interpreting Service (IRIS)**

Respondents were asked about their awareness and use of the Irish Remote Interpreting Service (IRIS).

**Table 5.8: Irish Remote Interpreting Service (n=140)**

	Yes	No	Number
<b>Do you know about the Irish Remote Interpreting Service (IRIS)?</b>	66%	34%	138
<b>Have you used Irish Remote Interpreting Service (IRIS)?</b>	33%	67%	135
<b>If yes, were you happy with the service?</b>	59%	41%	70

Two thirds of respondents said they were aware of IRIS but only one third had used the service. Of those that had, approximately 60% said they were happy with the service. The survey invited respondents to submit further comments on the IRIS service and 43 respondents took up this offer: their comments can be grouped under four major themes:

- By far the most frequent comment was that IRIS should be extended both in opening hours and in interpreter staff; many respondents explained that they worked, so they needed IRIS to be available after normal work hours. Several requested a service 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, one person adding that she was Deaf 24/7;
- The delay in getting an IRIS appointment - estimates ranged from 2-3 days to over a week - was making IRIS impractical for many respondents and a source of frustration;
- There were also happy respondents (“I am very lucky to have IRIS, without IRIS I’m lost”; “It is great that IRIS is there”);
- About a third of the comments indicated a lack of awareness of the IRIS service (“I have never heard of IRIS”; “Love to know about it”) or a misunderstanding of how it worked (“too far away”; “It’s just Skype”; “Every time I needed information it always fell late in the afternoon when CIC was closed. So never used IRIS”).

### **Rating of information provided in ISL**

The first of a two-part series of questions asked respondents to rate the provision of information in ISL for a variety of mediums such as public sector websites and in a variety of locations, for example, Intreo offices. It also asked respondents to rate the provision of ISL on television and at public events (Table 5.9 below).

**Table 5.9: Rating of information provided in Irish Sign Language (n=145)**

	Very good	Satisfactory	Poor	Very poor	No.
<b>Websites of public organisations</b>	13%	16%	30%	41%	128
<b>Public locations (Intreo offices; train stations)</b>	5%	14%	26%	55%	129
<b>TV programmes</b>	10%	25%	35%	30%	143
<b>Public events</b>	5%	18%	26%	51%	133

In general, respondents gave a poor rating to the information provided in ISL and this was especially true of public locations where the dissatisfaction rate was over 80% (with 55% of respondents giving a Very poor rating).

Thirty per cent of respondents said the information provided in ISL on public sector websites was Very good or Satisfactory though more than this percentage gave it a Poor or Very poor rating.

The provision of ISL information on TV programmes fared somewhat better; a third of respondents gave this medium a Very good or Satisfactory rating.

Respondents gave a poor overall rating for the provision of information in ISL at public events with 77% saying it was Poor or Very poor.

### Rating of text information and sub-titles

In the second part of this two-part question, respondents gave their feedback on the provision of text information and sub-titles (see Table 5.10).

Table 5.10: Rating the provision of text information and sub-titles (n=141)

	Very good	Satisfactory	Poor	Very poor	No.
Websites of public organisations	4%	22%	40%	34%	123
Public locations (Intreo offices; train stations)	7%	14%	45%	34%	128
TV programmes	17%	35%	35%	14%	139
Public events	5%	18%	26%	51%	133

Respondents gave a similar negative rating (40% said Poor and 34% Very poor) to public sector websites on the provision of text information/sub-titles as they had in the previous section on ISL provision. Likewise provision in public locations was again rated either Poor or Very Poor by 79% of respondents. However, there was more satisfaction with the provision of text information/subtitling by TV programmes than with their ISL signing; 52% of respondents rated the text information/sub-titling as Very Good or Satisfactory.

### Equality and Disability legislation

Respondents were asked about their awareness of their rights under equality and disability legislation and about their ability to make complaints if they felt they were victims of discrimination.

Table 5.11: Equality and Disability legislation [n=143]

	Yes	No
Do you know how to make a complaint if you feel you are being discriminated against by public organisations?	37%	63%
Are you aware of your rights under Ireland's equality and disability legislation?	47%	53%
Has equality and disability legislation improved the access to public information and services for the Deaf Community?	22%	78%
Have you ever made a formal complaint to a public organisation?	31%	69%

Sixty-three percent of respondents did not know how to make a complaint if they felt they were being discriminated against by a public service organisation. More than half of respondents were not aware of their rights under equality and disability legislation. Almost 80% of those who answered the question about the impact of these two pieces of legislation believed that they had made no improvement as regards access to public information and services for the Deaf Community. Asked if they had ever made a formal complaint to a public service organisation, 69% of respondents said they had not.

Fifty-one respondents gave further views in the 'additional comments' section. These all focused on how they would go about making a complaint (very few elaborated on their answers to the legislation awareness question). The comments can be summarised as follows:

- At one end of the spectrum there were strong declarations of independence and confidence to make a complaint - "Usually I am quite able to do it myself"; "As high up the management chain as possible until the matter is sorted"; "direct to HSE and also cc (copy) to Council of Sign Language of Interpreters/SLIS"; "I made a video letter in ISL of my complaint". One mentioned informing the Equality Authority; another cited the Ombudsman;
- At the other end of the spectrum were respondents who acknowledged they lacked confidence: "I am too passive to make a complaint"; "I would love to complain but not able because no interpreter and my poor English";
- About ten respondents indicated that they would seek support from DeafHear; several others indicated the Irish Deaf Society as their support, and some their local Deaf Centre/Club/Society. Other supports mentioned included a CIC website, the Deaf chaplain, SLIS, an Employability officer, and interpreters. Family members were cited by at least six respondents;
- As regards awareness of relevant legislation, one respondent said "Human rights law exists only in word but lacks action"; another that "Many Deaf people aren't confident to do by themselves and not sure where to start, like go to who, or do they know they have a right to complain".

### ***Suggestions for improving access to public information and services***

Respondents were requested to submit ideas for improving access to public information and services. The most frequent suggestion was the promotion of a greater availability of interpreter services. One aspect of this was a call for IRIS availability 24 hours a day, seven days a week and an IRIS marketing campaign including demonstration events to increase uptake by both public and private (banks, solicitors and GPs) service providers. In the case of enhancing the availability of accompanying interpreters, suggestions included encouraging public service providers to employ interpreters as permanent staff; launching a central interpreter booking hub and insisting that public service providers use it; stricter regulation of interpreter qualifications; and providing tokens to the Deaf Community to facilitate their proactive engagement of interpreters.

Allied to the interpreter issue, there were also calls for a more widespread knowledge of ISL in the hearing community. ISL should be taught as a subject in schools and public institutions. Basic alphabet cards should be provided to all public service staff and should be on public office walls so that people could generate some base level of communication.

There were numerous suggestions regarding the enhancement of the communication effectiveness of public service providers. Websites should include captioned videos (though not poor-quality auto-generated captions) and, ideally, ISL videos. Website language should be in plain English. A key concern was the availability of an immediate or 'live' response facility equivalent to a phone number contact for hearing people; in the case of the Deaf Community, this could consist of a dedicated text number, an email contact, a live chat option, or the use of social media websites such as Skype, ooVoo, Viber, Facebook and WhatsApp. It was pointed out that such an immediate response was crucial in the case of emergency services such as Gardaí, ambulance, or fire brigade.

Another prominent suggestion thread was the call for more effective deaf awareness training for public service staff. This should be thorough and continuous. It should make clear the legal rights of the Deaf Community in terms of access to services. It should offer guidance on good practice including a welcoming attitude to Deaf people and an awareness of their needs including the provision of interpreter services - when sending appointment letters it was suggested that public service staff should include a sentence to say that the ISL Interpreter has been booked and that the appointment letter has been copied to the interpreter. In regard to a knowledge of legal rights there were also comments that the Deaf Community itself needed awareness training on this topic.

There were calls for a more updated text relay service that would be accessible through mobile phones and not just through the outdated Minicom technology. (A new relay service was put in place in 2017 after the research was carried out). More widespread provision and better-quality subtitling and ISL was requested for television, cinema and theatre. Cinema subtitling tended to be offered at unfriendly hours ("10 a.m. Mondays"). Certain television stations were lagging in provision of quality captioning. Very few theatre shows catered for the Deaf Community by providing ISL signing.

