

RN
I:D | Supporting people
who are deaf, have
hearing loss or tinnitus

IT DOESN'T MATTER

Public attitudes towards people who use British Sign Language (BSL)

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report is to highlight the experience that BSL users and the public have communicating with each other. We want to provide an evidence base on which RNID can work with deaf organisations and deaf people to improve public attitudes and behaviours towards BSL users.



This report is based on a social research project we ran in 2024. We surveyed 5,383 people who are deaf or have hearing loss, including 180 BSL users, and 2,768 members of the general public. We did this research to understand both public attitudes towards deaf people and people with hearing loss, as well as the lived experiences of our communities. We wanted to learn what assumptions, challenges and misconceptions people face on a day-to-day basis to help us understand what changes we need to see and make in the world.

Our research shows that people who identify as deaf and use BSL as their main or preferred language find interactions with the public more negative than people with hearing loss. This report highlights some common issues BSL users face, and also seeks to understand why those issues occur and keep occurring.

However, we also found that much of the general public do not have ingrained

negative attitudes towards BSL users. The evidence we collected clearly shows that people are lacking confidence – they do not want to cause offence or appear rude by getting it wrong.

When we spoke to BSL users and the public, we found that both groups want the public to know more BSL and information about how to communicate with BSL users. In response to the findings, RNID has created free resources for the public, including simple BSL phrases and communications tips on how to include everyone in the conversation. [More information about 'It DOES matter'](#).

In the first section of this report, we will look more closely at the experiences of the 180 BSL users who shared their stories and insights with us. In the second section, we will look more closely at our findings from our polling of the general public. In the third section we find areas of consensus and a recommendation for moving forward.

DEFINITIONS

To allow us to highlight the different experiences of people within our communities, we have separated survey respondents into five groups.

- **British Sign Language (BSL) users** – people who identify as deaf and use British Sign Language as their main or preferred language.
- **People who are deaf** - people who identify as deaf, who do not use British Sign Language to communicate.
- **People with hearing loss** - people who identify as having hearing loss, who do not use British Sign Language to communicate.
- **Our communities** – people with hearing loss, people who are deaf and BSL users combined as a group.
- **General public** – people surveyed as part of the public polling that have not been diagnosed as deaf or as having hearing loss.

SECTION 1

THE EXPERIENCES OF BSL USERS

1.1 How BSL users feel about public attitudes



82% of BSL users agree that there is still stigma towards deaf people and people with hearing loss.



71% of BSL users believe that most people hold negative attitudes towards deaf people and people with hearing loss.



71% of BSL users believe most people think that deaf people and people with hearing loss are less intelligent compared to a hearing person.



66% of BSL users disagree with the statement that 'deaf people and people with hearing loss are treated fairly'.

"Sometimes I feel positive and like I have the energy to go out on my own and carry the communication with new people, and sometimes it just feels so daunting dealing with the stares and with people just not knowing how to cope or communicate with me that it makes me not want to go out."

Female, 25-34, BSL user

Our research has found that BSL users are much more likely to believe that the general public hold negative attitudes towards our communities. While 54% of people with hearing loss and 66% of deaf people think that most people hold negative attitudes towards our communities, 71% of BSL users feel this way.

71% of BSL users believe that most people think deaf people or those with hearing loss are less intelligent than hearing people. This could suggest

that the general public are patronising BSL users during their interactions and underestimating their ability to understand what is being communicated.

66% of BSL users do not think that deaf people and people with hearing loss are treated fairly. This perception is likely to have been built as a result of the barriers BSL users face at school, work and in daily life. It also indicates dissatisfaction with the way that organisations and individuals deal with inclusion and accessibility.



1.2 What BSL users are experiencing in everyday life

Our research found that 90% of BSL users say they have experienced negative attitudes or behaviours in the past 12 months.

81% have experienced negative attitudes or behaviours from retail staff.



78% have experienced negative attitudes or behaviours from administrative health staff (such as receptionists).



77% have experienced negative attitudes or behaviours from hospitality staff.



72% have experienced negative attitudes or behaviours from medical staff (such as GPs or audiologists).



64% have experienced negative attitudes or behaviours from call centre staff.



62% have experienced negative attitudes or behaviours from staff on public transport.



