



Executive  
Summary



# Inequality of Opportunity

Barriers to further and higher education, training and employment for people with hearing loss in Northern Ireland



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## Introduction

In 2016, Action on Hearing Loss in Northern Ireland commissioned independent research to identify common barriers to accessing further education (FE) and higher education (HE), training and employment for people with hearing loss – and potential solutions to overcoming them.

This research was carried out by Fiona Boyle Associates.

The aims of the research were to:

- gather evidence of numbers, participation levels and take-up of employment and opportunities to study for people who are deaf
- gather evidence of experiences and common barriers in the areas of education, training and employment
- establish whether people who are deaf or have hearing loss do have equality of access – and equal experiences and benefits arising from their experiences of FE, HE, training and employment.

This executive summary sets out the key findings.

Full copies of the research are available at:

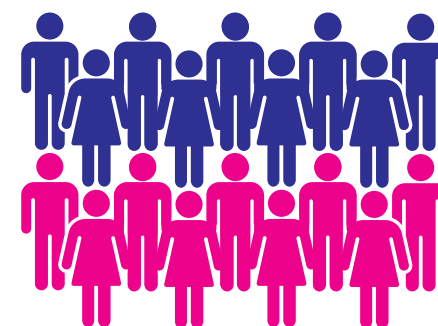
[actiononhearingloss.org.uk/you-can-help/campaigns-and-influencing/working-for-change/](http://actiononhearingloss.org.uk/you-can-help/campaigns-and-influencing/working-for-change/)

## Methodology

The methodology incorporated two main approaches:

### 1. Desk-based analysis of current research, materials and statistics

This focused, in particular, on the number of people who are deaf and unemployed or economically inactive in Northern Ireland; the number of people who are deaf in further and higher education; and the availability and take-up of services for people who are deaf or have hearing loss when accessing employment or training.



# 310,000

people are deaf or have hearing loss or tinnitus in Northern Ireland.

### 2. Primary research with key stakeholders

Staff feedback was obtained from seven staff members in one-to-one interviews and one focus group with six members of staff from Action on Hearing Loss's Employment Team.

Six people who use Action on Hearing Loss services were interviewed on a one-to-one basis; email feedback was obtained from two people who currently use, or have previously used, our services; and two focus groups were held with 12 people who use our services in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry.

Meetings, telephone discussions and email conversations were held with officials from the Department for Education and Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

## Findings

### Quantitative findings

- 310,000<sup>1</sup> people are deaf or have hearing loss or tinnitus in Northern Ireland.
- There is no official record of the numbers of people who use sign language as a first language. However, an accepted estimate is that around 3,500 people in Northern Ireland use British Sign Language (BSL) and 1,500 use Irish Sign Language (ISL).
- In Northern Ireland there are 25 fully qualified sign language interpreters, three trainee sign language interpreters, one lipspeaker<sup>2</sup>, four electronic notetakers, one manual notetaker and one speech-to-text reporter (STTR) reporter.
- 10% of disabled people have a degree, or equivalent, compared to 25% of non-disabled people.

<sup>1</sup>NISRA Mid-year population estimates 2016 <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/MYE16-Bulletin.pdf>  
<https://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/about-us/our-research-and-evidence/facts-and-figures/>

<sup>2</sup>National Registers of Communication Professionals working with Deaf and Deafblind people (NRCPD).

- People who are deaf are less likely to be recorded as enrolled at FE College. The level of enrolment is 0.4% of all enrolments – considerably lower than a population incidence of 15.9%<sup>3</sup>.
- The total actual number of students who are deaf at FE Colleges has declined by 20% – from 452 in 2008–09 to 361 in 2014–15.
- Students who are deaf or have hearing loss are more likely to withdraw or drop out than their hearing counterparts (as, indeed, are students with some other disabilities). On average, over the last seven years, the retention rate for students who are deaf or have hearing loss was 68.6% against an overall retention rate of 73% for all students.
- The number of students who are deaf or have hearing loss enrolled at Northern Ireland Higher Education Colleges has declined by 28% over the last seven years – from 160 in 2008–09 to 115 in 2014–15.
- 33% of disabled people are employed in contrast to 79% of non-disabled people<sup>4</sup>.



<sup>3</sup>Action on Hearing Loss

<sup>4</sup>Labour Force Survey (LFS), 2015

## Qualitative findings

There were a number of common themes cutting across the areas of: access to HE, FE and training; getting into employment; and staying in employment.