The Travel sector was also mentioned as an important area where improvements were needed. The increasing use of information screens in public buses and trains was welcomed, but more needed to be done in terms of providing visual directions and public information screens in stations. Guide transcriptions were also lacking in tour coaches.

### Profile data

Data on the profile of respondents was sought at the end of the survey to ensure the research focus was maintained on their information needs and their experience of accessing public services. This profile information relating to gender, age, nationality and other other criteria is set out in the following tables.

#### Gender

Just under two-thirds of the respondents were female and 35% were male.

Table 5.12: Gender (n=144)

Gender	%
Male	35%
Female	65%

#### Age category

Sixty-nine per cent of respondents to this question were in the 30-59 age bracket of which 37% were in the 30-44 age category and 32% were in the 45-59 age group.

Ten per cent of respondents were in the 18-29 age group while 21% were in the 60+ age bracket.

Table 5.13: Age category (n=143)

Age category	%
18-29	10%
30-44	37%
45-59	32%
Over 60	21%

#### County where they live

Respondents were asked to indicate the county in which they lived.

Table 5.14: County where they live (n=143)

County	Number
Dublin	61
Cork	17
Kerry	8
Meath	7
Wexford	6

County	Number
Donegal	5
Galway	5
Louth	5
Kildare	4
Limerick	4

County	Number
Clare	3
Kilkenny	3
Monaghan	3
Mayo	2
Tipperary	2

County	Number
Waterford	2
Wicklow	2
Carlow	1
Cavan	1
Longford	1
Offaly	1

Dublin was the overwhelming leader, the home of 61 (43%) of this question's 143 respondents. Next came Cork with 17 (12%) respondents, followed by Kerry on 6% (8 respondents), Wexford, Donegal, Galway and Louth all on 4% (5 respondents), and Kildare and Limerick on 3% (4 respondents). Clare, Kilkenny and Monaghan each had 3 respondents (2%) while Mayo, Tipperary, Waterford and Wicklow had two each (1%). Carlow, Cavan, Longford and Offaly had one respondent each, while Leitrim, Roscommon, Sligo and Westmeath had no respondents to the question.

The predominance of Dublin respondents must be borne in mind in analysing results where proximity to public services and also to Deaf support services has a significant bearing on the responses.

### **Type of location**

The vast majority of respondents lived in an urban area with 41% saying they lived in a city and 29% saying they lived in a town. The remainder of the respondents were equally split between those who said they lived in a village (15%) and those who said they lived in a rural location (15%).

**Table 5.15: Type of location (n=142)**

<b>Location</b>	<b>%</b>
City	41%
Town	29%
Village	15%
Rural location (in the country)	15%

### **Nationality**

Ninety-three per cent of respondents gave their nationality as Irish while 7% said they were non-Irish.

**Table 5.16: Nationality (n=141)**

<b>Nationality</b>	<b>%</b>
Irish	93%
Non-Irish	7%

### **Primary and secondary education**

Respondents were asked to specify whether they received primary and secondary level education in a school for Deaf and Hard of Hearing children, in a class for Deaf and Hard of Hearing children in a mainstream school or in a mainstream class in a mainstream school.

The majority of respondents attended a school for Deaf and Hard of Hearing children for both primary and second level. However, just under a quarter of respondents (23%) said they attended a mainstream primary school and 19% said they went to a mainstream secondary school.

A small number of respondents attended more than one type of school for both primary and second level education.

Table 5.17: Primary and secondary education (n=139)

	School for Deaf and Hard of Hearing children	Class for Deaf and Hard of Hearing children in a mainstream school	Mainstream class in a mainstream school	Numbers
Primary level	73%	8%	23%	131
Secondary level	85%	4%	19%	117

### *Highest education level attained*

Forty-two per cent of respondents said they had a third level qualification while 19% stated that their highest educational level attained was primary level.

A quarter of the respondents indicated that they had attained the Junior Certificate or Intermediate Certificate. 15% said their highest education level attained was the Leaving Certificate.

The high percentage of respondents with a third level qualification indicates that the survey attracted Deaf people who were comfortable responding to a questionnaire in English and thus may not be representative of the Deaf Community as a whole.

Table 5.18: Highest education level attained (n=129)

Education level	%
Primary	19%
Junior Certificate/Intermediate Certificate	25%
Leaving Certificate	15%
Third level qualification	42%

### *Frequency of use of Sign Language*

Respondents were asked to indicate the frequency with which they used sign language. Eighty per cent of the 140 respondents indicated daily use of sign language. Ten per cent said they used sign language at least once a week. For 8% the frequency was "only sometimes", and 2% said they never used sign language.

Table 5.19: Frequency of use of Sign Language (n=140)

Regularity	No.	%
Every day	112	80%
At least once a week	14	10%
Only sometimes	11	8%
Never	3	2%



## Current employment situation

Just over 40% of respondents said they were employed while a further 6% said they were self-employed. 16% of the respondents said they were unemployed and a further 10% said they were out of work due to illness or a disability. A smaller percentage of respondents gave their current status as a student or home-maker (6% each). Respondents indicating that they were retired accounted for the balance at 16%.

Table 5.20: Current employment situation (n=135)

Current situation	No.	%
Student	8	6%
Employed	55	41%
Self-employed	8	6%
Unemployed	22	16%
Out of work due to illness or a disability	13	10%
Home maker	8	6%
Retired	21	16%

## 5.3 Summary

Responses from the 'context questions' section of the online survey paint the following picture of the respondents' profile:

- 70% were aged between 30 and 59;
- 43% were located in Dublin and 12% in Cork; only 30% lived in a rural setting;
- 43% had attained a 3rd level qualification; 19% had only a primary-level education;
- 41% were in employment, 6% were self-employed, 16% unemployed, 16% retired.

Social Welfare, Health, Money/Tax, Employment and Education were among the key public service areas interfaced.

Accessibility and responsiveness of public information provision was scored very negatively across several dimensions.

Likewise the experience of Deaf respondents in accessing public services was scored either Very Good or Satisfactory by only a third of respondents. Interacting face-to-face with public sector staff was scored very negatively in terms of Deaf awareness and interpreter provision.

Respondents elaborated on these predominantly negative perceptions in an open question and the main themes emerged clearly: poor website design, deficient staff awareness training, inadequate interpreter services provision.

Asked what supports they used to assist them in accessing public information and services, the option Family and Friends was the clear leader, followed by Deaf support organisations and Deaf resource centres; CICs, SLIS and IRIS also featured strongly.

Email and texting were indicated as favoured methods of communicating with public service providers but these modes of contact were not on offer from a majority of public service organisations.

The IRIS service was known to some two thirds of respondents (indicating more marketing is required in the Deaf Community) and used by a half of these; 60% of users expressed satisfaction.

The use of ISL by websites, television programmes, public locations, and public events was judged to be very unsatisfactory. Likewise the low-level use of subtitling was criticised in these arenas though television programme subtitling was regarded as satisfactory by half of respondents.

More than half of respondents were unaware of their rights under Irish equality and disability legislation. More than 60% did not know how to go about making a complaint if they felt they were being discriminated against by public service organisations.

# Chapter 6: Consultation with public service providers

## 6.1 Introduction

The following sub-section provides an overview of the main government departments and organisations with which the Deaf Community interacts on a regular basis. The profiles presented below are based on both interviews with relevant officials in the organisations concerned and on an analysis of official documentation (service plans, policy statements, customer charters and statistics).

The interviews with these service providers had a number of objectives including whether they provided specific supports and assistance to Deaf people and in particular the extent to which they provided ISL interpreters to Deaf users. The interviews also sought to elicit whether the organisations contacted included a specific reference to the Deaf Community in their customer service plans.

## 6.2 Public service providers

The main public organisations surveyed were the Department of Social Protection (now Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection), the Health Service Executive (HSE), the Department of Education and Skills, Revenue and the Courts Service.

The relevant CIB supports and initiatives to assist the Deaf Community are also profiled.

### Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection /Intreo

The Department's Customer Charter and Action Plan<sup>33</sup> sets out its commitments to providing a professional, efficient and courteous service to all its customers. Specific commitments are included relating to the provision of interpretive and translation services and the provision of information in alternative formats such as Braille or Audio.

