

**IT**  
**DOESN'T**  
**MATTER**

**Public attitudes towards deaf people and people with hearing loss**

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“One of the worst things is when people say something I miss and when asked to repeat they say ‘oh it doesn’t matter’. It probably didn’t matter to them at the time, but it makes me feel ***I DON’T MATTER.***”

# INTRO

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**There are at least 12 million people in the UK who are deaf or have hearing loss – that’s at least 1 in 5 adults.**

Considering the millions more who are impacted as family members, friends, employers and service providers, it is hard to imagine there are many people who have no connection to deafness or hearing loss.

As part of RNID’s commitment to change society to make it more inclusive for everyone, we surveyed 5,383 people who are deaf or have hearing loss and 2,768 of the general public. We did this research to understand both public attitudes towards deaf people and people with hearing loss, as well as the lived experiences of our communities. We wanted to learn what assumptions, challenges and misconceptions people face on a day-to-day basis to help us understand what changes we need to see and make in the world.

And worryingly, our communities are experiencing poor communications with the general public in most areas of daily

life. These experiences build up over time and can have a significant impact.

However, there is cause for hope. Rather than deeply held negativity towards people who are deaf or have hearing loss, what we find is a lack of public awareness of hearing loss and deafness. As a result, the general public simply lack the confidence and knowledge to communicate with our communities effectively.

The title of this report captures an all-too-common experience that our communities face on a regular basis: not catching something the first time round, then being told ‘It doesn’t matter...’. **The way deaf people are valued, supported and communicated with in our society really DOES matter.** We hope that the new evidence in this report will educate, challenge perceptions, and influence our day-to-day behaviour.

Thank you to everyone who shared their experiences: your contribution will help shape the future of our work and make a better society for all.



## DEFINITIONS

The findings in this report are broken down into the following five groups of people, allowing us to highlight the different experiences of people within our communities:

- **People with hearing loss** - people who identify as having hearing loss, who do not use British Sign Language to communicate.
- **People who are deaf** - people who identify as deaf, who do not use British Sign Language to communicate.
- **British Sign Language (BSL) users** - people who identify as deaf and use British Sign Language as their main or preferred language.
- **Our communities** - people with hearing loss, people who are deaf and BSL users combined as a group.
- **General public** - people surveyed as part of the public polling that have not been diagnosed as deaf or as having hearing loss.

# SECTION 1

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## THE BIG DIVIDE: THE GENERAL PUBLIC AND PEOPLE WHO ARE DEAF OR HAVE HEARING LOSS

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**There is a big divide between how the general public see negative attitudes towards people who are deaf or have hearing loss, and how our communities are experiencing them.**

This division is shown by the fact that 54% of people with hearing loss, 66% of deaf people and 71% of BSL users tell us they believe that most people hold negative attitudes towards them. However, only 9% of the general public say they hold these negative attitudes.

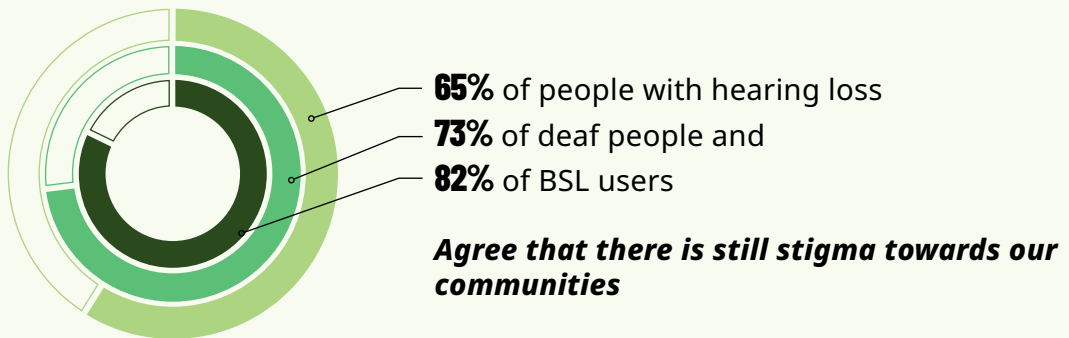
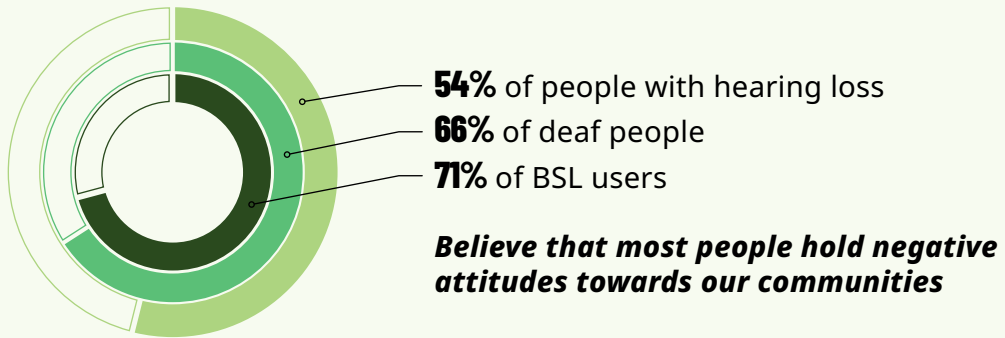
In addition, 65% of people with hearing loss, 73% of deaf people and 82% of BSL users agree that there is still stigma towards our communities, whereas only 42% of the general public share this view.

