

Sign of the Times

Conversations about LGBTQ+ identities and the D/deaf community

[An LGBT Health and Wellbeing community discussion event](#)



This event report was written by Jules Stapleton Barnes (LGBT Health staff), with contributions from Rosy Glen (LGBT Health Volunteer) and Sam Rankin ([Equality Network](#)). We will also publish the report in BSL, available via the Deaf Action Facebook page. Our thanks to all those who attended and shared their views and experiences. The event was hosted on Saturday 24th February 2018, by LGBT Health and Wellbeing with support from Leah Kalaitzi and featured as part of LGBT History Month.

Background

LGBT Health aims to create inclusive, accessible events and services for all LGBTQ+ people to participate in and enjoy. In reality, we understand that for some, including D/deaf people, there are still barriers making participation in community activities, difficult or even impossible. In our commitment to finding out what these barriers are and how we can learn to address them, we were delighted to work with queer and deaf community activist, Leah Kalaitzi, to host a supportive discussion event for D/deaf LGBTQ+ people, to ask about their views and experiences. The event formed part of our on-going series of community discussions providing a unique platform for LGBTQ+ people to have their say on topics and matters that affect their lives.

“I have not had these things talked about before”

About the Event

16 attended, including 9 D/deaf people, BSL interpreters, and supporters. Held at the Serenity Café, in central Edinburgh, the event ran over 2.5 hours with a strong focus on the participation and contributions of D/deaf people.



Access and participation

During the planning process, Leah provided useful guidance around involving and including D/deaf people at discussion events. We organised 2 interpreters to provide BSL throughout the event, both experienced at interpreting in discussion settings.

“Very good start at engaging with BSL users... but I know a few faces I didn’t see”

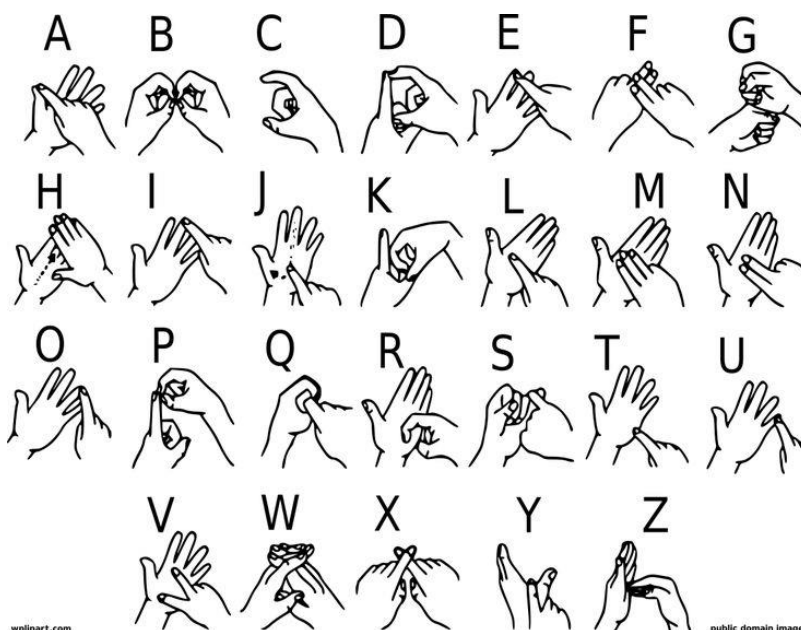
- attendee

In addition to ensuring everybody could communicate and take part, we also spent time planning how best to set the room up, how best to involve the team of events volunteers and how best to ensure that staff and volunteers felt confident to deliver a great event. This meant having open discussions about our current limitations.