The following services are provided to customers where required:

- A translation service for documents required to process a claim;
- A language interpretive service provided by 3-way phone conversation;
- A face-to-face service, where an accredited language interpreter attends in person, to facilitate customer/staff interaction;
- A Sign Language interpreter to facilitate customer/staff interaction;
- Written information or application forms in Braille, Audio or Large Print.

The Department states that a customer who requires any of the services outlined above should contact their nearest Intreo Centre, Local or Branch Office or the office dealing with their claim.

#### *Provision of ISL interpreters*

DEASP has made concerted promotional efforts, for example, through circulars and its internal staff portal, to make staff aware that it is Departmental policy that they should provide ISL interpreting services to Deaf people wishing to interact with officials - even if the service user had not requested it.

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33. [http://www.welfare.ie/en/downloads/DSP\\_CustomerCharter\\_EN\\_2016-2018.pdf](http://www.welfare.ie/en/downloads/DSP_CustomerCharter_EN_2016-2018.pdf)

The Department recognises that awareness of this policy is not yet as comprehensive as it would wish either among staff or the Deaf Community and it also recognises that there is a timing issue - it is not possible therefore for a Deaf person to walk into any of its offices and be guaranteed that an interpreter would be available at short notice. In any case, the Department says that in terms of its Intreo office networks, most visits are made on an appointment basis. The Department is aware that in some regions, the availability of ISL interpreters is an issue.

The Department has initiated a process under which IRIS will be installed in Intreo offices; in the short term, one Intreo office in each of its 13 regions was due to have IRIS by the end of 2017 and the intention over the longer term is to roll out the IRIS service to the remaining offices. The Department anticipates that initial conversations in Intreo offices with Deaf service users would be undertaken through IRIS and a more in-depth meeting would then be arranged at a later date with an ISL interpreter present.

### **Demand for ISL interpreting service**

The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection<sup>34</sup> keeps a record of the demand for both Irish Sign Language and spoken language (for example Chinese) interpreting services. Table 6.1 below shows the requests for interpreters for 2013–2016. The requests are classified under three headings: Irish Sign Language; Language interpreting (in person, where the interpreter is present in the Intreo office with the client and Intreo official); and Language interpreting (three-way by phone, where all three are on the same telephone conversation).

The Department has contracted an agency to provide in-person ISL interpreting services. There were 16 requests for ISL interpreters in 2013, 18 in 2014, 30 in 2015 and 36 in 2016. Requests for language interpreters (both in person and three-way by phone) during 2013–2016 significantly exceeded requests for ISL interpreters.

**Table 6.1: Requests for interpreters processed by the Department of Social Protection, 2013–2016**

<b>Period</b>	<b>Irish Sign Language interpreting</b>	<b>Language interpreting (in person)</b>	<b>Language interpreting (three way by phone)</b>
2016	36	545	560
2015	30	460	212
2014	18	302	246
2013	16	288	204

(Source: DSP)

### **Access Officers**

DEASP has appointed 13 Access Officers under the Disability Act 2005 each of whom has responsibility in relation to access to information on specific programme/functional areas, for example, the Child Benefit scheme. These staff members already have a number of primary roles in addition to their Access Officer role. In addition, DEASP has appointed an Access Officer for each of its 13 Intreo regions.

The DEASP website provides contact details of the Access Officers for the major Departmental programmes and Intreo regions. The extent to which staff receive training to undertake their Access Officer role is not known. However, most DEASP frontline personnel would have or can avail of disability awareness training provided by the Department. Staff are circularised on training programmes organised by the Staff Development Unit via the Department’s internal portal (Stór).

34. <http://www.welfare.ie/en/downloads/CustomerCharterActionPlan2013-2015.pdf>

## DEASP Complaints and Redress procedure

In addition to a general complaints procedure<sup>35</sup>, DEASP has installed a specific process for people with disabilities who experience difficulty in accessing its facilities and services, as legislated for under the Disability Act 2005. If DEASP fails to comply with Sections 25, 26, 27 or 28 of the Act, a person with a disability is entitled to make a complaint against the Department. These sections relate to access to DEASP public buildings, schemes, services and information, as well as to services supplied by the Department. In accordance with Section 39 (2) of the Act, such a complaint can be made directly by the person, or through their spouse/partner, parent or guardian, or a person acting in loco parentis to the individual. A legal representative, a personal advocate assigned by the Citizens Information Board (CIB), or another person advocating on behalf of the individual with his or her consent can also lodge the grievance. If unhappy with the DEASP response to the complaint, it is possible to contact the Office of the Ombudsman.

## DEASP Website

The Department has published a video which provides viewers with an overview of how to use its services. It is located on its home page and is entitled "Video guide to the website"<sup>36</sup>. It is in spoken English with ISL and sub-titles. The guide was a result of discussions that DEASP held with the Deaf Community on how it could best help Deaf people (and visitors to the website who may have literacy difficulties) to gain an understanding of its schemes and supports. External ISL interpreting expertise was sought for the making of the video. The sub-titles make it accessible to Hard of Hearing customers. The video is regarded as a first step and further Deaf-friendly initiatives may be undertaken.

## Health Service Executive (HSE)

In a memo to Regional Directors of Operations in June 2013, the HSE informed its staff that the Disability Act 2005 and the Equal Status Act 2004 placed a legal duty on health and social care providers to ensure that services provided are accessible and to make provision for a person's disability which included the provision of a qualified sign language interpreter. It warned staff that failure to make appropriate provision for a person's communication difficulty might result in avoidable serious risks and errors for both the patient and health care provider. The HSE memo also emphasised the importance of making management and staff aware that patients and service users are legally entitled to request and be provided with a qualified sign language interpreter. It noted that the cost must be borne by the service as it is considered an integral part of the service being provided and it legally protects both the health service provider and the patients/service users. Finally, the memo states that under no circumstance were patients/service users expected to bear the cost of an interpreter.

Another HSE memo in 2014 provided additional clarity around the provision of ISL interpreters for medical card holders attending their GP. It reminded senior managers that the engagement of an interpreter is an integral part of the service being provided. It stated that interpreting services were essential to assist GPs to gather relevant information in order to make the correct diagnosis and in the process of gaining informed consent. The memo explained that there was no provision made for GPs to pay for an interpreter for medical card holders and said that this matter required urgent attention as there had been increased incidences of GPs refusing to provide ISL interpreters. It was pointed out that it was essential that provision was made to ensure that service users could access GPs with the assistance of a qualified interpreter in a timely manner. It said that pending completion of national guidance on this issue, GPs may arrange a qualified ISL interpreter to attend an appointment for a medical card holder whose primary language is ISL. The cost of providing the ISL interpreter would be borne by the Area Manager's Office. An obligation was placed on the Office to keep a record of the costs borne in order to inform further planning around the development of a model for the provision of an interpreting service.

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35. <http://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/How-to-Make-a-Comment-or-Complaint-to-the-Department.aspx>

36. <http://www.welfare.ie/>

The HSE/National Disability Authority National Guidelines on accessible health and social care services provide advice to staff on how to communicate with a Deaf person and with a person who uses Irish Sign Language, as described in Section 2.10. The guidelines re-affirm that patients and service users are entitled to request and be provided with a qualified sign language interpreter. They state that while the onus is on the service user to request an interpreter, it is the responsibility of staff to make the arrangements.

### **HSE Access Officers**

The HSE established an internal Implementation Overseeing Group to monitor and oversee compliance with Part 3 of the Disability Act. The Group worked closely with the NDA to develop its guidelines for improving the accessibility of health services for people with disabilities in Ireland.

A National Specialist in Accessibility was recruited to link with all function and service domains of the HSE as well as other stakeholders such as the NDA, voluntary service providers, advocacy groups and service users to produce an overall plan for implementing Part 3 of the Disability Act (Access to Buildings and Services and Sectoral Plans). The Specialist's role is to offer guidance, advice and strategic support to assist in the promotion of access activities.

A total of 230 Access Officers have been appointed for all Hospital Groups and Community Health Organisations; the contact details for the Access Officers are available on the HSE website<sup>37</sup>.