While 61% of our communities disagree that deaf people and people with hearing loss are treated fairly, only 28% of the general public disagree.

Our research shows that the way the public have been engaging with deaf people and people with hearing loss has led our communities to think that the public hold negative attitudes towards them. This could include feeling ignored, left out, or pitied by the public in their daily life.

*“Negative reactions make me feel worthless and excluded. I have lost confidence.”*

**Figure 1: The perceptions of our communities**



## SECTION 2

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# NEGATIVE ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOURS IN DAILY LIFE

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### **Most of our communities have experienced negative attitudes and behaviours in the last year.**

Overall, two thirds (67%) of our communities say they have experienced negative attitudes or behaviours in the last year. This figure rises to 82% among deaf people and 90% among BSL users.

Our communities say they experience negative attitudes and behaviours in most areas of daily life. For example, 55% told us they have experienced negative attitudes from retail staff while shopping in the last 12 months.

In the workplace a quarter (25%) of deaf people say they have experienced negative attitudes from work colleagues, a figure which almost doubles (49%) for BSL users.

For many, even time with family and friends isn't an escape. Nearly half (48%) of our communities report they have experienced negative attitudes and behaviours from their own family members in the last 12 months.

In nearly every area, BSL users experience negative attitudes and

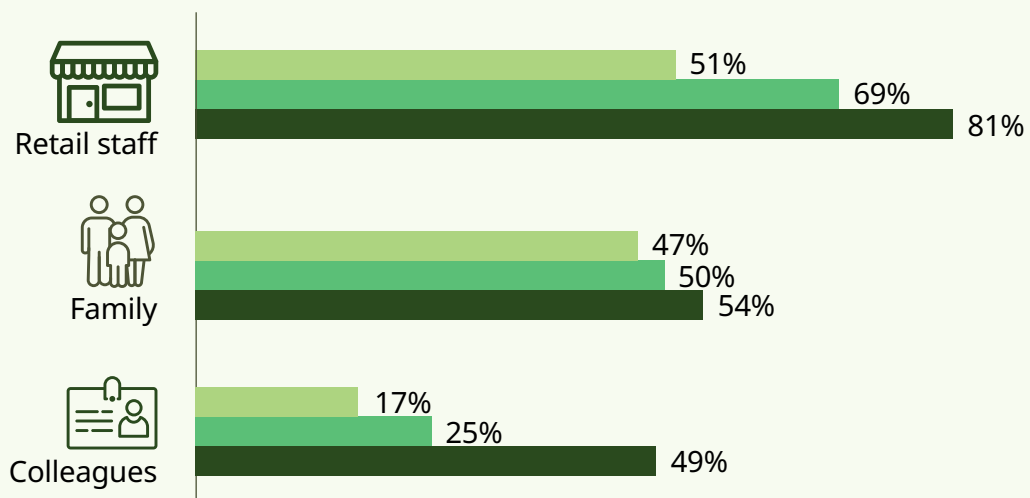
behaviours more than other members of our communities. For instance, while just under half (43%) of deaf people have experienced negative attitudes and behaviours from medical staff in the last 12 months, this rises to nearly three quarters (72%) of BSL users.