- **Availability of qualified communication support professionals.** Due to the limited number of qualified sign language interpreters and notetakers available in Northern Ireland, it's important to allow enough lead-in time when making a booking for an appointment, such as a training course, attending a job interview or participating in meetings at work. Not having enough notice for appointments, or lack of information regarding the time of day, location and nature of the appointment, can all have an impact on the communication support available. There was also feedback that the quality of interpretation can vary.
- **Lack of information about support available.** This was in relation to lack of information about options, opportunities and support available in all three areas – FE, HE, training and employment. This theme recurs in other research in this area, particularly in relation to the transition from school onwards.
- **Lack of understanding of high-level English.** For many sign language users, English is a second language. The use of dense or complex terminology, or language that is not Plain English, can present a barrier when it comes to completing application forms, understanding an employment contract, or being able to undertake work-related tasks effectively.
- **Geography.** People living outside of Belfast (and in the North West in particular) feel they have less access to support services and accessible training courses, fewer opportunities to work in 'deaf' organisations where they can gain work experience in an accessible environment, and less access to interpreters due to the distance the interpreters have to travel.



**“I went to a school for the deaf at age 14. I felt stupid... but I wasn’t stupid! It wasn’t a great experience for me... I ended up as a machinist.”**

**“We had communication support workers... there were three of them on a rota – they weren’t good... I didn’t understand what was going on. I withdrew and gave up on it.”**

**“They make comments to put you off – try to block a person from doing a particular course.”**

**“I was losing the information and I was really struggling and, in the end, I left the course.”**

- The impact of these barriers on people who are deaf or have hearing loss is profound and far-reaching – and has implications for their long-term health and wellbeing. A recurring theme throughout the research was the detrimental impact on their mental health as a result of their experiences in HE, training and employment.
- Respondents highlighted both a direct correlation between the need to communicate and be part of the wider world (including tertiary education, training and employment) and their mental health – and the detrimental effect poor experiences have had on their emotional wellbeing. They highlighted their frustration in making multiple applications that led to unproductive interviews (or no interview at all), with no job outcome.

### Barriers to third-level education

Feedback from people who use our service(s) and support service staff has identified a number of barriers to third-level education, often beginning before young people leave school, and continuing during the transition process.

Participants felt that there was a **lack of careers advice** and careers planning available to young deaf people and that, in their experience, teachers and related professionals had repeatedly tried to lower their horizons and make them think twice about their career choices.

A number of participants reported feeling that they were coming from a lower starting point in terms of leaving school with **lower qualifications** and **less confidence** in their own abilities, in comparison to their hearing counterparts.

People reported difficulty in getting onto training courses, or establishing themselves in further education, due to difficulties in accessing the limited number of qualified interpreters.

FE Colleges provide Communication Support Workers, who enable access to communication using a variety of support strategies.

**“If you mention deafness they back off and are not interested.”**

**“There are certain jobs I would love to do – like the police – but I would have failed the medical.”**

**“If I say I need an interpreter... there will be a barrier if I say this.”**

**“Employers pull back when they find out the applicant is deaf – they think, well they are obviously not suitable for the job... there are many examples of where a person is offered an interview and then this is cancelled when the person asks about an interpreter.”**

There is also a **shortage of qualified notetakers**, with participants reporting that admin staff or other students are often used to take notes for them in class, and the resulting quality of the notes is variable.

The **attitudes of teaching staff** appeared to vary greatly. Some participants cited excellent lecturers and teachers who were deaf aware and had helped them. However, it is clear that other young people who are deaf found college and university staff to be their greatest difficulty.

The research also found that students who are deaf or have a hearing loss do not have **equal access to all courses** and all elements of college life.

A number of participants had **withdrawn from college** or university; this outcome was obviously negative for them personally and had a detrimental effect on their career opportunities.

### Barriers to getting a job

Specific barriers were noted in relation to looking for employment and getting a job.

The most frequently mentioned barrier was **employer attitude** and lack of deaf awareness among employers.

People with hearing loss acknowledged that the **nature and range of jobs they may be able to undertake can be limited** by their disability.

As well as finding **job application forms** difficult to understand, a number of participants had an issue about disclosing their hearing loss on it – with many preferring not to.

**Job interviews** can also present a barrier to getting a job, particularly where an interpreter is needed and not provided, or the language used or tasks involved are difficult to understand.

