



Royal Association for Deaf people

Deaf Advance:

**Deaf people, employment and
career progression**

April 2021



About RAD

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Since 1841, the Royal Association for Deaf people (RAD) has worked to ensure that deaf people have access to services in British Sign Language (BSL). From supporting children, young people and their families; to helping deaf people find work; to befriending older people; we are here to make sure the people who use our services get the support they want, when they need it and that it is accessible to them.

Amongst the services we offer is our **DeafAdvance** programme, through which we provide career advancement and training for deaf people, helping to break down barriers to employment and career progression. This includes careers advice and support, employment information, management training and employer engagement. We also provide deaf awareness training for employers and businesses.



What is BSL?

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British Sign Language (BSL) is the signed language of the deaf community in the UK. A rich and complex visual-spatial language, it involves a combination of hand shapes, facial expressions, lip patterns and body language.

BSL has its own grammar and sentence structure and is not a signed equivalent of English. For the majority of deaf people in the UK, English is a second or third language, whilst some may struggle to understand written English (e.g. the average reading age of deaf young people is substantially lower than that of their hearing peers).

Language is important. Providing information and advice in BSL – the first or preferred language of deaf people in the UK – is critical, providing equitable access and empowerment.

There are estimated to be around **87,000 deaf BSL users in the UK**,¹ though the figure is likely to be much higher.

¹ British Deaf Association (BDA): <https://bda.org.uk/help-resources/>

Background

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Between October and December 2020 we carried out a **national survey** of deaf people to learn more about the issues, challenges and aspirations of deaf people in relation to employment and career progression (see [Appendix](#)). A total of 53 deaf people took part.² Most respondents were based in London or the South East, but there were also participants from the West Country, Yorkshire and elsewhere in the country.

Deaf people and employment – the current situation

One of the reasons for undertaking this research is that we know that **deaf people are at a particular disadvantage when it comes to accessing the labour market**, and that this inequality is entrenched from an early age. For instance:

- The reading age of deaf students leaving school is below the national average;³
- On average, deaf children have achieved an entire grade less than their hearing peers at GCSE level for at least the past 5 years;⁴
- Deaf people whose main language is BSL are often more likely to have no qualifications;⁵
- Deaf people are twice as likely to be out of work as their hearing peers.⁶

A combination of poor literacy rates and under-qualification, together with a lack of accessible careers advice, creates a perfect storm for deaf people trying to secure employment, with many struggling to find work until they are well into their 20s or 30s. The Covid-19 pandemic has also had a devastating impact on disabled people in general, with 71% saying that their work has been impacted by the pandemic.⁷

We hope that this report sheds new light on these challenges, as well as providing fresh insight into emerging issues and challenges.

² Three-quarters (77%) described themselves as a deaf BSL user; 50% as deaf oral; 13% as hard of hearing; 3% as deafened. Just over half (53%) said BSL was their preferred method of communication; 20% Sign Supported English (SSE); 17% spoken English; 7% lip-reading.

³ *Older Deaf People and Social Care: A Review* (Alys Young PhD, University of Manchester, 2014): commissioned by RAD and [sonus].

⁴ 'Deaf pupils failed by education system for fifth consecutive year', (National Deaf Children's Society [NDCS], August 2020): <https://www.ndcs.org.uk/about-us/news-and-media/latest-news/deaf-pupils-failed-by-education-system-for-fifth-consecutive-year/>

⁵ For instance, Londoners whose main language is BSL are almost twice as likely to have no qualifications as the London average, and less than half as likely to have a degree level qualification. *Equality, diversity and inclusion evidence base for London* (Greater London Authority, 2019): <https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/equality--diversity-and-inclusion-evidence-base>

⁶ *Deaf Works Everywhere* (NDCS, 2020): <https://www.ndcs.org.uk/media/5665/dwe-yab-report.pdf>

⁷ *Locked out of the labour market* (Leonard Cheshire, 2020): <https://www.leonardcheshire.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Locked-out-of-the-labour-market-report.pdf>



