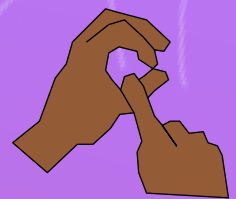
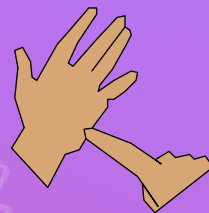
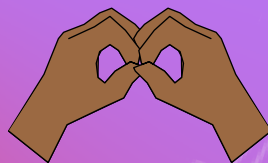
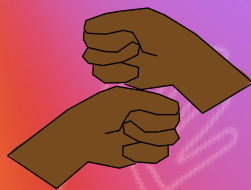


Queering the Signs

LGBTQ+ inclusion in the British Sign Language



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Report from a community panel discussion (May 2022)
exploring how BSL and interpreters can be inclusive
and affirmative of LGBTQ+ identities and experiences



Introduction

On 27th May 2022 LGBT Health and Wellbeing hosted a BSL led and focused panel discussion led by individuals from the d/Deaf Queer community.

The Panel invited Scottish Collaborative of Sign Language Interpreters (SCOSLI) members to attend a session to learn from the Queer d/Deaf experience, and discuss ways in which BSL interpreters can be LGBTQ+ inclusive (and affirmative!) when interpreting for LGBTQ+ d/Deaf people and the wider d/Deaf community.

BSL consultant (and panel member) Jamie Rea (he/him) recorded a BSL accessible video to accompany this report which you can find at <https://youtu.be/oWSYae-SAR8>. We have included hyperlinks ([blue](#)) across the report linking back to sections of the video, to provide context and demonstrate how to sign the inclusive signs discussed by the panel.



Panel members



Jamie Rea (he/him) is a multidisciplinary artist raised in Northern Ireland and living in Glasgow since 2015. He was a member of the first cohort of students in the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland's BA Performance in BSL and English, graduating in 2018. Jamie has progressed his artistic disciplines as a performer, producer and curator, presenter, theatre maker, BSL consultant in Scotland and across the U.K.

Jamie Rea

(he/him) LGBTQ+ BSL Consultant



Leah Francisco (she/her) is pan, Deaf, a LGBTQ+ activist and a performer. Leah has a huge love for creative arts. Originally she comes from Greece, Athens. Leah has been living in the UK for over 20 years now. She moved to Edinburgh in 2012 for a MSc in Inclusive Education.

For the past years Leah has been an active volunteer, advocate and freelancer in different roles for various LGBTQ+ organisations, such as SQIFF, LGBT Health and Wellbeing, Equality Network, LGBT Youth Scotland and Deaf Rainbow UK. Leah is the founder of BSL Rainbow Scotland (formerly Deaf Rainbow Scotland). Leah is passionate about equality and accessibility for the Deaf LGBTQ+ community.

Leah Francisco

(she/her) Deaf LGBTQ+ Activist



Joe Dunn (he/they) is a Queer Deaf trans non-binary artist, currently studying HNC Art and Design in Glasgow, with Art Therapist being a goal of theirs.

Joe Dunn

(he/they) Queer Deaf Trans Artist

Discussion

You are all in the LGBTQ+ community, can you explain your experiences of using BSL, and of the BSL language, as d/Deaf LGBTQ+ people?



Joe: “For me, I am non-binary. The traditional BSL sign for “non-binary” was very binary. When growing up, I felt I didn’t fit into any gender category, until I realised I was actually trans. The trans sign in BSL either means man or woman (transition, the change), which was very challenging for me. I wasn’t comfortable with this sign, it didn’t feel right. The visual nature of BSL does cause a lot of issues in instances like this.”

Joe gave an example: “Old-fashioned signs such as father or policeman are common, yet gender neutral options such as police person isn’t seen as often as a visual sign. It feels like visual signs are either or, there has never really been a third option or gender fluid option.”

Joe Dunn

(he/they) Queer Deaf Trans Artist



Jamie said: “From my experience growing up with a non-LGBTQ+ d/Deaf family, they can often be old-fashioned signers. I felt like my BSL just didn’t match. There is a problem with some signs, and there are many words in English which do not have signs, this is a problem too. For example, gay, trans or ace (a-sexual). I am not trans, but it is important we have inclusive signs for these identities.”

Jamie Rea

(he/him) LGBTQ+ BSL Consultant



Joe discussed their experiences of realising they were trans later in life, due to language barriers and lack of queer culture in mainstream BSL: “When I realised I was trans I was 30. There was a process of education I went through, learning terms and definitions which were quite new to me. People had been out in society, and on TV, but I saw this through subtitles which used problematic terms such as ‘cross-dressing’ to describe trans people.”

What is best practice for BSL interpreters when working with Queer d/Deaf people?