**“Most of the time you don’t get an interview. If you do get an interview, there’s no interpreter and I feel really apprehensive.”**

**“Trying to get work placements and work experience – how is a person going to get this if they have no interpreter?”**

**“I applied for jobs with 39 companies in Northern Ireland – only got two replies and two interviews.”**

**“They didn’t take the time to find out what my hearing loss was and what needed to be done. All they could talk about were the health and safety implications.”**

**“Communication again... the boss treated me differently – I felt it was because I was deaf. I could do the job but they kept giving me the same jobs and tasks over and over again.”**

Getting **work experience** is key to securing employment but the current Access to Work government scheme does not allow employers to apply for funding for communication support for work placements. People reported that, often, their first opportunity to enter the workplace was provided by people they knew or friends of their family.

Overall feedback indicated that the poor or ill-informed attitudes of employers resulted in a lack of opportunity for applicants who are deaf or have hearing loss.

**Lack of confidence** was noted as a barrier for people who are deaf or have hearing loss who are job-seeking after leaving school or college, and when going back to employment after a period at home raising their families.

While participants indicated that they wanted to be employed – for a number of reasons, including their own self-worth and having the same experiences as hearing people – there was some feedback about the **benefits trap** they experience. For many, the benefits they receive are equivalent to a salary, without having to tackle the barriers to getting a job.

## Barriers to staying in employment

This area of research revealed a lot of common issues, in relation to settling into employment and remaining in the job.

Participants reported that there were issues at the **commencement of employment**, where the required ‘reasonable adjustment’ (such as communication support) had not been made in time for their arrival. Participants also said that there is a lack of understanding of the type of individual adjustment that may be required.

A number of people said that their employer did not make enough reasonable adjustments to enable them to **continue to do their job**, and that employer awareness, knowledge and attitudes were often the difficulty.

**“There is an immense difficulty in the workplace because of the tinnitus – lack of understanding by managers and colleagues – they really need support within their own work environment.”**

**“The type of job was boring and repetitive... I would like a job to develop my skills, to develop relationships – but there are limited opportunities to do this.”**

**“When I was working, every day there were limits because it was all hearing people, and they couldn’t communicate with me, so there were barriers there.”**

The onset, or progression, of **tinnitus** can act as a barrier to someone staying in work. Employers are not always aware of the support they can put in place for employees with tinnitus and, in many cases, the employee does not raise the issue with their employer. The noise of open offices and busy environments can be difficult to cope with and sleep problems caused by tinnitus can affect the person’s ability to concentrate at work.

Respondents who were in employment (or who had previously been employed) suggested that they were treated differently to their hearing colleagues and were not given equal **opportunities for promotion** or growth in their career.

Participants noted that they’d felt **socially isolated**, particularly where they were the only person who was deaf or had hearing loss in the workplace.



**“It’s a very inefficient process – there’s no back-up or resources – a lot of people fail and drop out but no one asks about them. It could be so much better and there is the technology.”**

**“One important factor is Access to Work doesn’t fund interpreters for work experience. They only get access when they’re in a job... there is a big gap there.”**

**“I’ve had bad experiences at Job Centres – for example, calling my name even when I’ve told them I’m deaf.”**

**“Job Centres – they never offered an interpreter. Sometimes they offer information in English. There’s a lot of paperwork and questions.”**

## Support to enter and stay in third-level education, training and employment

The research highlighted the type of support provided by the tertiary education sector through Further Education Colleges and Higher Education Institutes. Qualitative feedback pointed to concerns about the **level and consistency of support** in tertiary education: in particular, support to prevent deaf students dropping out; and also the lack of support in place from day one and at subsequent key stages for the student.

The research noted that there are schemes to support disabled people, including those with hearing loss, to access and maintain employment and training. 12% of people who take up the Access to Work scheme are deaf or have hearing loss.<sup>5</sup> However, other research suggests that many people in employment are not aware of the scheme. The scheme guidelines exclude those on work placements, volunteers and self-employed people working less than eight hours per week.

Feedback was received on some negative experiences at **Job Centres**.

Positive feedback was noted in relation to **support provided by Action on Hearing Loss**; although individuals noted the personal impact of repeatedly going for training and looking for employment.