Summary

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- Only a quarter (24%) of respondents said they had received careers advice in sign language.
- Several factors continue to hinder deaf people's ability to access employment, such as a lack of deaf awareness amongst employers, communication issues and barriers to voluntary work.
- 6 in 10 said they had not been given progression opportunities during their career.
- One of the most commonly cited barriers to career progression was a lack of deaf role models within work.
- Accessibility and inclusivity of workplace environments remains a significant problem e.g.:
 - 83% of respondents said they had been excluded from conversations with colleagues
 - 69% reported feeling lonely at work
 - 59% had been left out of social events
 - 34% had experienced bullying or acts of unkindness at work
- Amongst our suggestions are the need for more accessible careers advice in BSL; greater deaf awareness training for employers and Jobcentre Plus staff; and tailored guidance and support for employers.

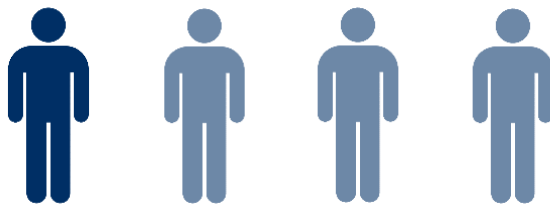
1. Careers advice

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Good quality careers advice is crucial to helping someone make an informed decision about what they want to do in life. For deaf people whose first or preferred language is BSL, it is even more important that any such advice is provided in an accessible manner.

However, the results of our survey show that the experiences of deaf people in this regard are overwhelmingly a negative one. For instance:

- Three-quarters (76%) of respondents said they either had no careers advice at school or had advice that was not in sign language;
- Only a quarter (24%) received careers advice in sign language;
- Of those who received careers advice at school, two-thirds (68%) said their careers advisor did not understand deaf culture, language or community;
- Of those who received careers advice at school, less than half (41%) said the careers advisor thought they could do the job they wanted.



Only **1 in 4** said they received careers advice in sign language

These results are damning, and suggest that **many deaf people have never had access to careers advice in their first or preferred language**. What's more, of those who did receive careers advice at school, it is clear that their advisors took a largely dismissive view of their career ambitions. It is therefore sadly unsurprising that the career aspirations of young deaf people are lower than those of their hearing peers, as has been reported by the likes of the National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS).⁸

To remedy this, more and better careers advice and guidance is needed for deaf people of all ages, but particularly young deaf people,⁹ and this advice needs to be provided by specialist organisations, in BSL. We also recommend that basic BSL courses be made available to all deaf people from a young age.

I always wanted to be a police officer. Career advisor told me that I can't do it because I can't hear...

⁸ *Deaf Works Everywhere*

⁹ In schools, for instance, educators and careers advisors need to be mindful of the Gatsby Benchmarks of Good Career Guidance, and in particular Benchmark 3: Addressing the needs of each pupil ("a school's careers programme should embed equality and diversity considerations throughout"): <https://www.gatsby.org.uk/education/focus-areas/good-career-guidance>

2. Employment and career progression

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Applying for a job can be a very stressful, and often disheartening, experience. For many deaf job seekers, this is even more so. For instance, respondents to our survey highlighted several factors that hindered their ability to access employment, including barriers to gaining unpaid work experience, **a lack of deaf awareness amongst employers** and communication issues.

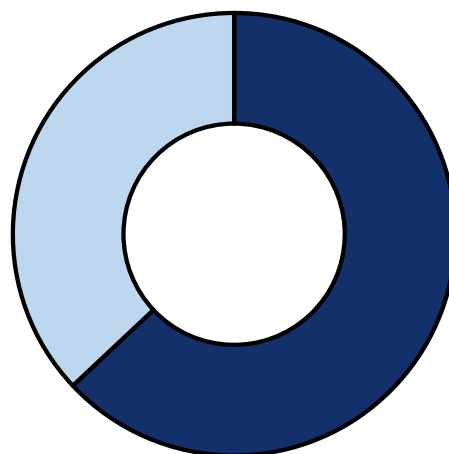
There is no Access to Work equivalent for voluntary work to cover communication support, and voluntary work is often required to get into jobs

Not being able to call up employers and ask for further information regarding a role. This would help with creating a personalised CV.