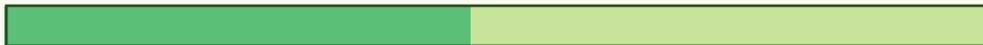
60% have experienced negative attitudes or behaviours from in-person customer service staff.



54% have experienced negative attitudes or behaviours from family.



49% have experienced negative attitudes or behaviours from colleagues.



42% have experienced negative attitudes or behaviours from friends.



32% have experienced negative attitudes or behaviours from managers at work.



It's clear that the majority of BSL users are experiencing negative attitudes and behaviours in many areas of daily life – such as while travelling, at the doctor's and in shops – and that not enough is being done to address them.

90% of BSL users have experienced negative attitudes or behaviours in the past 12 months, compared to 62% of people with hearing loss. This could be due to the language barrier – BSL users may need more support from staff to make informed

"I avoid using some things like customer services because of these negative attitudes."

Male, 25-34, BSL user

decisions, as there is less information about products and services available in BSL. This could contribute to the higher number of negative interactions, as they are having to rely on staff and other people more due to the lack of accessible information.

Retail staff, administrative health staff and hospitality staff were the three most common groups that BSL users had negative interactions with. This may be due to time pressures in their roles and a lack of understanding of how to communicate with BSL users.

Nearly three quarters (72%) of BSL users have experienced negative attitudes or behaviours from medical staff, such as GPs or audiologists. And 78% have experienced negative attitudes or behaviours from administrative health staff (such as receptionists). This is particularly concerning given that it could lead to people not making medical appointments when they have concerns about their health.





WHAT THE LAW SAYS

Legally, deaf BSL users have protection from discrimination under the Equality Act 2010. The Equality Act protects people against unfair treatment (discrimination) because of their disability. A deaf BSL user has rights under the Act, even if they don't think of themselves as being disabled.

As disability is a "protected characteristic" under the Act. Service providers such as the NHS, employers and other bodies have a duty to make "reasonable adjustments", so people with disability are not placed at a substantial disadvantage. If you are deaf and use BSL, a reasonable adjustment might include providing a BSL interpreter. However, sometimes, appropriate adjustments for deaf BSL users are not provided, and can be seen as having a high-cost burden. This isn't acceptable.

Some services have to take further steps to ensure that deaf people are able to access their services. For example, in England health and social care providers have to have due regard for the Accessible Information Standard to ensure that BSL users can access healthcare in their preferred language. There are also standards in Wales and Scotland. Our evidence suggests that even with these standards in place, deaf BSL users are still experiencing negative attitudes.

1.3 The impact on BSL users

These negative attitudes and behaviours have an impact on BSL users. Of those who had experienced negative attitudes and behaviours from other people:

59% said I felt frustrated.



56% said I felt disrespected.



53% said I felt excluded.



48% said I felt patronised.



43% said it had a negative effect on my confidence.



42% said I am used to it, so I just put up with it.



41% said it made me want to avoid people.



38% said I felt angry.



36% said I felt lonely / isolated.



"People find it hard to talk to me so prefer to avoid me."

Female, 35-44, deafblind BSL user

The perception of negative attitudes among BSL users is influenced by these experiences of being ignored, excluded or treated worse than other members of the public due to their deafness. With negative attitudes and behaviours, which could be inadvertent, making BSL users feel like this – something must change.

SECTION 2

THE EXPERIENCES OF THE GENERAL PUBLIC



2.1 How the general public feel about communicating with BSL users

We wanted to find out more about how the general public feel about communicating with BSL users, as well as the impact communicating with the general public has on BSL users.

WHAT THE PUBLIC ARE SAYING



25% of the general public say they are unsure how to act towards BSL users, but **42%** are not



55% of the general public think that most people don't know how to communicate with a BSL user

HOW BSL USERS FEEL



79% of BSL users feel that most people are unsure of how to act towards them



77% of BSL users feel that most people don't know how to communicate with them

THE IMPACT ON BSL USERS



63% of BSL users have experienced people talking to someone who is with me, rather than to me directly



58% of BSL users have experienced people being impatient with me



61% of BSL users say that people tend to tell them it doesn't matter, when they don't understand what is being said



54% of BSL users feel that most people avoid interacting with them



Our research shows that there are some differing experiences between the public and BSL users when it comes to communicating.

Despite a quarter of the general public (25%) admitting they are unsure how to act towards BSL users, 42% say they do not feel unsure. However, given that 79% of BSL users feel that most people are unsure how to act towards them, we need to delve a little deeper. The actual experiences of BSL users suggest the public may think they are better at communicating with BSL users than they really are.