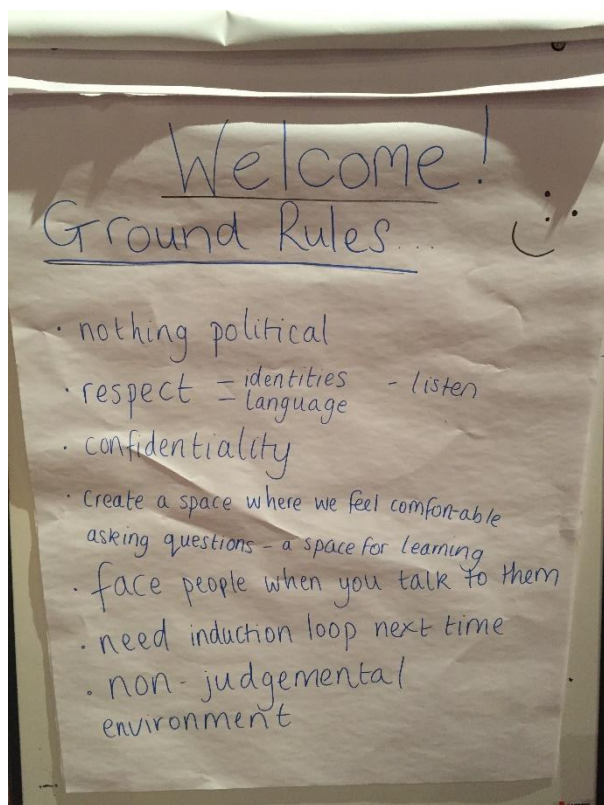
A volunteer of the Events Team, was able to host informal training for fellow volunteers and staff, around basic BSL communication. As well as learning to introduce ourselves and use finger spelling to provide our names, we also learned to say “hi”, “welcome”, “what’s your name?” and “would you like a cup of tea or coffee?”. Although basic, these small phrases helped non-BSL users to feel much more confident in being able to create a safe and welcoming atmosphere for attendees.

“It was easy and fun and I surprised myself! There’s no reason not to learn the basics, and now I feel much more confident at chatting with a deaf attendee.”

- Volunteer



Safe space agreement



After a round of introductions, with each attendee sharing their name and pronoun, we asked people what else they needed within the space, to feel able to share their views and participate without any worries:

- Nothing political
- Respect - identities, language
- Listen
- Confidentiality
- Create a space where we feel comfortable asking questions - create a space for learning
- Face people when you talk to them
- Non-judgmental environment
- (Need induction loop next time)

Discussing LGBTQ+ identities and language

Jules asked attendees to form pairs and take part in an LGBT definitions exercise, to explore what they knew about LGBT terms and what they wanted to know more about. Reiterating that it was a safe space to ask questions and that nobody was being tested, the pairs were given 3 labels each and asked to discuss their meaning. As a group these thoughts were shared and Jules introduced formal definitions.

This was a useful way to get to know how informed people were about the myriad of LGBT language being used in current English speaking society and whether this is reflected in modern BSL. It helped to address some of the gaps in people's knowledge, but also the limitations of BSL in relation to LGBTQ+ identities.

“As a non-binary person, how do I talk about myself in BSL when there isn't the language?”

- attendee

Resource: <https://www.lgbtyouth.org.uk/LGBTI-terminology>

Key discussion points about LGBTQ+ identities & language

Whilst discussing terminology, the group paused to explore the meaning of the word 'ally'. It prompted people to talk about how the word can be used in regards to both LGBT and D/deaf communities.

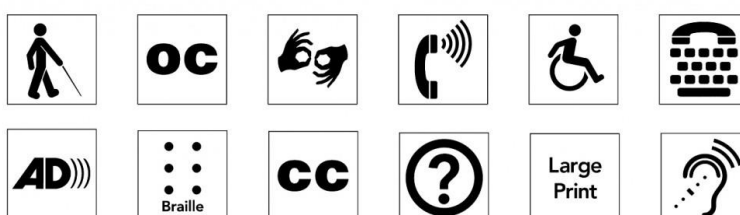
Q: What is an ally and how can we be one?

- Hearing communities can be allies to the deaf community (for example, members of the hearing community learning to sign)
- How to be an ally to the deaf community: if somebody is bullying a D/deaf person, stick up for them, **stand with the D/deaf person** and show support
- **Raise your Awareness** of the issues and where the vulnerabilities lie

The conversation then turned to how familiar or unfamiliar people were with talking about transgender issues with other D/deaf people.

Q: How frequently do you hear trans issues being discussed in the deaf community?

- Not often, as the D/deaf community is so small that it can be isolating
- Thanks to social media and the internet, trans D/deaf people can now be in contact via Facebook/YouTube and geographical distance isn't so much of a big deal
- It's really difficult to have a conversation if you don't have the language e.g. there is currently no BSL sign for non-binary
- For trans BSL users to feel included, we need to think about expanding the language but also providing more information for cis BSL users. Misinformation creates isolation. People don't realise they're being derogatory; asking a question but maybe in the wrong way. There needs to be opportunities for trans D/deaf people to meet others (which means accessible LGBT groups and events being more D/deaf inclusive!)