**“I’ve been here before. I felt – is it going to be the same thing again? I know how to set up my CV and what to do in the interviews... I don’t feel I can do much more. I think there is a need for employers to take the chance.”**

## Recommendations for government

### Department for the Economy (DfE)

- Should ensure there are prevalence studies of the numbers of people who are deaf or have hearing loss, with particular reference to the levels of unemployment, economic activity and of HE qualifications.
- Should review its work with employers around deaf awareness, with particular reference to understanding communication needs and the area of high-level English.
- Should consider how best to financially support students in FE, who are not eligible for the Disabled Students’ Allowance.
- Should re-examine options for people who are deaf or have hearing loss in terms of employment support schemes. Low participation and take-up levels point to the need to introduce and implement a more specialist and targeted supported employment model specifically for this group.
- In light of the completion of ‘Work Connect’ in August 2016, and the increase in the number of hours people need to be contracted for in order to be eligible for the Workable programme (minimum 10 hours per week), the guidelines for Access to Work (NI) should be re-examined, particularly with regard to support for individuals on zero-hours contracts. Where possible, consideration should be made for flexibility and enhancements within existing programmes and services that would support disabled people – with a particular focus on those with hearing loss – in part-time work, work placements or other types of employment.

<sup>5</sup>All information in this sub-section has been provided by DE: Disability Employment Service Access to Work Programme Manager.





**The total number of students who are deaf at FE Colleges has declined by 20% – from 452 in 2008–09 to 361 in 2014–15.**

## Department for Education (DE)

- Should create a strategy to enable young people who are deaf to move positively into FE and HE, training and employment. Specifically, to ensure that young people who are deaf have the academic results (particularly in numeracy and literacy) to be able to move on to tertiary education and that information on their needs is passed on at each stage (eg from school to FE college or university). More support should be provided to help make the transition, and outcomes should be monitored and measured.
- In particular, there is a need to further develop and strengthen the transitions programme for young people who are deaf, both in terms of staff on the ground who can assist young people at this crucial stage and also by providing more dedicated and targeted transitions information online and through smartphone technology.

## Cross-departmental

- There should be a cross-departmental approach, in particular involving the Department for Communities and the Department for Education, to review and address the number and level of interpreters registered and available in Northern Ireland; and examine mechanisms to increase this further. BSL and ISL should be embedded in the NI Curriculum and tied into the proposed Sign Language Framework.



**“They made reasonable adjustments, for example, if we were watching a DVD in a staff meeting or training, they gave it to me the day before so I could watch it – and provided a room where I could watch it with the headphones on... They were very patient with me.”**

**“After a team meeting, I said to my boss I can’t follow it at all in a group conversation. The manager did make adjustments – he gave me a list beforehand of exactly what would be discussed. It wasn’t just the agenda it was a purpose-made outline to help me follow.”**

## Recommendations for third-level education providers

### FE colleges and universities

- Should re-examine their information and literature for students with disabilities, including those with hearing loss. In particular, work should be undertaken by FE colleges to ensure appropriate support and intervention with students who are deaf or have hearing loss to prevent drop-out and increase retention levels.
- A series of further recommendations are outlined in the Action on Hearing Loss 2014 report, *Opening Doors: Transitions experiences of young people with hearing loss in Northern Ireland*.

## Recommendations for employers

During the research, participants made a number of practical suggestions about what employers could do:

- Arrange talks and provide information leaflets in the workplace on deafness, hearing loss and tinnitus to increase levels of understanding and awareness among colleagues.
- Arrange an induction and ongoing regular conversations with the employee in relation to the support they need. This will help to ensure that hearing loss is taken seriously and that the employee is valued as a member of staff.
- Research and provide the appropriate assistive equipment – if the employee needs to use a phone at work, the employer should make sure it is the one best suited to their individual needs.
- Recognise and ensure that the employee is able to take a regular break to protect their health and wellbeing.
- Further recommendations are outlined in the 2017 Action on Hearing Loss report, *Working for Change: Improving attitudes to hearing loss in the workplace*.



**Action on Hearing Loss** (formerly RNID) is the largest UK charity helping people who are confronting deafness, tinnitus and hearing loss. We give support and care, develop technology and treatments, and campaign for equality. We enable people to take control of their lives and remove the barriers in their way. We rely on donations to continue our vital work.

### **Questions about deafness, tinnitus or hearing loss?**

Contact our free, confidential Information Line:

Telephone: 028 9023 9619

Textphone: 028 9024 9462

Fax: 028 9031 2032

Mobile: 07587 130 502

Email: [information.nireland@hearingloss.org.uk](mailto:information.nireland@hearingloss.org.uk)

Write to: Action on Hearing Loss,  
Harvester House, 4-8 Adelaide Street,  
Belfast BT2 8GA

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