Specifically, 77% of BSL users feel

that most people don't know how to communicate with them, and 54% feel that most people avoid interacting with them.

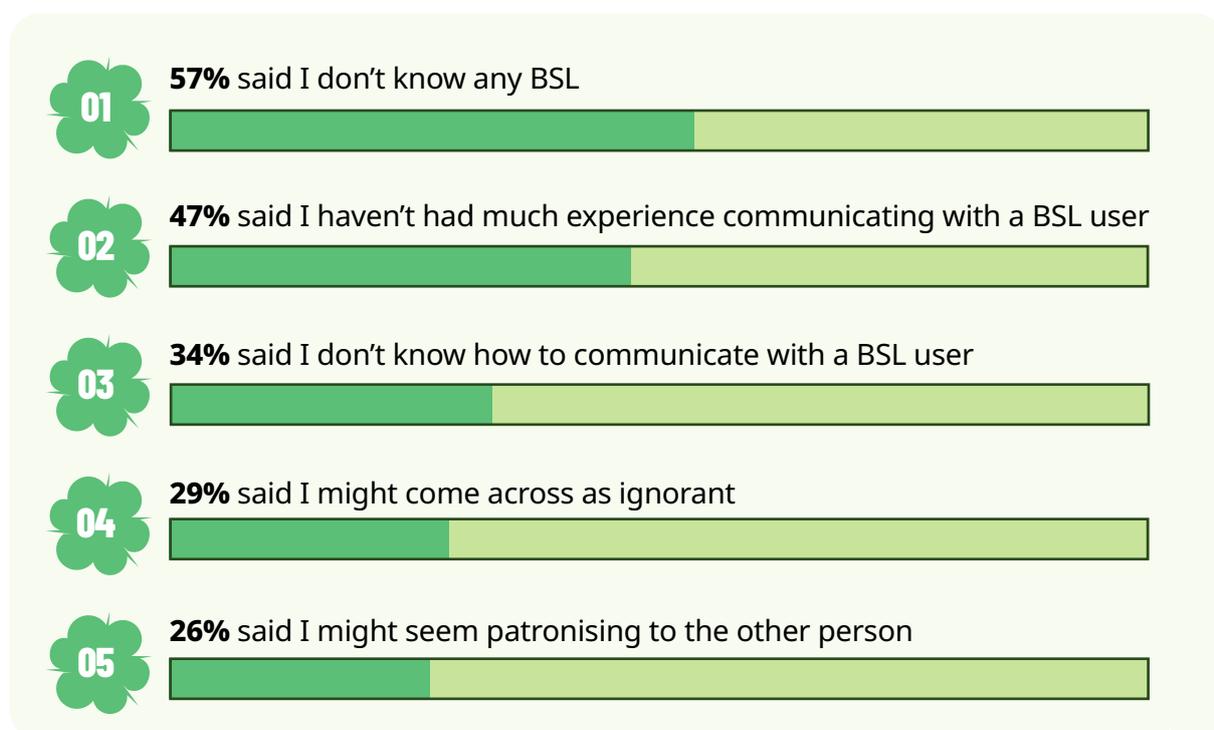
And this can manifest in very negative experiences – 63% of BSL users say they have experienced people talking to someone who is with them, rather than to them directly and 58% say they have experienced people being impatient with them. A further 61% of BSL users say that people tend to tell them it doesn't matter, when they don't understand what is being said. These experiences show that the public may be missing the mark when it comes to interacting with BSL users, and it's having significant consequences.

"I don't mind explaining how to communicate with me but people just don't want to take the time. They are often too afraid of offending me. Better to try and communicate than not communicate at all."

Female, 45-54, deafblind BSL user

2.2 Why the public don't feel confident communicating with a BSL user

On first look, this research paints a very negative picture of interactions between the general public and BSL users. But, when we asked the public why they don't feel confident communicating with BSL users, we found the following reasons:



These statistics reveal important gaps in the public's understanding and experience, when it comes to communicating with BSL users. 57% said they don't know any BSL, highlighting a lack of basic awareness that could be holding people back from communicating.