*"It's friends and family closest to me that seem to think it's funny to make jokes of it or be impatient. Only one person close to me has ever asked how they can help me by communicating more clearly which is disappointing."*

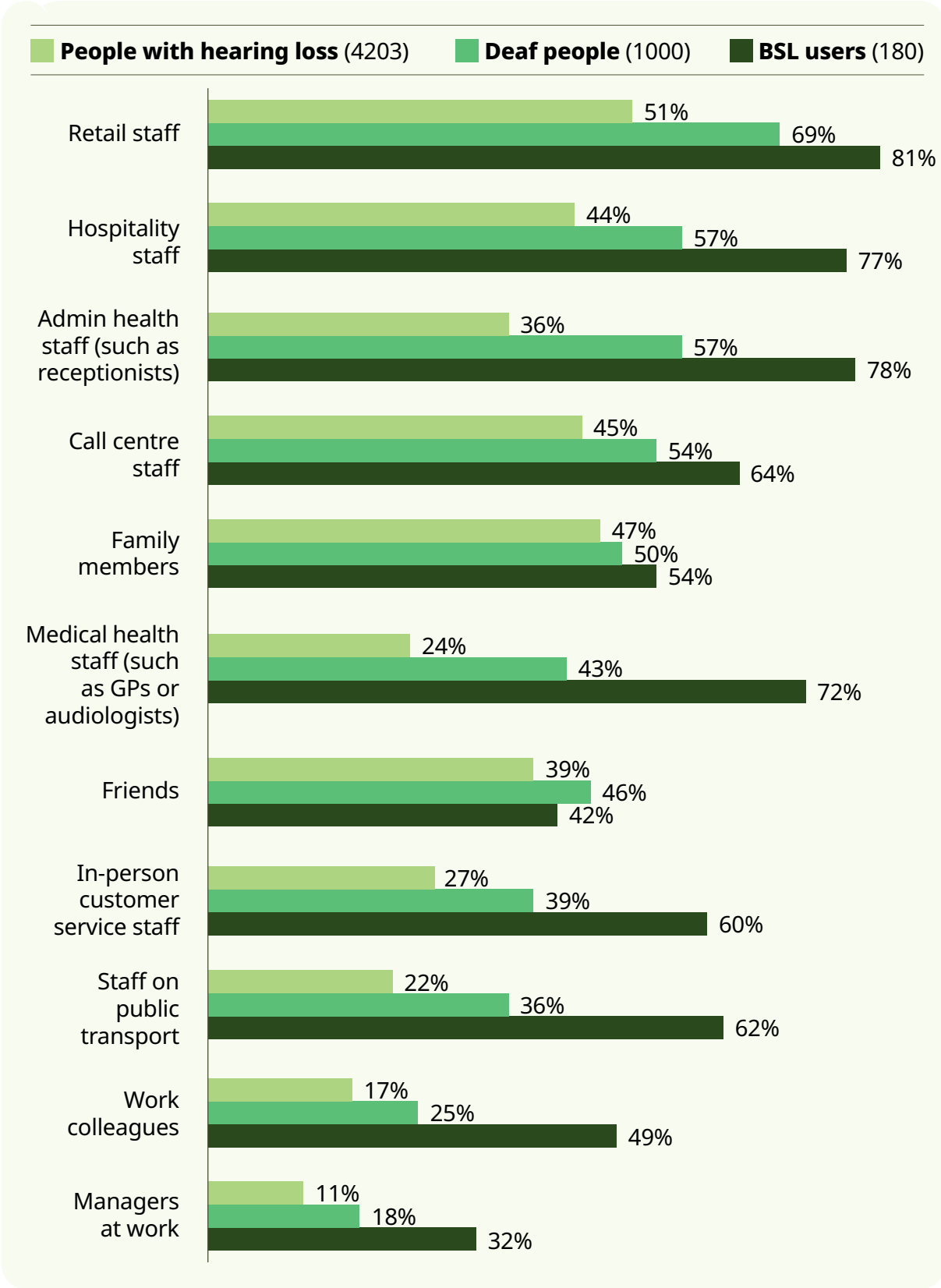


**Figure 2: Percentage of our communities who have experienced negative attitudes from retail staff, colleagues and family**

■ People with hearing loss (4203) ■ Deaf people (1000) ■ BSL users (180)



**Figure 3: Percentage of our communities that have experienced negative attitudes and behaviours from people in the last 12 months**



**What negative experiences with the public look like**

Part of the reason why our communities believe the general public have negative attitudes towards them is based on their past experiences and conversations with the public.

***'IT DOESN'T MATTER...'***

Over half (54%) of our communities report being told 'It doesn't matter...' by someone when they asked them to repeat something they missed.

Although members of the public may think they are saving the person from the embarrassment or not being able to understand what is being said, this phrase is not harmless and has a significant impact on our communities by making them feel different and excluded from conversations.

Small actions such as this contribute to our communities feeling that the public do not value them and that they can't be bothered to make changes to the way they communicate.