LEARN

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Jamie signed: *“I would recommend BSL interpreters who want to ensure they are inclusive attend SQIFF (an LGBTQ+ d/Deaf film festival). This is a great way that hearing people can really learn the language and inclusive terms and embrace new terminologies.”*

Jamie Rea

(he/him) LGBTQ+ BSL Consultant



Jamie (left) signing at a SQIFF event (Credit: Tiu Makkonen)

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Joe added: *“Doing things like watching queer films, or interpreting for (or shadowing at) queer events, there is so much diversity within that that people can experience and take in. You’ll meet all kinds of people from very different communities and this will broaden your understanding.”*

Joe Dunn

(he/they) Queer Deaf Trans Artist

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Leah highlighted: *“There are places where you can go as a BSL interpreter, to shadow other queer BSL interpreters. Places such as LGBT Health and Wellbeing, LGBT Youth Scotland, Equality Network etc. there are so many opportunities!”*

Leah Francisco

(she/her) Deaf LGBTQ+ Activist

ASK

All expressed: *“Don’t be afraid to ask! It is okay to say, I am not sure or confident with this sign. This shows you are being open, respectful and honest. We know this is a sensitive topic and the best thing is to be open and honest about what you do and don’t know.”*

Joe signed: *“It’s about asking around. Talking to d/Deaf people. Saying “do you have a sign for this?” and finger spell the word that you mean! This way you’ll get a sign that has the d/Deaf stamp of approval from the d/Deaf person you’re working with. It is about developing and evolving BSL. And sometimes we (queer d/Deaf folk) won’t know the answer, and then we have to go away and create a sign by researching and developing to progress the language.*

We know BSL interpreters feel nervous about the language developing, it is fine to say that you are a bit worried. You can say “Can you explain to me how you identify?” or email us before meeting and ensure you have all the information you’d need to understand who we are. We are people at the end of the day.”

Joe Dunn

(he/they) Queer Deaf Trans Artist

Jamie added: *“Work with us, learn from us, if you want to improve.”*

Jamie Rea

(he/him) LGBTQ+ BSL Consultant

TRAINING

Leah added: *“We need more training. There needs to be much more, and it needs to be out there (and available). They [interpreters] need to learn these signs too, not just the queer d/Deaf community. They need to be more inclusive overall... It’s important that interpreters meet LGBTQ+ people and ask them their pronouns etc, so when they meet people this is part of how they introduce themselves. Don’t be scared to ask, we’re not gonna bite you!”*

“There also needs to be more thought around funding. There needs to just be more funding actually, There are lots of events and we need the access”.

Leah Francisco

(she/her) Deaf LGBTQ+ Activist

Which BSL signs do you think need to be changed?

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Joe signed: *“Examples like policeman, or other occupations, are integrated to visual ideas of gender. This is very common in BSL, but is also due to the fact society is so ingrained in these gender norms. We make assumptions based on people’s gender: a mechanic, we think, oh a man? We should try to move away from this automatic thinking.”*

Joe Dunn

(he/they) Queer Deaf Trans Artist

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Jamie highlighted the need for inclusive language: *“Terms like ladies and gentlemen at theatres, this is something I want to see fizzle out. I want to see people, refer to us as people! BSL interpreters don’t have to interpret spoken language either (when interpreting to an audience), you are matching the meaning. If you know in front of you, you have LGBTQ+ people who are d/Deaf, you can say “hello all”, this is welcoming and inclusive. Sometimes not interpreting direct speech can deny a d/Deaf person their right to challenge, their right to say ‘well that actually isn’t an inclusive term’, so it is tricky. But you just have to be aware and sometimes it gives the hearing person an opportunity to learn.”*

Jamie Rea

(he/him) LGBTQ+ BSL Consultant

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Leah added: *“I dislike the sign for gender, I actually use my own sign. We shouldn’t use the traditional gender sign (which is very binary e.g. man/woman) as this is not inclusive of non-binary people. Similarly, the sign for ‘people’ is very man/woman. I don’t like this either.”*

Leah Francisco

(she/her) Deaf LGBTQ+ Activist



‘People’ BSL sign: index finger waggling down

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Jamie added: *“I like people for this sign. I think this is good!”*

“The sign for sibling, which is more gender neutral than brother or sister, is also how I imagine it to be.”

Should queer signs be created by the d/Deaf Queer community only?

The group generally accepted that a queer d/Deaf person would be most appropriate for creating these signs, but highlighted that queer hearing people who sign can also create these signs, if they are willing to discuss them and “hand them over” to the d/Deaf queer community.