These staff members have other primary functions and being an Access Officer is an additional duty that they undertake. Their role is to support HSE staff members in assisting patients and service users to access the health care system. The Access Officers have been provided with a one-day training session in disability issues; the training course was specially developed by the HSE with inputs from internal experts and from relevant disability support organisations.

The Access Officers also have access to information and supports from senior HSE access specialists. They have been encouraged to set up their own oversight committees, and a number of them have formed informal networks to exchange information.

There has been no evaluation of the HSE Access Officers and while 230 were appointed, a number of these have changed jobs and in some cases replacements have not been appointed. An evaluation might indicate if there are gaps in their awareness of difficulties faced by patients/service users with specific disabilities in accessing HSE services. Once identified, these knowledge gaps could then be addressed by additional training input.

There are also no formal communication structures within the HSE such as a staff intranet to facilitate the Access Officers to exchange information and best practice.

Members of the Deaf Community have a number of avenues open to them if they wish to make a complaint relating to access to HSE health and social care services. In the first instance, they can make their complaint to the senior manager of the unit where they experienced unsatisfactory service. They can also submit a complaint under the HSE's "Your Service Your Say" complaints procedure. If their grievance concerns non-compliance with Part 2 of the Disability Act 2005, they can make a complaint to the Complaints Officer for Disability Services (complaints relating to Part 3 are now dealt with on a local basis). Although the HSE collects and collates details on the categories of the complaints made by service users, only the name and contact details of the complainant are kept; hence it is not possible to correlate the complainant with the nature of the complaint.

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37. <http://www.hse.ie/eng/services/yourhealthservice/access/AccessOfficers/>

## **SLIS-HSE pilot funding scheme for interpreters for GP appointments**

The provision by the HSE of ISL interpreter services takes place within a wide number of locations. The budget for this provision depends on which sector (hospital, community healthcare clinic, GP surgery) the interaction takes place. Concern on the part of General Practitioners over payment issues for providing ISL interpreters for visits by their Deaf medical card patients was a prime factor in the establishment by the HSE in conjunction with SLIS of a pilot scheme<sup>38</sup> whereby Deaf people with a HSE medical or GP visit card can book a sign language interpreter through SLIS for their GP appointments. While the HSE was committed to providing ISL interpreters for health appointments, in practice there was no clear process in place to book an interpreter. At this stage the funding can only be used to pay for an interpreter for Deaf people with a HSE medical card or GP visit card, but it is hoped that the scheme will be expanded in the future so that all Deaf people will have access to interpreters for their GP appointments.

When a Deaf person wants to book an appointment with their GP and to have a sign language interpreter present, they contact SLIS first. SLIS contacts the GP, books the interpreter, and lets the Deaf person know the date of the appointment and the name of the interpreter. SLIS pays the interpreter on behalf of the HSE.

### **HSE website**

The HSE has prepared video content for publication on its website specifically for the Deaf Community. The HSE website currently features an ISL video that provides a guide to applying for a medical card.<sup>39</sup>

The HSE is seeking to embed Universal Design principles in its digital plans and this may result in additional content which is suitable for Deaf people.

## **Department of Education and Skills**

The Department of Education and Skills provides an extensive range of supports to assist pupils who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing.

### **Primary and Post-Primary Level**

In line with the Department's policy that children with special educational needs access appropriate education intervention in mainstream settings where possible, many Deaf or Hard of Hearing pupils are integrated into mainstream classes at primary and post-primary level with additional supports such as additional resource teaching and Special Needs Assistant (SNA) support being provided.

Other children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing may attend special schools or classes, for which lower pupil teacher ratios are provided.

Funding is also provided for a weekly home tuition service whereby tutors visit the homes of Deaf and Hard of Hearing pre-school children and school-going pupils to provide training in Irish Sign Language (ISL) for these children, their siblings and parents.

A dedicated Visiting Teacher Service for children and young people with a hearing impairment is provided from the time of referral through to third level education. It provides advice and support to ensure that the needs of children and young people with hearing impairment are met. It is available at pre-school, primary and post-primary levels. The service is staffed by qualified teachers with particular skills and knowledge of the development and education of children with varying degrees of hearing and visual impairment. It offers

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38. <https://www.deafhear.ie/DHFiles/docs/SLIS%20GP%20poster%20Oct%202016.pdf>- poster advertising the Fund

39. <http://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/1/schemes/mc/focuson/apply.605623.shortcut.html>

longitudinal support to children, their families and schools from the time of referral through to the end of post-primary education [see National Council for Special Education (2011)]. A review of the Visiting Teacher service for children who are hearing impaired has been completed and published.

Additional supports provided include funding for specialised equipment for pupils who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing, special transport arrangements, enhanced levels of capitation in special schools and special classes as well as additional teacher training.

A number of the recommendations contained in the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) policy advice paper on the Education of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children in Ireland have been implemented, or are currently being implemented.

This includes the rolling out of a Universal New born Hearing Screening Programme, the provision of \ information to parents in relation to services available to children with a hearing impairment, the provision of Irish Sign Language support for children and their families, and the establishment of new special classes and new early intervention special classes for children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing.

DES Circular 30/2014, in relation to the Special Needs Assistant Scheme, also contains specific provisions, as recommended by the NCSE policy advice paper, in relation to the provision of SNA Support for Children with a hearing impairment. The circular provided that children with acute sensory impairment such as a hearing impairment have particular and distinct care needs which are of a non-teaching nature, but where the assistance of SNA support is required for those pupils to be able to attend school and to be able to access the curriculum.

SNAs can assist in providing access to peer interaction and curriculum participation for pupils who have a hearing impairment and who communicate through sign language. They may also assist in the care and preparation of audiological and assistive technology equipment.

The Departments of Health and Education along with the Health Service Executive and the Visiting Teacher service have also developed and agreed new co-operative working structures, as recommended by the NCSE paper.

### ***Use of Irish Sign Language in the education system***

Section 2 of the Official Languages Act 2003 states that “the official languages” of the State are (a) the Irish language (being the national language and the first official language) and (b) the English language (being a second official language) as specified in Article 8 of the Constitution.

Although Irish Sign Language (ISL) has only recently been formally recognised in the Irish Sign Language Act 2017, it already had formal recognition in the Education Act 1998. Under the Act, it is a function of the Minister for Education and Skills to ensure, subject to the provisions of the Act, that there is made available to each person resident in the State, including a person with a disability or who has other special educational needs, support services and a level and quality of education appropriate to meeting the needs and abilities of that person. This includes provision for students learning through ISL.

A number of initiatives which seek to promote, develop and implement ISL in order that it will achieve greater recognition and use in the education system are currently in place. These include:

- Special schools for the deaf/hearing impaired have been encouraged in relation to the use of sign language in class;



- Funding for an ISL weekly home tuition service whereby deaf tutors visit the homes of deaf pre-school children and deaf school-going pupils to provide training in ISL for deaf children, pupils, their siblings and parents;
- Funding is also made available through the Special Education Support Service (SESS) to enable individual teachers and whole school staff to undertake courses in Irish Sign Language which are available throughout the country through a variety of providers.

The Department, through its Post-Primary Languages Initiative, has also developed a specification for a short course in Irish Sign Language (ISL) which will be available as part of the new Junior Cycle. In this course the emphasis is on developing communication skills in ISL at level A1 (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). It develops students' ability to understand ISL in live and in recorded situations, to produce the language and to interact with other signers in a simple way on familiar topics.

### **Higher Education**

Significant resources are also provided to ensure that students, including pupils who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing, can participate fully in third level academic courses and are not disadvantaged by reason of a disability.

The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 has targeted measures to increase higher education participation by groups that are under-represented including people with disabilities. The target for participation by students who are Deaf/Hard of Hearing is to increase the current figure of 210 to 280. The targets were due to be reviewed in 2017.

The Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) provides full-time students with disabilities in higher and further education colleges with supports such as additional tuition/learning support, the purchase of assistive technologies, targeted transport services, sign language assistance/interpreters and personal assistants. Almost 10,000 students benefitted under this fund in 2014/15.

The Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) is a third level alternative admissions scheme for school-leavers whose disabilities have had a negative impact on their second level education. DARE offers reduced points places to school leavers who as a result of having a disability have experienced additional educational challenges in second level education. The scheme is managed by the higher education institutions.

The Department of Education and Skills will continue to support and assist pupils who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing to fully participate in education while continuing to further implement the recommendations of the NCSE policy advice paper on the Education of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children in Ireland.

### **Further education and training**

SOLAS supports people with hearing difficulties wishing to attend FET course provision in three different ways.

Mainstream FET course provision: Learners with hearing difficulties wishing to attend courses are supported on an individual basis, based on a discussion/assessment of their specific learning needs/supports at guidance or registration stages, onto their chosen courses.

Specialist training FET provision: Learners with more profound hearing difficulties wishing to attend courses are supported on an individual basis based on a discussion/assessment of their specific learning needs/supports at guidance or registration stages onto their chosen courses.

Specific FET course provision by the Deaf Community: SOLAS funds the Irish Deaf Society to provide training for 220 deaf learners in a range of training programmes, and for Deaf Adult Literacy Services (DALs)<sup>40</sup>.

Classes are provided through the students' first language - Irish Sign Language, except for non-nationals. A trend of non-national deaf students seeking to improve their English has been observed. They learn English/Irish Sign Language through "International Sign Language". No other organisation in Ireland is able to facilitate these classes.

### **Other supports**

The Department's headquarters has a trained official who uses Irish Sign Language to facilitate communication through interpretation. The official is also available via phone video link/Skype should any other Department offices require this service.

In addition, an Audio Frequency Induction Loop facility is available at the Department's two main reception areas in Dublin and Athlone. The device is a wire that circles a room and is connected to a sound system. The loop transmits the sound electromagnetically and the signal is then picked up by the telecoil hearing aid or cochlear implant.

## **Revenue**

Revenue's Customer Service Standards state that it will ensure that its offices and services are accessible to people with special needs and that the appropriate level of service is available to enable them to conduct their business.

An Irish Sign Language interpreter service can be provided on request for customers who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing. Revenue has appointed three Access Officers in accordance with its obligations under the Disability Act 2005 and they are responsible for ensuring that an ISL interpreter service is provided where requested. Revenue does not, however, keep a record of the number of times that an ISL interpreter was requested by staff but estimates this to be minimal, less than 10 a year.

Revenue has been approached in relation to IRIS and while it had not investigated the cost of the service at the time the research was carried out, it believes it has the potential to be an effective solution to allow the Deaf Community to interact with staff.

The only signed information available on Revenue's website relates to the Local Property Tax given that it was a relatively new tax and had wide applicability.

### **Disability training**

Revenue's Training Branch hosts an online course on disability equality training, developed by the National Disability Authority<sup>41</sup>. The Training Branch also offers a tutor-led disability equality training course which is available to groups of staff with a specialised interest in this area. The course explores and examines disability in an equality context and covers areas such as defining disability, attitudes, equality and legislation. It includes participation in practical exercises. Both courses feature a short section on Deaf awareness.

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40. DALs initiated a new subject, Deafhood, which emerged in the UK and has gone on to be a worldwide subject within the Deaf Community. Coined by Dr. Paddy Ladd from the UK, based on his book "Understanding Deaf Culture: In search of Deafhood" - its main objective is for Deaf people themselves to explore issues of who they are today. It is heavily related to their personal development and building up their confidence and self-esteem.

41. <http://nda.ie/Resources/eLearning/>

The Training Branch also provides course information and access to staff on an online equality course hosted by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission. This course was designed for frontline workers in the public sector and provides an introduction to equality in service delivery.

There is a Disability Liaison Officer within Revenue to provide assistance to employees with disabilities.

## The Courts Service

The Courts Service says that Irish Sign Language interpreters are provided where Deaf people are involved in:

- Criminal law cases;
- Family law cases (though this is at the discretion of the judge - there is no absolute entitlement as there is for criminal law cases).

The Courts Service says that in civil cases it is up to the plaintiff or the defendant to pay for the provision of Irish Sign Language interpreters. The same rules in relation to criminal law, family law and civil law cases apply to the provision of language interpreters.

Responsibility for hiring Irish Sign Language interpreters for Deaf people involved in criminal or family law cases rests with the Courts Service; however, a Deaf person can suggest an ISL interpreter of their own choice if they feel more comfortable using that person.

Data is not collected centrally on the number of times that an ISL interpreter has been requested for a criminal or family law case. Requests for interpreters can be made by a local court office, a regional administrative office or head office.

The Courts Service does not currently provide any information in ISL either via its website or in terms of signage within its buildings.

The Courts Service has appointed an Access Officer to assist people with disabilities to access information and services. The number of complaints made by Deaf people in relation to information access and service provision is negligible.

Staff within the Courts Service have had limited exposure to disability awareness training. The Courts Service is planning to make the NDA elearning disability awareness module available to its staff.

## Citizens Information Board

Relevant CIB initiatives that seek to assist the Deaf Community include:

- Sign Language Interpreting Service (SLIS);
- National Advocacy Service (NAS);
- AssistIreland.ie;
- Citizens Information Service network, in particular St Vincent's Deaf Citizens Information Centre (CIC);
- Live Advisor;
- Commissioned research.

As described in Section 2.7 above, SLIS promotes, represents, advocates and ensures the availability of quality interpretation services to Deaf people in Ireland.

The National Advocacy Service for People with Disabilities (NAS) provides an independent, confidential and free representative advocacy service for people with disabilities. NAS has a particular remit for people with disabilities who are isolated from their community and services, have communication differences, are inappropriately accommodated, live in residential services, attend day services and have limited informal or natural supports.

Assistireland.ie contains information on daily living aids, mobility aids and assistive technology. It includes a directory of products available from suppliers for people with disabilities and older people.

The network of Citizens Information Services (CISs) which is supported and funded by the Citizen Information Board provides information, advice and advocacy services through its Citizens Information Centres (CICs). The Dublin North West CIS operates the St Vincent's Deaf CIC located at Deaf Village Ireland. Many CISs have signed up to IRIS and it is planned to roll out access to all CISs by the end of 2018.

Live Advisor<sup>42</sup> is a free, confidential, one-to-one online service that provides information on a wide range of social and civil rights and entitlements aimed at for people with hearing and speech difficulties. Live Advisor allows the Deaf person to chat directly with an Information Provider in a chat-room-type environment. It is available through the Citizens Information Phone Service and is funded by the Citizens Information Board.

CIB also commissions research in identifying needs and issues in relation to the Deaf Community - this report is part of that series.

## 6.3 Summary

The majority of public sector organisations profiled in this Chapter have policy and service provision commitments that specify that they will provide ISL interpreters for meetings involving Deaf people. For example, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Revenue and the HSE state they will provide a Sign Language interpreter to facilitate customer-staff interactions.

Details on the expenditure and the number of times that ISL interpreters have been requested for meetings involving Deaf customers are difficult to access as in most cases the data on usage is not collated. The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection was able, however, to provide information on the number of times an ISL interpreter was required for customer-staff interactions over the last three years. This points to a low awareness among staff and/or members of the Deaf Community that the DEASP/Intreo will provide an ISL interpreter for appointments involving Deaf people.

A number of the organisations surveyed had signed up for IRIS, and the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection is committed to having IRIS installed in one Intreo office in each of its thirteen regions by the end of 2017. The HSE is piloting a funding protocol for ISL interpreters for GP visits by Deaf medical card holders.

While there are examples of good practice and pilot initiatives, the amount of information provided by the service organisations profiled in this chapter that might be considered as Deaf-friendly, is limited.

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42. <http://www.citizensinformationboard.ie/en/services/accessibility/liveadvisor.html>

The researchers' consultations with public organisations indicate that while some staff members - particularly those with responsibility for disability issues - had an understanding of the needs of the Deaf Community, this was not always the case with other officials. Many in the latter category had difficulty distinguishing the information and service provision requirements of Deaf people from Hard of Hearing people. The consultants' conversations with officials also indicated that there was a need for the provision of disability awareness training to staff.

