

Opening up Libraries for Deaf People



STEVE CRUMP, from Action Deafness Books, encourages greater consideration of the needs of D/deaf library users.

With one in seven of the population experiencing deafness and hearing loss in some form, equivalent to 9m people, it is clear that the library and information world has a responsibility to these users. In particular, to provide access in a way that overcomes the challenges of library environments, staff practices and communication barriers so often experienced by deaf people. But more of this later – what do we mean by deafness and who are deaf people?

Deafness is quite simply the inability to hear or a hearing impairment and it can be experienced in a number of forms. Of the 9 million people that are known to be deaf, 8.3m are 'Hard of Hearing'. This group is normally comprised of older people who are experiencing acquired hearing loss as part of the aging process and who use hearing aids to assist their hearing. Some 123,000 are 'Deafened.' This refers to people who were originally hearing but have lost it through illness, infection or an accident. There are 50-70,000 British Sign Language users. This group is formed of those individuals who were born profoundly Deaf or who became profoundly Deaf at an early age. There are also 24,000 deafblind people within the UK; people that are both deaf and visually impaired. The statistics show us that this constituency is both large and diverse.

At the newly established social enterprise 'Action Deafness Books', the term 'D/deaf' is used to embrace and represent the diversity of the deaf community. The founder, Steve Crump, explains "The big 'D' in D/deaf represents the profoundly deaf sign community – those whose first language is British Sign Language and who see themselves as a distinct linguistic and cultural minority, whose needs are largely ignored by the mainstream. The small 'd' represents the deafened, hard of hearing and deafblind communities that we also work with."

Recently established to promote D/deaf literacy and D/deaf writing, funded through the sales of books and DVDs on D/deafness, Action Deafness Books has already had much to

do with the library and information sector. Action Deafness also recognises the importance of providing British Sign Language training to individuals and corporate clients alike. Lauren Francis comments; "We stock books and DVDs on British Sign Language so, naturally, many of our students browse the titles we hold and buy them. They often comment on how few books and DVDs on D/deaf issues and sign language are held in their local libraries – that you can have a whole shelf on a foreign language, but next to nothing on British Sign Language! We've therefore been approaching public and school libraries in Leicestershire and Warwickshire to say, 'look at these resources, look what's available – please use them!'"

Initial responses have been good, with library staff keen to learn what materials are available and how also libraries can be made more accessible to D/deaf people. Action Deafness Books has also focussed on providing awareness to profoundly D/deaf people of the importance of libraries; that there is a wealth of learning, knowledge and information ready to be accessed.

Action Deafness Books is also working to increase awareness by publishing D/deaf authors as well as works on the D/deaf experience. These materials are available either as a recorded DVD in British Sign Language or in print. Another interesting dimension for Action Deafness Books is that a number of D/deaf people have said that they are interested in working in publishing, book distribution, book sales and... wait for it... libraries! What a way to promote D/deaf role models and to challenge the old, negative stereotypes of 'deaf and dumb.' It's hard to believe that these perceptions still exist in this day and age, but unfortunately they do.

So how do D/deaf people see libraries today – what are the positive points to note and what are the challenges?

In essence the D/deaf experience distils into three areas. These are the library building – its layout and design, staff practices – communicating with D/deaf people and lastly the resources that a library should be seen to stock – BSL books, DVDs and 'literature' on D/deaf issues, culture and the D/deaf experience.

Most libraries are, today, well laid out and the materials held within, well signposted. Following visual clues, most D/deaf people would be able to find the books and DVDs they are looking for. It is when interacting with staff that many of these issues manifest. Most D/deaf people, whether profoundly deaf BSL users or hard of hearing people with hearing aids, look for some lip reading clues to support their interaction. Does the building environment support this? Are public and counter areas well lit? Are visual distractions and obstructions minimised? Is there a great deal of background noise, as many D/deaf people find background noise hugely difficult to cope with? Is the enquiry counter or public service desk fitted with an induction loop?