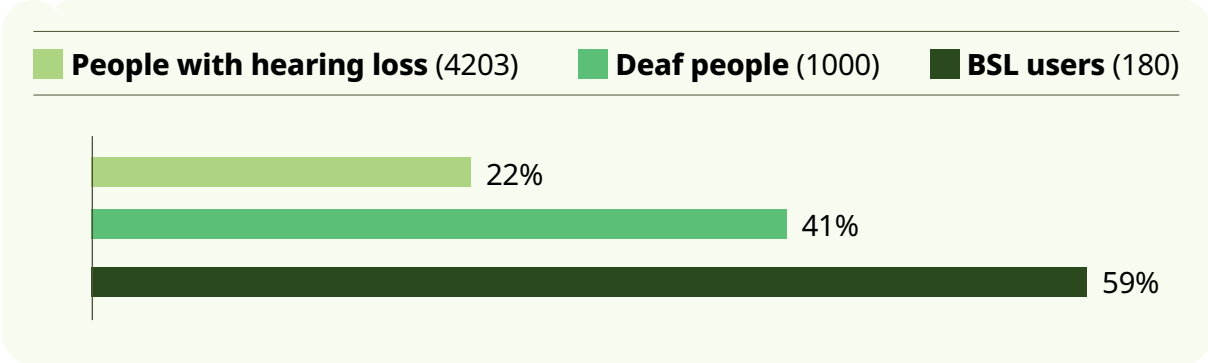
**Most of our communities feel ignored**

One common negative experience shared by our communities is being ignored, where, in particular, 59% of BSL users feel that most people ignore them in public settings.

In our survey of the general public, 1 in 10 admit they avoid interacting with our communities. However, given that 16% of people with hearing loss, 34% of deaf people and 54% of BSL users say that most people avoid interacting with them, this is a further example of a disconnect between what the public are reporting, and how our communities are feeling.

It's possible that the public are consciously under-reporting their attitudes and behaviours to be socially acceptable. Or people might not realise their own discomfort which affects their behaviour when talking to our communities. Or maybe they hold positive attitudes towards our communities, but they don't show it well. We're not sure why this happens, but what we do know is that exchanges with the public are impacting our communities in a significant way. They feel overlooked, they feel negativity, and we need this to change.