When in work, having opportunities for personal and professional development, and to learn new skills, is key to making an employee feel valued, whilst the ability to progress in work and move up the 'career ladder' is important to many.

However, the results of our survey show that for many deaf people such opportunities do not exist. For example, 6 in 10 (60%) said they had not been given progression opportunities during their career, whilst nearly two-thirds (63%) had encountered barriers to career progression.

Have you ever encountered barriers to career progression?



■ Yes ■ No

A number of issues were cited as barriers to career progression, foremost of which was **a lack of deaf role models within work**. Insufficient training and CPD opportunities were also significant obstacles, whilst several respondents mentioned low self-confidence, and employers' low expectations of deaf employees.

Peer mentoring schemes for deaf employees should be encouraged within the workplace, whilst employers must ensure that tailored CPD opportunities are provided. Deaf employees must also not be excluded from networking and social events, which provide valuable opportunities for developing 'soft skills', as well as making professional and social connections.

Further, it is important that any support provided to deaf employees does not cease, or ease off, upon gaining employment – a pathway and package of support must be provided *throughout* a deaf employees' journey.

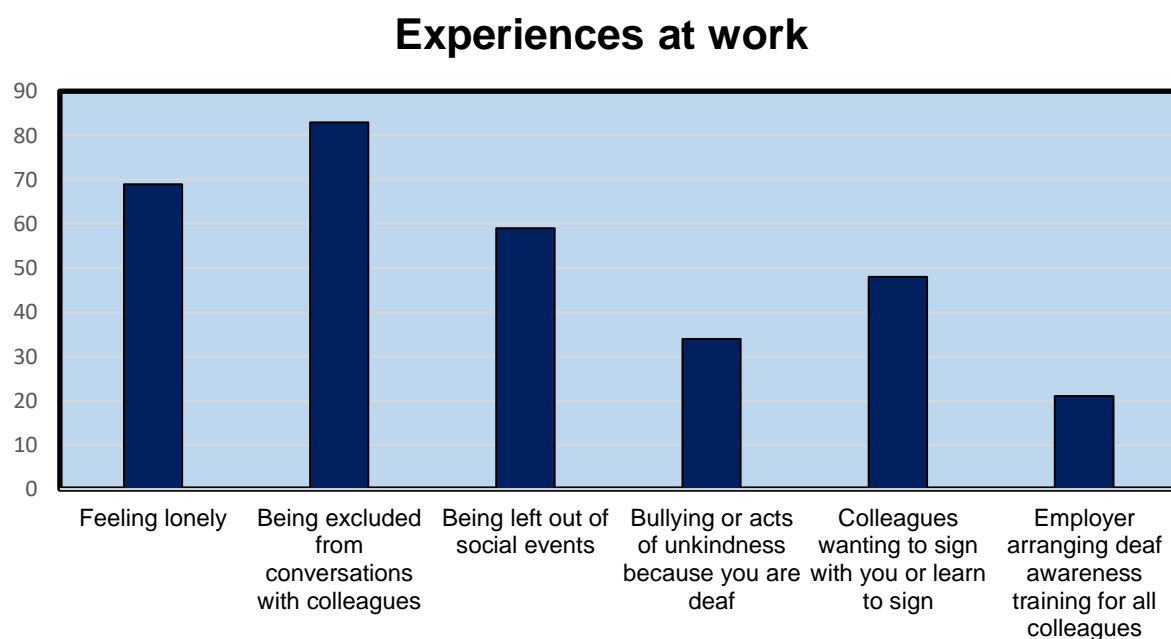
**There
are few higher level disabled employees
within companies. Need a standard
within industry that encourages and
recognises talented disabled employees
and
encourages progression into higher
level roles**

**Few opportunities to
specialise and diversify.
Lack of networking
opportunities due to
communication barriers**

3. In the workplace

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Encouragingly, according to our survey, of those who were in work the vast majority (74%) of deaf respondents were happy in their job. However, there remain a number of significant barriers around the accessibility and inclusivity of workplace settings. For instance, whilst most (87%) respondents said they were aware of the Government's Access to Work scheme, almost two-thirds (63%) had not been given equal opportunities in the workplace and just over half (53%) did not feel supported at work. Our survey also looked in more detail at some of the specific workplace experiences that deaf people encounter, as shown by the graph below.