Nearly half (47%) said their lack of confidence

was because they haven't had much experience communicating with a BSL user, and 34% said it was because they just don't know how to. Finally, the public are also concerned about coming across as ignorant (29%) or patronising (26%), which could make people avoid interactions altogether.

We need to help bridge the gap.

SECTION 3

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN BSL USERS AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC

Our research shows that there is real cause for hope. There is strong alignment between what the general public say would help them feel more confident communicating with a deaf BSL user and what deaf BSL users want the public to know.

3.1 What would help the public feel more confident communicating with a deaf BSL user?



54% would like to learn basic words and phrases in BSL



41% would like information about how to communicate well with BSL users



36% would like information about BSL as a language



26% would like more representation of BSL users in the media



24% would like more opportunities to meet BSL users

Over half of the public would like to learn basic words and phrases in BSL, and a further 41% would like information about how to communicate well with BSL users. This shows there is a strong appetite from the general public to learn more, increase their deaf awareness and communicate better with BSL users.

WHAT BSL USERS WANT THE GENERAL PUBLIC TO KNOW

BSL users highlighted that a few small changes in behaviour from the general public could make a massive difference.

Nearly two thirds (65%) of BSL users would appreciate someone trying to include them back into a group conversation if they were struggling to follow what was being said, and 63% would like to be updated on what they had missed. This highlights the importance of the hearing public being deaf aware and shows how small changes in behaviour can make BSL users feel included in social situations, reducing feelings of isolation and exclusion.

Here are the top things that BSL users said would help them feel more comfortable communicating with members of the public:

01.

If more people were aware of how best to communicate with people who are deaf or have hearing loss (78%)



02.

If more people learnt basic signs in BSL (71%)



03.

If more people tried to include me in conversation (66%)



04.

If more people were open / willing to communicate with me in different ways (64%)



05.

If more people were patient with me (60%)





It should reassure the general public to know that 64% of BSL users would feel more comfortable if the public were open/willing to communicate with them in different ways.

Despite the general public's concerns about coming across ignorant or patronising, over three quarters (76%) of BSL users said they would feel comfortable if someone asked how best to communicate with them.

This shows that BSL users are open to helping the general public communicate better with them. If the public could offer a little flexibility in their communication style (for example, learning some BSL or finding other ways to communicate), these small changes would make a big difference.

CONCLUSION

The results in this report paint a difficult picture of how BSL users are experiencing the attitudes and behaviours of the general public and highlight an urgent need for change. The public is clearly concerned about getting it wrong, but their lack of awareness and confidence is having a significant impact on BSL users. We know it will take many different activities to move the dial on inclusion for deaf BSL users.

Here are just some of the projects RNID is currently running to help make this change:



RNID's campaign - 'It does matter'

Our research shows the general public want to learn how to communicate with BSL users better. With the right tools and information, the public can feel more confident to connect with our communities, including BSL users. Our 'It does matter' campaign encourages people to sign up to receive easy British Sign Language phrases and free, simple tips on how to communicate. Thousands of people have signed up so far.



Other campaigns RNID is working on

RNID has a proud history of collaborating with deaf organisations on campaigns to influence government, business and employers, and to raise awareness of the issues faced by BSL users. Our past and ongoing campaigns include:

Accessible healthcare: we know people who are deaf or have hearing loss, including BSL users, can face unnecessary barriers to communication when they visit the GP or other NHS services. RNID are working with SignHealth to show Government and NHS providers how they can better meet the communication needs of our communities.

BSL Act Now!: working collaboratively with other deaf organisations, led by the British Deaf Association, we successfully campaigned for the BSL Act 2022, to give legal recognition to BSL.

999 BSL: we successfully campaigned for 999 BSL, so that BSL users can have equal access to the fire, police, ambulance and coastguard emergency services.

Government communications: we are working to ensure government communications are accessible to BSL users at the same time as everyone else.

BSL at work: we regularly engage the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that they are delivering appropriate employment support for BSL users and making sure their wider services are accessible.

We are RNID: the national charity supporting more than 18 million people in the UK who are deaf, have hearing loss or tinnitus. We campaign to change public attitudes and help people hear better now. We fund groundbreaking biomedical research that will stop hearing loss and silence tinnitus. And we provide practical support and information over the phone, online and in local communities.

If you or someone close to you are deaf, or have hearing loss or tinnitus and need free confidential and impartial information and support, contact RNID. We are open 8:30am to 5.00pm, Monday to Friday.



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