**Figure 4: Percentage of our communities that agree with the statement 'most people ignore me in public settings'**

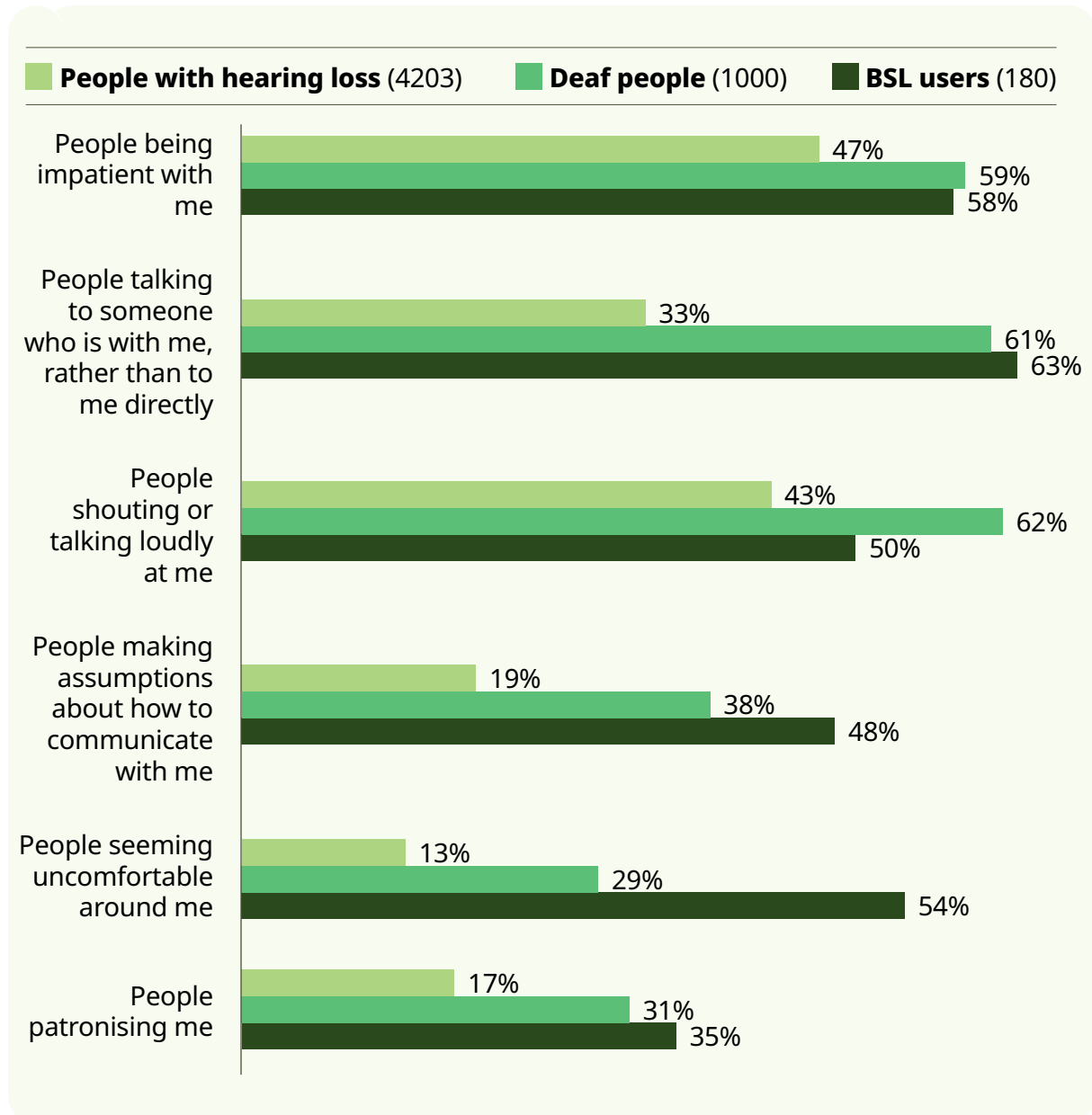




### What these experiences are like

To understand what makes communicating with the general public feel negative to our communities, we asked which of the following things they have experienced.

**Figure 5: Experiences of our communities when interacting with members of the general public in the last 12 months**



Discomfort, impatience, being patronised and ignored - all things that shouldn't be happening in 2024 to people because they are deaf, have hearing loss or use BSL. The implications of living in a society where you believe that most people hold negative attitudes towards you are profound.

## SECTION 3

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# PERSONAL IMPACT OF PUBLIC ATTITUDES

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**These negative experiences build up over time and have a significant impact on our communities.**

People who have reported these negative experiences said they made them feel lonely, isolated and patronised, and this has negatively impacted their confidence. Over half of BSL users say they feel frustrated, disrespected, and excluded.

This had made people want to withdraw

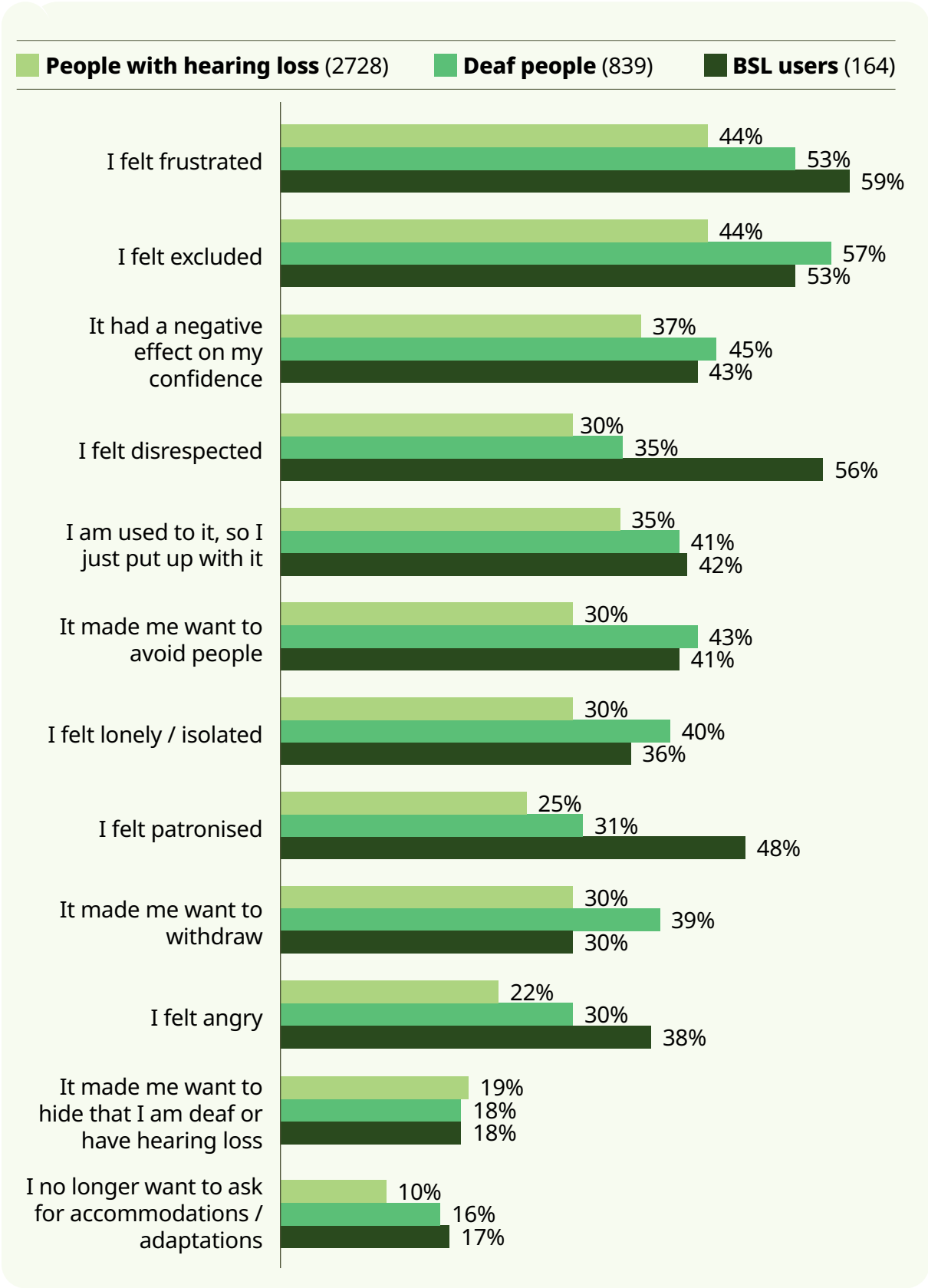
and avoid interacting with others.

