

Deaf & Hard of Hearing Community Engagement



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Introduction

Background

This event is motivated by a crucial commitment to ensuring truly equitable and responsive health and care services within Newham, with a specific focus on the Deaf community. Despite ongoing efforts, significant disparities persist in how Deaf individuals access, understand, and utilise essential healthcare services. This engagement initiative seeks to shed light on these challenges and advocate for improvements to ensure inclusive and accessible care for all residents.

Objectives

- Identify and document specific communication barriers faced by Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals when accessing health and care services in Newham.
- Understand the impact of current booking systems and digital platforms on the accessibility of healthcare for this community.
- Gather direct feedback and lived experiences from Deaf residents to inform actionable recommendations for service improvement.

Key Findings

Communication Barriers

- Booking British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters often has wait times of up to two weeks, and last-minute bookings are difficult. Some agencies or interpreters are unavailable, especially after 5pm, impacting emergency care access due to budget limitations.
- Issues arise with GPs claiming to have booked interpreters when the service hasn't received the request, leading to missed appointments.
- Video Relay Service (VRS) interpreters frequently experience technical issues like freezing or dropping calls, and not all GPs offer face-to-face interpreting.
- Misunderstandings occur when doctors assume American Sign Language (ASL) is interchangeable with BSL, causing miscommunication.
- Family members often have to act as interpreters, which is not ideal or inclusive.

"I need to be able to explain my issues face to face" – Deaf resident

Digital and Booking System Barriers

- Booking systems frequently lack an option to request an interpreter.
- GPs sometimes book the wrong appointments due to misunderstanding.

- GPs often attempt to confirm appointments via phone calls, which is ineffective.
- The NHS app presents challenges due to digital skill levels.

Impact on Patient Care and Rights

- A lack of an interpreter led to a serious allergic reaction for one resident due to misdiagnosis.
- Patients are often left to advocate for themselves. There is a lack of awareness in hospitals regarding deaf patients' right to an interpreter.
- Deaf residents express a strong desire for the same access and equal care as hearing people.

"I want the same access as hearing people" – *Deaf resident*

Recommendations

Improve Interpreter Provision

- Increase funding for BSL interpreters to ensure wider availability, especially for urgent and out-of-hours appointments.
- Implement a robust and reliable system for booking BSL interpreters, ensuring requests are received and confirmed by interpreting services to prevent missed appointments.
- Ensure all GPs offer face-to-face interpreting services and invest in stable Video Relay Service (VRS) technology to prevent freezing and drop-offs.
- Provide clear guidance and training to healthcare staff on the distinction between BSL and ASL to avoid miscommunication.
- Emphasise and uphold the patient's right to an interpreter, making it clear that it is their choice if they prefer to sign.

Enhance Staff Deaf Awareness and Communication Skills

- Mandate comprehensive deaf awareness training for all healthcare professionals, including doctors, nurses, and reception staff, focusing on direct engagement with deaf patients.
- Educate staff on appropriate communication strategies, such as removing masks when possible, to facilitate lip-reading.
- Ensure doctors and nurses address deaf patients directly, rather than solely communicating with hearing family members.

- Implement a policy for longer appointment times for to accommodate communication needs.

Address Digital and Booking Barriers

- Integrate an option to request an interpreter directly into GP and hospital booking systems.
- Develop alternative, accessible confirmation methods for appointments that do not rely on phone calls.
- Improve the accessibility and user-friendliness of digital platforms like the NHS app, considering varying digital skills and connectivity issues.

Establish Clear Protocols and Advocacy

- Develop a clear escalation process for when communication fails, empowering patients and staff to address issues effectively.
- Reduce reliance on hearing family members or handwritten notes as primary communication methods, promoting inclusive and professional interpreting services.

Conclusion

The current healthcare system often fails to adequately meet the needs of deaf individuals, leading to significant communication challenges, reduced access to care, and the potential for serious health consequences, such as misdiagnosis. The consistent themes of a lack of deaf awareness, inadequate interpreter services, and digital barriers underscore a systemic issue that compromises the right of deaf people to equal healthcare. Addressing these issues is crucial to ensure that deaf residents receive the same standard of care and access as hearing individuals.

Next Steps

The next step should involve a multi-stakeholder collaborative effort to implement the recommendations, including representatives from healthcare providers (GPs, hospitals), deaf community organisations, interpreting services, and policymakers. This collaboration should focus on developing and implementing standardised policies and procedures for communication support, conducting comprehensive deaf awareness training programs, and investing in accessible technology to overcome booking and digital barriers. Regular monitoring and evaluation of these initiatives will be essential to ensure their effectiveness and make necessary adjustments to improve the healthcare experiences of deaf individuals.



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