The public organisations surveyed have appointed Access Officers in compliance with the Disability Act 2005. These are responsible for providing or arranging for and co-ordinating the provision of assistance and guidance to persons with disabilities in accessing services and generally to act as a point of contact for people with disabilities wishing to access such services. They carry out the task of Access Officer in addition to their normal work responsibilities. It is understood that some public organisations have yet to evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of their Access Officers. Additionally, there is also limited evidence to indicate that Access Officers network to exchange information on best practice.

# Chapter 7: Conclusions and recommendations

## 7.1 Conclusions

### Definition

For the purposes of this study, the Deaf Community is defined as people with a profound hearing loss whose first language is Irish Sign Language. This definition is readily understood within the Deaf Community but less so among external stakeholders. Public organisations interviewed during the study frequently used the term “deaf” to include both Deaf and Hard of Hearing people.

### Access to Irish Sign Language interpreters

For members of the Deaf Community, having ready access to ISL interpreters in their dealings with public organisations is of utmost importance. This is especially true for interactions relating to medical or legal matters but other areas can be equally important such as education and employment. The interviews with Deaf representative organisations and the results of the online survey both point to a high degree of dissatisfaction among members of the Deaf Community in terms of current access levels.

There are some examples of good practice in relation to the provision of ISL interpreters but they are seldom government-wide - it is acknowledged that the higher and further education sectors have a good record in this regard; however, Deaf parents of Deaf children point to difficulties in securing the agreement of primary schools to provide ISL interpreters for parent-teacher meetings. The consultation with the Deaf Community also reveals dissatisfaction with public organisations in terms of their failure to provide ISL interpreters for follow-up meetings that have been scheduled long in advance.

A number of public organisations specify in their customer charter or on their website that they are committed to providing ISL interpreters for meetings/interactions involving members of the Deaf Community. There is often, however, a significant disconnect between the aspirations of public organisations to facilitate Deaf people to access their information and services by providing Irish Sign Language interpreters, and awareness of this commitment by frontline staff. Members of the Deaf Community say that they are often left angry and frustrated when they seek ISL interpreters in the offices of public organisations that have a stated commitment to provide interpreters, only for officials to refuse this provision through lack of awareness of their own organisation’s policy in this area.

The research indicates that public organisations routinely seek to update staff members by circulars and notices on their intranets on their commitments to Deaf people. However, internal staff mobility and the volume of inter-organisational messages can often result in front-line staff not being aware of their organisation’s commitments in relation to the provision of ISL interpreters. Interviews with Deaf representative organisations reveal that they often have to inform or remind staff in large public organisations that their employer has declared a willingness to provide ISL interpreting assistance for Deaf clients/service users.

This study has found that records are usually not kept on the number of requests for interpreter services by staff in public organisations where there is a commitment to provide ISL interpretation at meetings with Deaf people nor are there details of expenditure on ISL interpreter provision. This lack of data makes it difficult to assess the extent to which public organisations follow through on their commitments to provide ISL interpreters. An analysis of the data supplied by public organisations that do monitor ISL provision, whether formally or otherwise, indicates low levels of requests on the part of staff for ISL interpreters. This may reflect a lack of awareness on the part of staff but also on the part of members of the Deaf Community who may be unaware that the public organisation has made a commitment to provide ISL interpreters.

The Deaf Community give a poor rating to public organisations in relation to their lack of Deaf-friendly signage within their offices and, in the case of public transport providers, within their bus and train stations. In the case of public organisations that do not have any stated policies or commitment to provide ISL interpreters for Deaf clients/service users, requests from the Deaf Community to have ISL interpreters may be decided on a case-by-case basis. Members of the Deaf Community noted with disquiet that some public bodies proclaim their efforts to translate organisation information into spoken languages such as Polish or Russian but ignore the needs of Irish Deaf people whose first language is ISL.

Members of the Deaf Community are often compelled to use family members, friends, neighbours or staff from Deaf representative/advocacy groups to translate at meetings in public organisations where an ISL interpreter is not provided or is not available or booked. This can be distressing to Deaf people as the subject of the meetings may relate to confidential health or legal issues. Deaf people feel disempowered by having to use an intermediary known to them rather than a professional ISL interpreter.

## Supply of Irish Sign Language interpreters

ISL has recently been recognised as an official language and consequently there is a legal obligation on statutory bodies to provide ISL interpreters. There are issues currently with the availability of trained ISL interpreters, particularly outside urban areas. The Deaf Community also points to difficulties booking interpreters during school/college term-time as many ISL interpreters are engaged in assisting Deaf students to progress their education.

Deaf representative organisations have expressed concern at the low numbers graduating from the Trinity ISL interpreter's degree programme; only 4 students were expected to qualify from the programme as ISL interpreters in the most recent academic year. That concern was heightened in the context of their campaign to have ISL recognised as an official language.

Some of the public organisations contacted during the course of this study indicated that they had experienced difficulties in sourcing ISL interpreters while others said they were not aware of any issues in this regard.

The shortage of interpreters with specialist expertise in medical and legal interpreting is also of huge concern to the Deaf Community. If a Deaf person needs to discuss a medical issue with their doctor, accuracy in the translation of their condition is of paramount importance.

A significant number of ISL interpreters are not currently working in the profession. There have been calls within the Deaf Community for the government to introduce initiatives to encourage people in this category to resume their careers as interpreters. The introduction of a scheme similar to the Finnish voucher initiative would not only enable Deaf people to have access to a fixed amount of interpreting services but would at the same time provide interpreters with a more stable level of income.

New initiatives are urgently needed to increase the supply of ISL interpreters. The options here include the expansion of student numbers on the TCD course and the introduction of degree courses incorporating blended learning. Longer term measures might include disseminating information to second level students on career opportunities for ISL interpreters.

The Deaf Community believes that the low numbers of graduates currently entering the ISL interpreting profession may act as a significant barrier in the future that will constrain Deaf people in accessing public information and services. However, Minister Finian McGrath said the following in response to concerns raised by the Deaf community during the Dáil debate on the ISL Bill (December 2017):

*"... the commitments relating to Irish Sign Language in the national disability inclusion strategy I launched last July were strengthened. In addition to providing for the extension of the Irish Sign Language remote interpretation service to evenings and weekends and supporting this legislation to ensure that all public bodies provide Irish Sign Language users with free interpretation when accessing or availing of their statutory services, we will ensure that the Sign Language Interpretation Service, SLIS, will be resourced to increase the number of trained sign language and deaf interpreters. A quality assurance and registration scheme for interpreters, for whom ongoing professional training and development will be provided, will be established. I am delighted to confirm that an allocation of €327,000 in 2018 has been made available to SLIS via the Citizens Information Board for that work."*

## Irish Remote Interpreting Service (IRIS)

Information technology has brought many benefits to the Deaf Community, not least smart phones which have enabled Deaf people to communicate with each other via text and video. Skype and similar services have also enhanced the capability of Deaf people to communicate remotely. The development of IRIS, which is funded by CIB via SLIS, provides the opportunity for the Deaf Community to communicate with public service providers via an ISL interpreter, and vice versa.

The Deaf Community would like to see IRIS's daily operational hours extended and also hopes that its present Monday-Friday service availability would be expanded to include the weekends. It is planned for this to happen in 2018. There is also concern that the service is being held back by broadband constraints and an unfriendly user-interface. Some members of the Deaf Community would like to be able to use interpreters of their choice when availing of IRIS.

The survey of the Deaf Community reveals a sizeable number of respondents who were unaware of IRIS. However, the respondents who had used the service expressed satisfaction with it.

There is concern in the Deaf Community that few public information and service providers have signed up for IRIS despite the advantages that it can bring to their interactions with the Deaf Community and its relatively low investment cost. The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection is engaged in the installation of IRIS in its network of Intreo offices and, within the network of organisations supported by CIB, a number of CIC and MABS offices have registered with IRIS as service providers. It is planned to roll it out to all CIBs and MABS in 2018.

There was a commitment in the National Disability Strategy Implementation Plan 2013-2015 indicating that a Sign Language Interpreting Service pilot project would be co-ordinated across government departments for which the key indicator was that remote interpretation access would be established through PC or laptop in relevant government departments. The evidence to-date indicates that this commitment has not been delivered on.

## Deaf awareness training

A common theme in the Deaf Community is the lack of awareness among public organisations in differentiating between the needs of the Deaf Community on the one hand and Hard of Hearing people on the other.