Over a third say that they are used to it, so just put up with it. This isn't good enough, and we need to do better as a society to make a difference.

Our research lays bare the unacceptable regularity with which deaf people and people with hearing loss feel they experience negative attitudes, or are simply ignored. It's time for this to change.



**Figure 6: The impact on those people who say they have experienced negative attitudes and behaviours**

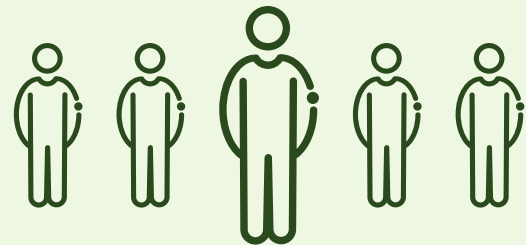


# SECTION 4

## BRIDGING THE GAP

**There is cause for hope.** Rather than deeply held negativity towards deaf people and people with hearing loss, what we find is a lack of public awareness of hearing loss and deafness, a lack of confidence in communicating with our communities and concern from the public about how they might be perceived if they were to try to interact.

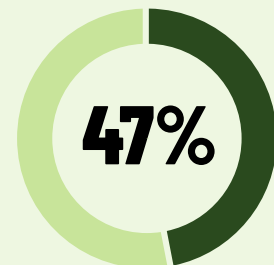
At least 1 in 5 adults in the UK are deaf or have hearing loss, which is a large proportion of the UK population. However, nearly half (47%) of the general public report not knowing anyone who is deaf or has hearing loss. This means that many members of the public may be interacting with people within our communities without realising it. This disconnect indicates a lack of public awareness of hearing loss and deafness and may be contributing to the negative experiences that our communities feel.



**1 IN 5**

At least 1 in 5 adults in the UK is deaf or has hearing loss

And yet, nearly half of the general public report not knowing anyone who is deaf or has hearing loss



*“Hearing loss is hidden, so people don’t realise how prevalent it is.”*







BY THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**SARAH J. MAAS**

**TOWER OF PAWNS**

A THRONES OF GLASS NOVEL

### Lack of confidence

Only 41% of the general public say they are confident communicating with people with hearing loss and deaf people. That goes down to 29% who are confident communicating with BSL users.

When we asked those people who don't feel confident communicating with deaf people and people with hearing loss why this is the case, 42% say it's because they don't have much experience and 34% say they just don't know how.

Results are similar for those who do not feel confident communicating with BSL users. 57% say it is because they don't know any BSL, 47% say they haven't had enough experience communicating with BSL users, and 34% simply say they don't know how to communicate with BSL users.