Short film screening

‘Deaf World: How attitudes towards Deaf gay and lesbian people have changed’ made by the British Sign Language Broadcasting Trust:

<http://www.bslzone.co.uk/watch/deaf-world-how-deaf-attitudes-same-sex-marriage-have-changed/>



“The deaf community very much viewed deaf gay people as a disgrace to the community”

- Interviewee from film reflecting on life as a gay D/deaf person in the 1980s

The documentary focusses on how attitudes have changed between the 1980s to modern day, and raises questions about how accepting and understanding D/deaf communities are, towards LGBTQ+ people.

The group discussed how many felt that barriers continue to exist, preventing many LGBTQ+ D/deaf people from feeling a sense of pride, belonging and community.

Key Barriers

An important aim of hosting this event, was to give D/deaf people an opportunity to speak about the barriers they face in different areas of their life. Contributions included barriers to accessing services, social opportunities, self-acceptance and participating in LGBTQ+ community life.

to accessing services:

- Lack of interpreters, and political will to provide interpreters
- Lack of continuity of interpretation, particularly problematic when different interpreters are used at for e.g. counselling sessions. Much easier for communication and confidence if the same interpreter is used throughout
- Information in printed word – it’s all in English. Need info in BSL as English not always easy for people whose first language is BSL rather than English

- LGBT spaces probably more favourable to Deaf people than general services in terms of welcoming attitude from other service users
- Lack of understanding and awareness of D/deaf AND LGBTQ+ issues

to accessing social opportunities:

- Issues with people turning up to make use of interpreters:
 - Lack of publicity
 - Need to advertise to deaf clubs
 - Post on social media
 - If people not turning up then they are not seeing the publicity



- Harassment - less of an issue in LGBT spaces but lack of D/deaf awareness (ignorance) needs to be addressed. Good practice example: the sports group **Edinburgh Front Runners** – good on access overall and good at welcoming deaf people
- One attendee knew trans people who would like to go to T time (a social group offered by LGBT Health and Wellbeing) but they are nervous that requests for interpretation will be turned down, confidentiality being broken and being the only deaf person there and therefore not having anyone to talk to
- This fear of being the only D/deaf person at an event is common
- Christian religious groups had a significant influence on the deaf community, and do so even now. They give D/deaf people a space to go and sign and meet other deaf people, though there is a feeling that these spaces are set-up to get people along to the church. One attendee commented that it feels tricky because there are negatives to missionaries being part of the community. They are “welcoming/supportive but controlling”. They also perceived a lot of missionaries and priests to be homophobic. This sense of homophobia is still there even though times are changing

to being 'out' (at school and later in life):

- Re: Deaf school: there was no education about the LGBT community
- Attitudes in educational settings were terrible - there was lack of education about sexual orientation or gender identity
- One attendee mentions hating gay people growing up, because that's how they were taught. They spent years in denial.
- Teachers didn't know about bullying because LGBTQ+ D/deaf people didn't tell them it was happening
- Non-hearing people would tell hearing people about others' sexualities
- Not taught about LGBT community or about BSL (two types of alienation) and instead the focus was how to keep the hearing aid clean/diction/medical focus instead of finding another method (aka BSL)

to feeling part of an LGBTQ+ community:

- Communication. Without an interpreter, or without others knowing BSL, you can't talk to anyone. It's just not accessible
- Not all D/deaf people read, write or understand written English
- Often you are the only D/deaf person at an event
- D/deaf people aren't always confident or proactive in asking for what they need. Which may be due to low expectations
- Losing your hearing can feel like losing some of your identity
- Losing your hearing means you may be more likely to turn to the D/deaf



community for support, which means being distanced from LGBTQ+ community

- Hearing people often behave like they're embarrassed or feeling awkward around you
- Most people don't know even basic BSL to say 'hi' or 'how are you?' So it's no wonder it feels isolating, even in a crowd
- D/deaf people often feel isolated in any hearing-focused social setting



Ideas for improvement

- It would be great if more D/deaf people said, "Have you thought about providing an interpreter for that event?" They could make contact with the organisers to raise awareness of the level of interest and need for interpreters
- Challenge the way society sees D/deaf identities first and foremost and the desire to put people in a box
- More visibility and raised awareness of D/deaf LGBTQ+ people
- More D/deaf people working for LGBT organisations
- Recognise that some D/deaf people do not want Deaf organisations involved because of negative experiences.
- The D/deaf community needs to build better links with organisations - it is vital that LGBT organisations continue to build links with D/deaf organisations