Members of the Deaf Community point to instances where officials in public organisations would decline a request to provide an Irish Sign Language interpreter on the basis that Deaf people have superior lip-reading capabilities and therefore can follow what is being communicated to them. The research suggests a low level of awareness among public organisations and their staff that Irish Sign Language is the main and preferred language of the Deaf Community.



Large public organisations said they provide disability awareness training to their staff and a number of these instanced the availability of a National Disability Authority distance learning disability awareness training module that staff members could access via their internal corporate intranet. There was, however, recognition that this module had limited information on Deaf people.

Public organisations acknowledge that not all staff have received training on disability issues. For example, a day's training on disability issues has been provided to Access Officers within the HSE but this may not have been the case for many of their colleagues in public-facing positions such as receptionists, porters and care assistants.

The public organisations that do not currently provide disability training say they will be making the NDA's e-learning disability awareness module available on their intranet which their staff are expected to access. A number of public officials pointed to the challenges of keeping staff in large organisations informed of the needs of the Deaf Community given staff mobility. They also alluded to the information demands on staff arising from the requirement to respond to the needs of an increasingly diverse customer/service user base.

The consultation with the Deaf Community indicates that Deaf people may be unaware that some public organisations have a stated commitment to provide ISL interpreting services. The Deaf representative/support organisations play an important role in disseminating awareness of these commitments and the online survey shows that their constituents rely on them extensively for information on public services.

Deaf Community organisations also point to the need for training to be provided to Deaf people to make them aware of their rights and entitlements and how to make a complaint if they feel they are being discriminated against.

## Deaf-friendly public information provision

Only a minuscule amount of public information is provided in Irish Sign Language, the main language of communication of the Deaf Community. The reverse of this is that the vast bulk of information available from public organisations is in English or Irish, which for Deaf people are their second or third languages and for which they have low literacy levels.

The lack of Deaf-friendly signage in public places and especially within the transport system places Deaf users at a significant disadvantage compared with hearing people.

The study has found that very few public organisations provide information in Irish Sign Language and that even among those that do, the amount of information provided in ISL is minimal. The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection now provides a video guide to its website that includes Irish Sign Language, sub-titles for the Hard of Hearing and a voice-over in English. Other public organisations such as the HSE and Revenue have at least one ISL-signed video on their websites.

The Deaf representative organisations would like CISs in major urban areas such as Cork and Dublin to have Information Providers trained in ISL, similar to Dublin North West CIS, so as to provide information, advice and advocacy services to the Deaf Community in these locations. They also believe that the St. Vincent's Deaf CIC is a good practice model for the provision of information by an ISL-trained staff member both face-to-face and remotely to Deaf people that government departments and agencies should adopt.

These barriers are reflected in high levels of dissatisfaction among the Deaf Community in relation to

their access to public information and services. The consultants' overall conclusions are that the Deaf Community face numerous barriers in accessing public information and services and they concur with the findings of an Oireachtas report which stated that the experience of Deaf people arising from the lack of ISL recognition and the lack of sign language interpreting provision was one of extreme marginalisation.

## Customer service and communications

The interviews with public organisations found that even where they did provide information in a Deaf-friendly format on their websites, the extent of prior consultation with the Deaf Community on the aims and format of the information provision was minimal.

Public organisations say that they have extensive engagement with the disability sector on a range of issues, including information dissemination. They also point to the fact that a number of public organisations have consumer/customer panels where feedback is sought on information and service provision. One public organisation did admit, however, that in retrospect an ISL video it had prepared for the Deaf Community might have been more effective had Deaf representative organisations been consulted beforehand.

Few public organisations made available Deaf-friendly communication processes to allow Deaf clients/service users to interact with them. Examples might include providing a texting service whereby members of the Deaf Community could send or receive text messages via their mobile phones. Public organisations say they provide an email address or have a query form on their website that Deaf people can use but the Deaf Community say that these facilities are often poorly monitored and that response times can be lengthy.

## International best practice

Deaf organisations highlighted the following international best practices with respect to the provision of public information and services to the Deaf Community:

- The Finnish Voucher System for interpretation services under which Deaf people have the right to obtain a minimum annual level of interpreting services. ISL interpreters would welcome the introduction of the voucher system which in Finland has helped to provide sign language interpreters there with a level of financial security which is missing in the Irish context;
- The UK and US telecommunications relay services enable Deaf individuals to communicate in a manner that is as close to "functionally equivalent" as possible to the communications enjoyed by telephone users. The US system operates 24 hours a day and 7 days a week and is provided free to users;
- Both the UK and the US also have cost-effective on-demand Video Remote Interpreting systems;
- The UK Access to Work scheme provides an annual grant for people with disabilities and in the case of Deaf employees can be used to defray the cost of a sign language interpreter.

Young Irish Deaf people were critical of the low level of government supports to assist them to access vocational training and employment opportunities. They also pointed to the Access to Work scheme as an initiative that should be emulated in the Irish employment context because what they really need are interpreters more so than workplace equipment/adaptation.

## 7.2 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 continue their role in policy development and responding to requests for policy submissions, particularly in relation to legislative requirements and the commitments under the National Disability Inclusion Strategy.

# Recommendations

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

# Appendix 1: Historical background

## History of Irish Sign Language

There were undoubtedly sign languages in use in Ireland (in both secular and monastic settings) going back centuries, but the modern version of ISL is inextricably tied up with the history of formal deaf education in Ireland. Formal education of Deaf people began in the 19th Century when Dr. Charles Orpen opened his Claremont School in 1816 using an early version of British Sign Language (BSL) or some version of signed English based on BSL (Pollard, R., 2006).

The first Catholic school for deaf boys and girls was opened in Cork in 1822 but it closed in 1846 due to lack of funds. In 1846 the Catholic Institute for the Deaf (CID) requested the Dominican Sisters in Cabra to start a school for deaf girls in Dublin. Two nuns and two deaf girls travelled to Caen in Lower Normandy to study the teaching method of Pierre-François Jamet in Le Bon Sauveur School; this followed an earlier visit by Fr McNamara who had been instrumental in setting up the CID. Jamet had been to the Institution Nationale des Sourds-Muets à Paris to study the methodical signs (signes méthodiques) technique of the Abbé Charles Michel de l'Épée and his successor the Abbé Sicard. This technique used some aspects of Old French Sign Language but was essentially a kind of Signed French - Laurent Clerc, a deaf pupil (and later teacher) of the institution, wrote that the Deaf never used the signes méthodiques for communication outside the classroom, preferring their own community's sign language which evolved into the modern French Sign Language (Langue des Signes Française or LSF).

The Abbé de l'Épée's great contribution to the Deaf Community was to recognise and demonstrate that the deaf did not need oral language to be able to think (a belief floated by extreme oralists such as l'Épée's nemesis, Samuel Heinicke, the "father of Oralism", who dismissed sign language, and also written language). The American Thomas Gallaudet, having failed to gain access to the Braidwood family's oral instruction methods on a trip to England, was invited by Abbé Sicard to return with him to his Institution in Paris. Impressed with the manual method, Gallaudet invited teacher Laurent Clerc to America to help him and his benefactor Dr. Mason Cogswell found the first school for deaf children in the United States, the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut. There, Old French Sign Language, Old American Sign Language including various village sign languages, and 'home sign' (the language system developed by a deaf child who lacks input from a language model in the family) were fused by language contact to produce the American Sign Language (ASL).

In 1857 the Christian Brothers in Cabra asked the nuns for assistance to learn sign language. The Brothers then set up St Joseph's School for Deaf Boys. A later infusion of ASL and BSL strains into their version of sign language led to a gender differentiation in ISL which persisted until recent times.<sup>43</sup>

Leeson and Lynch relate how, back in 1979, the National Association for the Deaf (now DeafHear) produced a rudimentary ISL dictionary, "the blue book", in an attempt to standardise ISL. They merged the significant gendered variations that existed and created a systematic vocabulary that was influenced strongly by English. More recently, the Centre for Deaf Studies (CDS, 2001) paper proposed linguistic research to record and annotate the grammar of ISL. The Centre for Deaf Studies has been very active in developing a digital corpus of ISL, the 'Signs of Ireland Corpus' which they claim to be one of the largest, most richly annotated in Europe.

