

Deafness Support Network Completing the Jigsaw

Funding: European Social Fund (CFO Cheshire and Warrington LSC)

Good practice principle demonstrated: Equal Opportunities for D/deaf People

What does the project do?

There are approx 8.7 million people in the UK with a significant hearing loss and many of these are registered as Deaf without speech, deaf with speech or hard of hearing. Recent research by the RNID has estimated that as many as 1 in 4 are unemployed but there is a more significant problem with underemployment.

Deafness Support Network (DSN) has been funded by the European Social Fund to deliver DAT (Deaf/ness Awareness Training) to local businesses and major public service providers.

DSN provides a wide range of services including three Open Learning Centres which delivers information guidance and advice. They also provide specialist supported housing to the wider deaf community, via mainstream funding.



How does the project support D/deaf people?

The project addresses a number of specific barriers that D/deaf people face in accessing employment. One is a distorted perception of the disability, which can result in employers having a limited expectation of what a D/deaf employee is capable of. Many people also fail to understand the richness and diversity of Deaf culture and the D/deaf community. Some Deaf people will have been D/deaf from birth and may have been born to Deaf parents and British Sign Language (BSL) will be their first language, this language can be influenced by English and some D/deaf people use signs in English syntax, this is known as Sign Supported English. However the majority of people will have experienced the onset of deafness later in life and will probably prefer to lipread and use a hearing aid to support their understanding of speech.

Communication is also a barrier being tackled by DSN. Although many D/deaf people can read English, those whose first language is British Sign Language (BSL) can have issues with English as the grammar and syntax of BSL is very different. For hard of hearing people, shouting or exaggerating lip patterns does little more than make understanding more difficult.

There are a number of things that are central to ensuring DSN can deliver effective support to D/deaf people. The first is that, wherever possible, D/deaf people deliver the majority of services. DSN has a policy of employing D/deaf people (at present 40% of the staff group) and almost 80% of their staff have the required skills and qualifications in BSL. This allows DSN to provide services in a one to one setting rather than with an interpreter acting as a third party. The policy also ensures that DSN understands the needs of deaf people and are providing locally-based 'grass root services'.

Further Information:

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Being local has been effective in developing contact with local businesses and many requests for training have been through word of mouth recommendations. The fact that training is delivered by D/deaf people has had a significant impact and also helps challenge the expectations of employers and service providers.

It is also important to allow consumers, customers, clients and staff to communicate in their preferred method of communication. Although many D/deaf people can lip-read, BSL/SSE is key to communicating within the Deaf community. It is important that project staff working with D/deaf people have access to qualified BSL/English interpreters and lip speakers.

Organisations that support deaf people and any employer needs to ensure that there are no barriers to participation for any D/deaf individual. This includes D/deaf people who are comfortable with the use of written English. Information technology and the way that we now communicate with each other has made it easier for deaf people to be included especially in the third person. However, although we often initiate or respond to written English (in e-mails) it is often because something has been said in the office. This effectively excludes the D/deaf member of staff. Any assessment of needs should be carried out with the full participation of the D/deaf service user or employee.

Organisations that work with employers can also refer them to a Disability Employment Adviser at their local Job Centre Plus. Advisers can provide information on the Access to Work Scheme, a government scheme that will pay the cost of adaptations or support that allows disabled people equality in the workplace.



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