- More choice of accessible events
- More grassroots D/deaf community-led organisations - giving people space to make their own choices and recognise their own power to make things happen
- More BSL interpreted events. Pride for example, speeches on the marches are interpreted but how are they engaging with D/deaf people beforehand to help publicise?
- BSL versions/translations of publicity on websites. Leah created a BSL promotional video for an event and the numbers increased, of people attending whose first language is BSL
- A D/deaf person signing publicity information makes things so much more accessible and understandable
- Build a community of allies! People can learn basic signs through non-hearing people teaching hearing people
- Invite BSL tutors to teach basic BSL to event organisers and volunteers (there are willing people!)
- Events organisers could create more opportunities for hearing and D/deaf people to come together to socialise, get to know each other, build deaf awareness and chill together! For example, a regular LGBTQ+ BSL group for all, on a Friday night
- LGBTQ+ Deaf people can be very suspicious of D/deaf organisations in case they are disclosed to be LGBTQ+ against their knowledge or will. So LGBT events should not be held at Deaf organisation's venues
- D/deaf orgs should support LGBTQ+ people to access LGBTQ+ services directly
- D/deaf awareness training for staff
- Provide support for the making of a film of BSL users talking about their experiences of and ideas for improving services

- Use BSL films rather than written English to publicise to D/deaf people
- More support for LGBTQ+ people losing their hearing who may need help integrating into the D/deaf community

Next Steps

LGBT Health is committed to building relationships with D/deaf organisations and individuals. The feedback and suggestions from this event, are a great place to begin exploring ways to improve access for LGBTQ+ D/deaf people and their sense of belonging within any community. In response to the more specific suggestion of a community-led BSL users social space, LGBT Health will be meeting with members of the community to explore how best to support the idea to progress. If you are interested in or would like to get involved in organising a BSL Social Space for LGBTQ+ people, please contact: jules@lgbthealth.org.uk



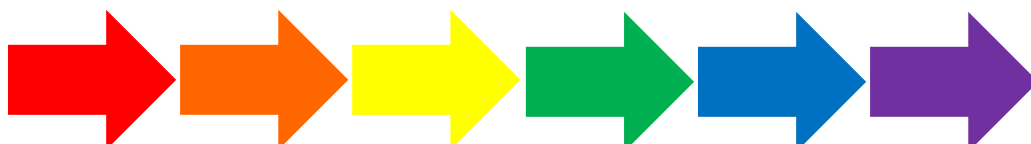
BSL Glossary Project

Equality Network are investigating options for funding for an LGBTQ+ Glossary project, to expand the current BSL language to include LGBTQ+ terms. If you are an LGBTQ+ D/deaf person and would like to get involved with the project, please contact Sam Rankin, Intersectional Coordinator at the Equality Network on the details below.



Film about Deaf LGBTI people

Equality Network are also making a film about Deaf LGBTI people, their experiences of accessing services in Scotland and their ideas for improving these services. Please contact Sam Rankin by text on 0774 704 0355 or by e-mail sam@equality-network.org if you are a deaf LGBTI person and would like to be filmed. You can remain anonymous in the film.



Useful Information

LGBT Health and Wellbeing

LGBT Health delivers a varied programme of services, projects, groups, courses and events in Edinburgh and Glasgow for people aged 16+. We welcome people with a diverse range of identities. [Our LGBT Helpline is accessible via email](#). Some of our events provide BSL, however we are keen to know if there is something you would like to access and BSL provision is not indicated.

W: www.lgbthealth.org.uk T: 0131 523 1100



Equality Network

The Equality Network is a leading national charity working for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) equality and human rights in Scotland.

E: en@equality-network.org T: <https://www.equality-network.org/>



LGBT Youth Scotland

LGBT Youth Scotland offer a wide range of groups, activities, volunteer opportunities, and events for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender young people and their friends. They run groups and drop ins in: Dumfries, Dundee, Edinburgh, Galashiels, Glasgow, Perth, Stirling and Stranraer. LGBTYS also have information about what other LGBT youth and community groups that are running across Scotland.

E: info@lgbtyouth.org.uk W: <https://www.lgbtyouth.org.uk/> T: 0131 555 3940



Deaf LGBTQ+ UK (Facebook Group)

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1644603052253227/>