Being excluded from conversations with colleagues was the most commonly cited workplace experience, with 83% of respondents saying they had encountered this. More than two-thirds (69%) reported feeling lonely at work, whilst over half (59%) had been left out of social events. Shockingly, a third (34%) had experienced bullying or acts of unkindness at work because they were deaf.

More positively, nearly half (48%) said their colleagues had wanted to sign or to learn to sign with them. However, only 2 in 10 (21%) said their employer had arranged deaf awareness training for all staff.

What this data tells us is that, despite government support schemes like Access to Work – and behaviour change initiatives such as Disability Confident – workplaces continue to be excluding environments for many deaf people. It is also clear that deaf awareness is severely lacking. Indeed, **“greater deaf awareness amongst employers” was one of the central messages to come out of our survey.** Having staff, at all levels of an organisation, who are educated and knowledgeable about deaf culture, is of critical importance to deaf employees. It follows that staff who have had deaf awareness training are likely to be more

understanding, positive and encouraging towards deaf colleagues, which is important given that many deaf employees suffer from low self-confidence.

Some respondents also highlighted the fact that starting a new job could be a particularly stressful experience, with anxiety and uncertainty around how welcoming and accessible a new employer would be. With this in mind, it is in the interests of employers to redouble their efforts to ensure that deaf employees feel welcome and secure when they start a new job. This could mean, for instance, making reasonable adjustments well in advance of a deaf employee's start date – ensuring all of their Access to Work requirements are in place – and arranging a mentor or buddy scheme for the first few weeks or months (with a colleague who is ideally deaf themselves, or who has had extensive deaf awareness training).

Finally, whilst Disability Confident is a welcome initiative – and one that has led to many improvements in the accessibility of employment practices – we believe much more needs to be done to ensure the scheme does not fall into the trap of simply becoming a 'tick box exercise'. To this end, we would like to see a greater emphasis placed on deafness in future, and for the needs of deaf employees to be made more explicit in any related guidance.

Moving jobs is much more stressful for us because we don't know how welcoming and communicative the people will be

For me, moving jobs is a huge undertaking as it takes me 6+ months to get used to new colleagues' speech and language, which is an exhausting process



Case study: getting the right communication support

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Client X is one year into an apprenticeship. During this time, two internal jobs became available at her place of work, for which she had the relevant experience and decided to apply. The employer supplied an 'interpreter' for both interviews, but the client was unsuccessful on both occasions, despite the role being closely matched to her apprenticeship responsibilities.

Client X approached RAD because she felt she had been unfairly disadvantaged at the interview due to her communication provision. For instance, at the first interview, the 'interpreter' was unable to effectively translate the interviewers' dialogue or Client X's responses. Client X later found out that the 'interpreter' was not a qualified professional with the relevant qualifications of NVQ Level 6 in British Sign Language and NVQ Level 6 in Translation or equivalent. The 'interpreter' was not registered on the National Registers of Communication Professionals for Deaf and Deafblind People (NRCPD). There were further problems at the second interview.

This situation made the client feel confused, downhearted and affected her confidence. She also felt strongly that she had been discriminated against, as she had lost an opportunity to secure full-time permanent employment and the potential to advance her career.

Client X spoke to an advisor at RAD about the situation. She had an Access to Work funding agreement in place, but was unaware that she could request funding for Deaf Awareness training for her employer.

After having built her confidence, Client X agreed to speak to her manager and gave us permission to contact him. It was clear that he valued Client X as an employee and wanted to support her progression. Our advisor explained to the manager about Access to Work, Client X's rights to communication support, and the necessity of using qualified professionals to ensure that the client's needs are met. It became clear that there were several departments involved in the booking of communication support, but with no clear path for who was responsible. Client X also informed us that she was shown a list of agencies and told that she had to pick one of them (we learned that the employer had rejected a qualified interpreter for the interviews due to financial considerations).