Jamie said: **“Difficult one! Sometimes there are no signs for words which already exist in the English language, and someone might need to transfer this over to interpret it. I think, in this situation it is fine for a hearing queer person to create a sign.”**

Jamie Rea

(he/him) LGBTQ+ BSL Consultant



Leah highlighted: **“I think it is about, when is this sign confirmed? I think it is okay for a hearing queer person to temporarily create a sign in a situation if they know the culture, especially in comparison to a d/Deaf non-queer person who doesn’t know anything about queer culture.”**

Leah Francisco

(she/her) Deaf LGBTQ+ Activist



Group photo of panel members

Should heterosexual people interpret for LGBTQ+ events?



Joe began: *“I think it is best to have an LGBTQ+ interpreter as the safe space must feel safe, and it is more likely to feel this way if the interpreter is queer also. Sometimes, straight people can be a bit old fashioned in their views and this is hard. Maybe they don’t mean it in a harmful way, but this is the outcome.”*

Joe Dunn

(he/they) Queer Deaf Trans Artist



Jamie: *“If there are no other interpreters that are queer available on the specific day you need an interpreter, then yes. We want there to be access, you know. If you are not an ally, then you need to be being one for these kind of events as they need to be safe spaces. If you are a straight person and you want to be involved in the queer d/Deaf community, you have to be honest and understand you need to be aware of the culture and language.”*

Jamie Rea

(he/him) LGBTQ+ BSL Consultant



Joe added: *“Allies and allyship are very important. When I go to an event and I see a queer interpreter, I feel it’s a safe space. I feel they understand me a little bit more. There are not enough queer interpreters, this needs to change.”*



All agreed there needs to be more investment in LGBTQ+ interpreters, with Jamie adding: *“I want to see more LGBTQ+ interpreters being represented on stage at LGBTQ+ events. I want to see a trans person who is an interpreter. Where is that at the moment?”*

What's next?



Leah signed: *“The advances in BSL need to be taken beyond the queer d/Deaf community, and into the sectors which are adjacent to LGBTQ+ work.”*

Leah Francisco

(she/her) Deaf LGBTQ+ Activist



Joe added: *“Really, for me, it is about getting queer d/Deaf people together. We have different regional signs in Scotland, England, Ireland and Wales – we need to work together. We need to expand our inclusive signs!”*

Joe Dunn

(he/they) Queer Deaf Trans Artist



Jamie highlighted: *“I think, we need to be saying: where is the money? Where is the funding? When you ask hearing organisations for funding, they often say “how will it benefit us?”. In order to develop the BSL language, there is so much to be done. It is easy to talk and talk, we need the money and funds to be able to create the safe spaces where these discussions can take place. And where people who have busy lives can contribute and aren't excluded.”*

Jamie Rea

(he/him) LGBTQ+ BSL Consultant



Twin Cities Pride Parade 2018 (Credit: Tony Webster)



Joe added: *“Where is the money and support for development? We need to be asking this.”*



Leah added: *“There are so many queer people who have highlighted that they don't feel comfortable going to d/Deaf organisations. Who knows why. Maybe they are not out? But this needs to change.”*

Resources

Organisations

LGBT Health and Wellbeing – www.lgbthealth.org.uk

LGBT Health & Wellbeing promotes the health, wellbeing and equality of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT+) adults (16+) in Scotland. We welcome the entire diversity of the LGBT+ community including non-binary, queer, intersex, asexual people and all identities under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella.

Deaf Rainbow – www.deafrainbowuk.org.uk

Deaf Rainbow provides information and resources for Deaf LGBTIQ+ people, along with everyone else.

The Equality Network – www.equality-network.org

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

Scottish Trans Alliance – www.scottishtrans.org

Scottish Trans Alliance works for gender identity and gender reassignment equality and human rights in Scotland. Scottish Trans strive for everyone in Scotland to be safe and valued whatever their gender identity and to have full freedom in their gender expression.

LGBT Youth Scotland – www.lgbtyouth.org.uk

LGBT Youth are Scotland's national charity for LGBTI young people, working with 13–25 year olds across the country.

Stonewall Scotland – www.stonewallscotland.org.uk

Stonewall stand for lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer, questioning and ace (LGBTQ+) people everywhere. Stonewall imagines a world where all LGBTQ+ people are free to be ourselves and can live our lives to the full.

Groups

Scottish Deaf Network Facebook page – www.facebook.com/groups/1454239438028454

Resources

Deaf and LGBTQ+: A Community Discussion by LGBT Health and Wellbeing
www.lgbthealth.org.uk/resource/deaf-lgbtq-community-discussion-report

Guest panellist David Ellington chats with Disability Arts Online about recent improvements in Queer and Trans Deaf representation in the UK in film: www.disabilityarts.online/magazine/opinion/queer-and-deaflynn-stewart-taylor-and-david-ellington-chat-filmmaking-in-bsl

Information, support, advice, resources and representation for Deaf people who identify within the LGBTIQ+ community: www.deaflgbtqiqa.org.uk