"Hearing aids are a bit of a myth" says Steve Crump. "I use one – don't think they that give you instant and quality hearing. They don't! In essence they are amplifiers and as amplifiers they big up every sound in the vicinity, like road



Pictured: Action Deafness Books' Lauren Francis hosts a young visitor
Picture: Action Deafness Books

noise, the white hum of conversation and more. An 8 hour day with a hearing aid can be quite a chore. But when public service desks are fitted with a loop, life becomes a bit easier. I can switch my hearing aid to 'T' and background noise falls away – so long as the speaker is close to the microphone and speaks clearly. And of course, that the loop works. Regular checking of such equipment is essential!"

Another environmental consideration is the provision of text telephone facilities, such as Minicomms. The D/deaf community rely heavily on email and SMS services to communicate with each other on a daily basis. The use of Minicomms is still common, as is the use of a text to speech service operated by the Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID), called 'TypeTalk'. Does the library have a Minicom and, more importantly, do staff know how to use it? When 'TypeTalk' call and say that are handling a call from a D/deaf person, who wishes to renew the books they have out on loan, do your library staff freeze – or do they calmly manage the call?

Confidence in dealing with D/deaf people face to face, comes from having a degree of corporate and individual D/deaf awareness. For example, employing clear communication strategies such as speaking clearly and a little slower than normal with background noise minimised can make a huge difference to the D/deaf customer. Also the use of subtitles and sign language on service information videos provides access to the community. An understanding of how and when to use sign language interpreters effectively and appropriately will ensure that D/deaf people have more confidence in accessing the service. Advertising the use of interpreters at events like the library's planned programme of activities will allow D/deaf people to feel included. "We've seen an increasing trend, lately, of libraries offering sessions where local authors read from their works or hold book signing sessions. These very welcome activities can often exclude D/deaf BSL users, but with a BSL interpreter present, full access can be ensured." says Lauren.

Whilst some libraries maintain a register of local interpreters, qualified to the requirements of the award body Signature (formerly CACDP – Council for the Advancement of Communication with Deaf People), others have encouraged staff to learn BSL with funding provided from the Council's training budget. "We've had a number of library and information professionals on BSL courses which are provided by Action

Deafness Books, as part of its Knowledge Programme" said Steve Crump. "They tend to pick up the linguistic intricacies of BSL quickly and assimilate the detail well!"

Students studying BSL as well as those D/deaf students within education often find the choices afforded by their local libraries are limited or out of date with regards to books and DVDs relating to deafness in general. Lauren Francis, "In our experience, profoundly D/deaf people have access to little information in their own language. In many cases, libraries are not sure what resources to stock. We've been working to address this – to show that a balanced selection – eg. baby signing, BSL reference materials for people learning sign language, D/deaf culture, works written by D/deaf people, both fiction and non-fiction, D/deafness and education etc. – can be provided on a limited budget. Furthermore, that D/deaf people respond very positively when they see material that is relevant to learning British Sign Language and also D/deaf culture."

But perhaps it is policy that needs reviewing? It certainly seems that where a comprehensive collection of D/deaf books & DVDs can be found, where subtitled and closed captioned videos are promoted, that this is repeatedly the result of an individual staff member's interest rather than acquisition or library policy.

"Perhaps the answer is an ad-hoc local user group that can meet occasionally with library staff to review the resources held and to also support the development of good staff practice?" observed Steve Crump. "That staff become familiar with D/deaf people and recognise them. We've started some work in this respect with Library service in Leicester and also at the University of Leicester's library. The initial signs are good".

In addressing environments and looking at staff practices, it is clear that D/deaf people can be positioned to access the library and information services they wish or require. Staff awareness is critical as is the development of policy which engages D/deaf users and enables them to shape service provision.

"We are making progress but as always there's so much more we could do. With libraries at the forefront of both the information and communication revolution, we look forward to doing more" says Lauren.

Steve Crump is from Action Deafness Books - adbooks@actiondeafness.org.uk ; www.actiondeafness.org.uk