Our advisor discussed Deaf Awareness training with the manager, who expressed that he would press forward with recommending this for managers and colleagues, and expressed gratitude for the information.

Client X now has suitable communication provision from qualified interpreters with a new agency. She is able to communicate effectively at work and knows what to expect from a qualified, professional interpreter and now checks for their ID and credentials. She feels more confident to raise issues with her employer and to ask for the support that she needs.



Policy recommendations

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1. More and better careers advice is needed for deaf people of all ages, but particularly young deaf people, and this advice needs to be provided by specialist organisations, in BSL.
2. Greater deaf awareness training is urgently needed for Jobcentre Plus (JCP) work coaches, whilst JCPs should employ more specialist deaf advisors and/or outsource this work to specialist deaf organisations.
3. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) should work with employers, businesses and further education institutes to support the promotion of Access to Work, and consider funding a national advertising campaign to boost awareness of the scheme.
4. As a way of strengthening its Disability Confident campaign, the DWP – together with deaf organisations and individuals, and business leaders – should co-design tailored guidance for prospective employers of deaf employees.
5. The Government should commission new research into the barriers faced by deaf people accessing volunteering, and consider reinstating the Access to Volunteering Fund.



What are we doing to help?

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RAD's employment support offer

Careers guidance

We have qualified careers advisors who can support deaf people to explore paths to develop and progress their careers.

Finding employment

Our advisors work with deaf people to support their goals towards securing employment and/or career advancement. This might include working with clients to create a CV, carry out a job search, conduct a mock interview or complete a job application. We also liaise with employers and advise clients about Access to Work, and can signpost to additional support where needed.

Complex and specialist employment support

We can support deaf people to raise a grievance or to resolve a dispute at work, or with more complex problems such as harassment, bullying, redundancy, dismissal and discrimination. We can also refer to an accessible legal service.

Employer engagement

Employers are a key part of breaking down and removing barriers. We work with employers in order to raise deaf awareness, including by providing training and supporting employers to meet their corporate social responsibility.

Future services

To further support the up-skilling of deaf people, we are looking to establish the first management and leadership training centre for deaf people. This will provide accessible training that aligns with training bodies and accreditations, such as the Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM) and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).

Visit our website [here](#) for more information.



Appendix

Survey

1. When you were at school, did you have access to careers advice?

Yes – and it was in sign language

Yes – but it was not in sign language

No

2. Would you say that the careers advisor understood being Deaf?

Yes

No

3. Would you say that the careers advisor thought you could do the job you wanted?

Yes

No

4. Have you ever had access to any other careers advice in sign language?

Yes

No

If 'yes', please state who provided this (e.g. a specific college, further education institute), where and when this was received

5. Are you currently employed?

Yes

No

6. What is your job? (please describe)

7. Are you happy in your role?

Yes

No

8. What are your career aspirations? e.g. what is your ideal job? (please describe)

9. What do you believe is the biggest barrier to securing employment? (please write your answer below)

10. Have you been given progression opportunities during your career?

Yes

No

11. What do you believe is the biggest barrier to career progression? (please write your answer below)

12. Have you ever encountered barriers to career progression?

Yes

No

If 'yes', please explain the barrier(s) you have encountered

13. Do you believe you have been given equal opportunities in the workplace?

Yes

No

14. Do you feel supported at work?

Yes

No

If 'no', what would help? (please write your answer below)

15. Have you ever experienced any of the following at work? (please select as many as apply)

Feeling lonely

Being excluded from conversations with colleagues

Being left out of social events

Bullying or acts of unkindness because you are deaf

Colleagues wanting to sign with you or learn to sign

Employer arranging Deaf Awareness Training for all colleagues

None of the above

16. Are you aware of the Government's Access to Work scheme?

Yes

No



Royal Association for Deaf people

A future of opportunity, achievement and equality for deaf people