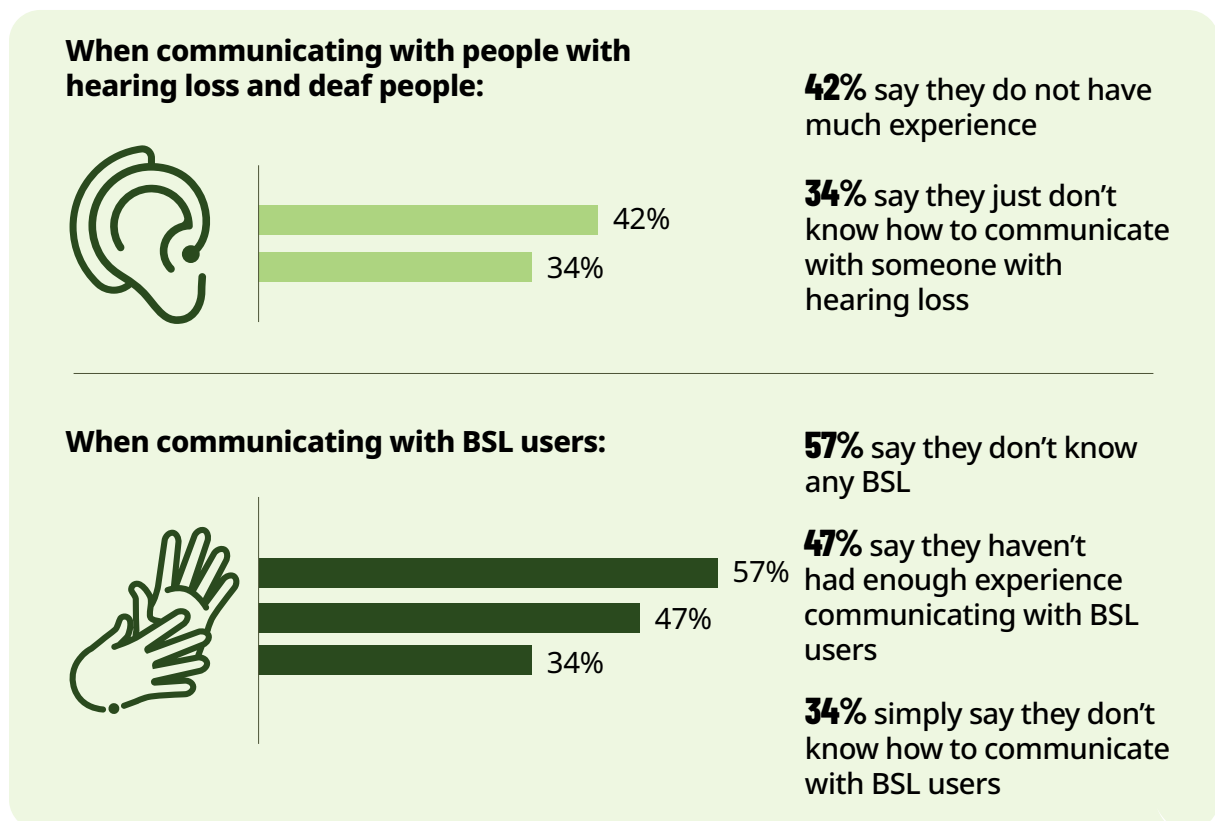
In addition, members of the public are

concerned about how they might be perceived when communicating with our communities. When communicating with deaf people and people with hearing loss, nearly a third (31%) are concerned about being patronising and over a quarter (26%) are worried about doing or saying something inappropriate. Sadly, 20% admit they feel uncomfortable trying to communicate with deaf people and people with hearing loss. When communicating with BSL users, members of the public are concerned about coming across as ignorant (29%) and patronising (26%).

Life for our communities is unnecessarily harder and more challenging because of this lack of awareness, confidence and concern about getting it wrong. People need the right tools and information to feel confident to connect with our communities.

Together we can bridge this gap.

**Figure 7: The reasons people lack confidence communicating with our communities**



## SECTION 5

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# GOOD NEWS: YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

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**We are glad to see that many people are eager to get better at talking to our communities. What the general public wants in terms of support matches up well with what our communities need. And the good news is, these changes are simple, practical and easy to do right now.**

When we asked the general public what would help them feel more confident communicating with deaf people and people with hearing loss, the top thing they ask for is communication tips. More than half (52%) of people wanted information about how to communicate well with deaf people and people with hearing loss.

And when we asked the general public what would make them feel more confident communicating with BSL users, more than half (54%) say that learning basic words and phrases in BSL would help them.