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43. This section was based on Le Master, B. (1990) and Leonard, C. (2005) – see Bibliography in Appendix 2 for details.

# History of deaf education

The international history of deaf education since the 18th century has been scarred by a heated ideological 'war of the methods' between advocates of oral and manual communication. This was seen as a proxy war for the medical versus social/cultural models.

The oralists claimed that the manualists were neglecting the residual hearing in deaf children and their emphasis on sign language was isolating the children from hearing family members and achieving success in the wider culture. Oralism pointed to their success with children who had lost hearing after having already learned to speak.

The manualists claimed that oralists neglected the psychosocial development of deaf children; in their zeal for training in articulation which required long tedious practice, oralism left children with no time or energy to advance academically and socially; the outcome was inadequate skills and often poor speaking ability despite the great effort invested.

The pendulum swung over and back between manualism and oralism in the early 19th century as each movement gained ascendancy. For a brief period in the mid century the 'combinists' - Simultaneous Communication or Total Communication advocates - held sway. Oralism finally prevailed in both Europe and America following overwhelming endorsement by an international conference of deaf educators (mainly hearing) in Milan in 1880, and by a UK royal commission in 1889 (the outcome of this commission sparked the establishment of the British Deaf Association to oppose the threatened suppression of deaf culture; in a similar vein, the National Association for the Deaf had been formed a decade earlier in America in response to the Milan Conference).

They became entrenched for almost a hundred years up to the 1970s. Many countries supported the outright banning of sign language in education, believing it impeded deaf children's progress toward mastering literacy, for the Irish case, see McDonnell and Saunders (2003). Deaf teachers were dismissed from schools. In some schools deaf children were labelled "oral failures" when they could not pick up the oral language.

However, the oralism rationale proved to be seriously flawed. Deteriorating literacy outcomes coupled with markedly superior levels of literacy and self confidence achieved by deaf children of deaf parents highlighted the importance of early first language acquisition for both literacy and cognitive development. It is essential that a deaf child has access to signing adults or peers in order to facilitate age appropriate language development. Since 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents, early first language acquisition for them is not automatic but highly dependent on the enlightened initiative of their parents. However, CDS (2002) noted that:

"early opportunities for acquiring ISL are frequently missed. The general trend seems to be that the use of a sign language is considered as a last resort, and explored only when other interventions (for example, cochlear implantation) are not possible."

Mounting international evidence-based research in the 1960s and 1970s (notably by the American William Stokoe) finally discredited the claims for oralism. At first, educators went back to Simultaneous Communication or Total Communication as the default replacements. But, from the late 1980s, the bilingual approach gained precedence because of its clear emphasis on the separate nature of the two languages and the value placed on the use of full sign language in every phase of deaf education.

The 'Dark Age' of oralism had set back not only the literacy achievement but the overall academic and socio-economic aspirations of generations of deaf students who could not fully access the curriculum because they couldn't understand what the teachers were saying - they had to concentrate so much on the way the words were formed, they were missing out on what they meant.

## Deaf Education in Ireland

Oralism was introduced for fee-paying students in the Protestant Claremont School in 1887. However, the two principal Catholic deaf schools, established in the mid 19th century in Cabra by the Dominican nuns (St Mary's School for Deaf Girls) and the Christian Brothers (St Joseph's School for Deaf Boys), both abstained from the international swing towards oralism at the end of the century (some researchers have put this down to a lack of resources to instal the necessary audiology and oral-training facilities) and continued with the manual method up until 1945 in St. Mary's and 1957 in St. Joseph's. They then switched to a very rigorous application of the oral approach which they sustained up to the close of the twentieth century. Mathews (2011) describes how the new oralism regime quickly led to extreme forms of spatial and social segregation based on failure to learn speech, and how this treatment fed through to the general public's association of ISL use with social inferiority.

The legacy of the misguided oralism approach was highlighted in several research studies on oralism outcomes - notably the landmark UK study by Conrad (1979); also studies by Allen (1984) and Traxler (2000) - showing that Deaf pupils were leaving oral schools with median reading ages of nine years, with poor speech intelligibility, and with lip-reading skills no better than those of the hearing population despite their special training in this area. Leeson (2012) stated that approximately 80% of the Deaf Community school leavers have literacy levels on a par with 8 year olds.

There are three broad 'placement' approaches to deaf education at primary and post-primary levels:

- *Full Mainstreaming (Inclusion)*: in this approach deaf students spend all, or most, of the school day with their hearing peers in local schools. The theory is that they should be given access to assistive technologies such as radio aids and loop systems, and to the support of special needs assistants where required.

Mathews (2011) points to the distinction between mainstreaming practice which accommodates specialist 'pull-out' services such as resource teaching, and inclusion ideology which considers 'special education' as a service, not a place, and therefore, as far as possible, all necessary educational and behavioural supports and services are to be provided within the general classroom. Inclusion has been proposed as best practice only for mildly-to-moderately deaf students.

- *Group Mainstreaming/Integration ('Special Class/Unit')*: here Deaf/Hard of Hearing students are grouped together in a unit within a mainstream school. There is a varying degree of participation in mainstream classes by these students depending on their communication skills.

Some students are capable of joining the mainstream classrooms for most academic subjects while receiving back-up tailored supports within the special unit from ISL-fluent resource teachers and visiting teachers; other students may only integrate with hearing peers for extra-curricular activities (play-time, meal times).

The National Council for Special Education (2011) states that a pupil who has been assessed as having a hearing impairment and no other assessed disability may be allocated a maximum of four hours teaching support per week from a resource teacher, or from a visiting teacher and resource teacher combined.

- *Separation* (separate Schools for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children): these schools focus specifically on the provision of a unique educational and developmental experience in a supportive environment where pupils can learn, develop, interact and socialise with their peers. They have the specialist expertise and resources necessary to deliver the required interventions. By definition, the major downside of separation is the minimal association with hearing peers during the school day/week.

In addition to the placement question, the other critical consideration in deaf education is the communication method used by the school. There are five broad communication options:

1. *Pure Manualism* - the use of sign language only, without any instruction borrowed from oral approaches.
2. *Pure Oralism* - this 'articulation' approach emphasises lip-reading and speech training, and assumes that all information can be transmitted using spoken language; it excludes the use of a signed language.
3. *Simultaneous Communication (SimCom) or Sign Supported Speech (SSS)* is a technique in which both a spoken language and a supporting manual variant of that language (such as manually coded English, see below) are used simultaneously. Full sign language cannot be used simultaneously with spoken language because of its independent vocabulary, grammar and syntax. In a deaf educational environment where a majority of teachers are hearing, SimCom is clearly an improvement on pure oralism, but the foreign grammar and syntax present difficulties for Deaf children.
4. *Total Communication (TC)* - TC was introduced as a middle ground between oralism and manualism, and as an alternative to Simultaneous Communication. Originally a pragmatic child-centred philosophy, it valued all forms of communication equally. Depending on the particular needs of the child, it selected from the full communication spectrum encompassing body language, sign language, finger-spelling, gestures, visual imagery, writing, voice and lip-reading. However, in many cases nominal Total Communication programmes were implemented narrowly and offered little in addition to SimCom.
5. *Bimodal Bilingualism (Bicultural Bilingualism)*- this approach recognises sign language as the native or first language of Deaf children and uses it as the classroom language to provide a bridge to literacy in the hearing community's spoken language through lip-reading and reading. The goal is competency in both languages.

Bilingualism is called 'additive' when there is no intention of diluting the student's primary language or culture, therefore the minority language is not viewed merely as a linguistic gateway to acquiring the dominant language. Oral and sign are the two modes to which "bimodal" refers (strictly speaking, oral communication itself can be bimodal - one can use both auditory and visual senses through hearing and lip-reading). Bicultural refers to the two cultures, Deaf culture and hearing culture.

Recent policy approaches to Deaf education are covered in Chapters 2 and 6 of this report. Chapter 2 outlines the development of Deaf education policy in Ireland over the last 20 years and the attainment levels of Deaf students. Chapter 6 includes additional information on supports available to Deaf students.

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