**52%**

More than half of the general public wanted information about how to communicate well with people with hearing loss



**54%**

More than half of the general public say learning basic words and phrases in BSL would help them

*“I think most people mean well but they don’t have the education and tools to know how to communicate with deaf and hard of hearing people effectively.”*





When we ask our communities what would help them to feel more comfortable when communicating with members of the public, in order of preference, they say:

**01.**

**If people were more aware of how best to communicate with people who are deaf or have hearing loss**



**02.**

**If more people were patient with me**



**03.**

**If more people tried to include me back in the conversation**



**04.**

**If more people asked me how I prefer to communicate**



**05.**

**If more people were open / willing to communicate with me in different ways**



For BSL users specifically, 71% say they would feel more comfortable when communicating with members of the public if more people learnt basic signs in BSL.

Finally, when we asked our communities if they would feel comfortable if someone asked how best to communicate with them, nearly three quarters (73%) say they would feel comfortable being asked this question. It's important to note that only a small proportion of our communities express discomfort at being asked (8%) and their answers suggest that if it was done sensitively and appropriately, this discomfort could be overcome in most cases.

**CONCLUSION**

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A woman is captured in a joyful dance pose, wearing a vibrant purple quilted puffer suit and a black beanie with a white Nike swoosh. She has several long, light-colored braids hanging down her front. Her right arm is extended to the side, and her left hand is near her waist. She is wearing purple Crocs. The background shows a park-like setting with a blue fence, benches, and buildings under a cloudy, overcast sky.

**IT  
DOESN'T  
MATTER**



## We want change, and so do our communities.

While much of this report makes for tough reading, our research also shines a clear light on just how simple it could be to tackle much of the lack of awareness and confidence that is holding so many people back. The general public have clearly highlighted the barriers that stand in their way, which undoubtedly lead to some of the behaviours our communities experience. Positive change is within our reach.

Good communication and inclusion for

deaf people and people with hearing loss absolutely **DOES** matter.

Wherever you live in the UK, whatever your hearing status, you do know people with hearing loss. They could be your family, your friends, your neighbours, your colleagues or your customers. By following some simple tips and having a little patience, all of us can help change how we include deaf people and people with hearing loss in all aspects of daily life. In fact, most of these are things that benefit hearing people, too – we should be doing them regardless.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

We want everyone to feel confident talking to deaf people and people with hearing loss. Here are a few simple tips from our communities:

01.

### GET MY ATTENTION

Use simple gestures like waving to get my attention.



02.

### FACE ME

Please face me when you talk to me. Lots of people rely on lipreading to some degree to understand.



03.

### BE PATIENT

Don't be afraid to **repeat or rephrase** and try something different.



## AND NEVER SAY: 'IT DOESN'T MATTER'...

There's lots more you can do to help. Check out how you can get involved and learn more.



# ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

## **Focus groups**

In May 2023, we ran five focus groups with 15 members of RNID's Research Panel following a review of existing data. The aim of the focus groups was to better understand the attitudes that deaf people and people with hearing loss feel they encounter from the general public, the barriers they face in their everyday lives, and the potential role of the public in helping to overcome some of these barriers.

We then developed two surveys based on what our communities told us. This allowed us to compare the awareness, attitudes and behaviours of the general public with the actual experiences of our communities from a much larger group of people.

## **Survey design**

The surveys were developed with the input of colleagues from across RNID, including people with lived experience. We then tested some of the survey questions with people with lived experience that had attended the original focus groups.

## **General public polling**

The polling of the general public was conducted between January and March 2024 by Censuswide with 2,768 people (aged 18+) that had not been diagnosed as deaf or as having hearing loss. Please note, this sample may still include people with unaddressed hearing loss. The data was weighted to be nationally representative of the adult population in the UK by age, gender and ethnicity.

## **Online survey of our communities**

This survey was conducted online with questions provided in both written English and BSL video clips. The survey was open for a 4-week period from 30th January – 25th February 2024.

The survey was distributed through RNID's communication channels, as well as by colleagues who sent the survey to external contacts and organisations.

Participation was incentivised with a prize draw, where people had the chance to win one of five £100 shopping vouchers.

A total of 5,383 people completed the survey online, where 4,203 people identified as having hearing loss, 1,000 people identified as deaf and 180 were BSL users. The data was weighted to be representative of deaf people and people with hearing loss in the UK based on age and location.



**We are RNID: the national charity supporting the 12 million people in the UK who are deaf, have hearing loss or tinnitus.**

**Together, we will end the discrimination faced by our communities, help people hear better now and fund world-class research to restore hearing and silence tinnitus.**

If you or someone close to you are deaf, or have hearing loss or tinnitus and need free confidential and impartial information and support, contact RNID. We are open 8:30am to 5.00pm, Monday to Friday.



**Chat to us on the RNID website:** [www.rnid.org.uk](http://www.rnid.org.uk)



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