

**REVIEW OF SERVICES FOR THOSE WHO ARE DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING**

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**1. Purpose**

- 1.1 To provide the Panel with the outcome and recommendations of the Review of Services for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, completed within the Neighbourhood Services Directorate.
- 1.2 To ask for support for those issues which apply to the Council as a whole, which are key to the accessibility of services and will ensure compliance with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

**2. Summary**

- 2.1 Services provided to people who are deaf and hard of hearing have remained unchanged since local government reorganisation in 1997. A review of the whole of the service, involving service users, was therefore appropriate.
- 2.2 While some aspects of the service are common to people who are deaf and to people who are hard of hearing, their needs are different. The assessment of needs in relation to these two groups of service users has been considered separately.
- 2.3 The review consulted the deaf community and the Hard of Hearing Group. Other models of service were visited elsewhere in the country. The Social Services Inspectorate reports "Service on the Edge" and "Stepping Away from the Edge" were considered as part of the review.
- 2.4 The review presents a range of recommendations for the development and improvement of the service in Milton Keynes for people with hearing impairment. Some of these recommendations apply directly to adult social care and others are relevant to the whole of Milton Keynes Council. The corporate issues are important to ensure that deaf and hard of hearing people have equal access to Council services and that the Council complies with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act (1995).

**3. Recommendations**

- 3.1 The Equalities Panel is asked to:

- (a) support the proposal that a programme of work is undertaken to install loop systems in reception areas and the purchase of portable systems in the next financial year and to invite officers to explore how this might be achieved;
- (b) support the principle of a corporate contract for the provision of interpreters for the deaf community and that further work be undertaken to develop detailed proposals for how this could be achieved;
- (c) support the development of a corporate policy statement and guidance for staff in relation to the use of interpreters by staff to ensure an equal quality of service is available to all; and
- (d) consider this policy statement as an addition to existing equalities policies at a future meeting of the Panel.

## 4. Background

- 4.1 Until 1995 the Oxford Diocesan Council provided most of the care services for the deaf community in Milton Keynes . In the late 1980's questions began to be asked about the traditional service provided by support workers who signed. There was a move towards qualified social work staff using trained interpreters. This began a process, which was meant to improve the quality of service and the quality of interpreting. The RNID began to provide interpreters and in 1995 was given the contract to undertake assessments for the provision of environmental aids and to then provide the equipment required. This contract was with Buckinghamshire County Council. Although Milton Keynes Council took a portion of the contract to cover the Milton Keynes area, the nature of the contract has remained essentially unchanged since 1995.
- 4.2 This review is an identified objective of the Neighbourhood Services Directorate, Strategic Plan. It is part of the overall objective to review services for sensory impairment in order to provide equality of access. User involvement in services had been very limited in the past and it was important that service users were part of the review process.
- 4.3 The recommendations of this report support actions CP12 and CP14 of the corporate Equalities Action Plan and connect with the Community Languages Service report which is also being considered at this meeting.
- 4.4 At an early stage in the process, it became clear that the needs of the deaf community were distinct from service users who are hard of hearing. For example the deaf community has its own language and identity. There are very real issues around the need for support in accessing the hearing world and how this support can be given without creating dependence. For people who use British Sign Language (BSL) English is a second language and the understanding of written English varies. This point is often not appreciated by the wider community.
- 4.5 For people who are hard of hearing, there is a need to maintain their independence and maximise remaining hearing. For most people, they have been part of the hearing world and need to continue to be, if they are not to become isolated. It should be acknowledged that most hearing people do not understand that hearing aids are not like glasses which are very simple and effective in correcting sight. Hearing aids are difficult to adjust to and may improve hearing, but hearing does not return to its previous quality.
- 4.6 The present service exists in two parts. For the "profoundly deaf" the RNID provide assessment for and provision of equipment (minicomms, flashing doorbells etc.). There is block purchase of interpreting time and 11 hours per week of information officer time.
- 4.7 The interpreting contract is currently available for Adult and Children's care services and more recently, the whole of the Housing Service has been added. The current contract remains under-used despite the deaf community's complaints about the lack of interpreting. This is largely due to staff's lack of understanding about the need for interpreters in communicating with the deaf community.

- 4.8 The current arrangements for the Neighbourhood Service Contract, are now co-ordinated by the Milton Keynes Community Language Service.
- 4.9 Education has separate arrangements for interpreting.
- 4.10 The Audiology Department at Milton Keynes General Hospital provides audiological assessments and hearing aids. The Department also undertakes assessments for equipment for hard of hearing people and Disability Services in the Council pays directly for the equipment. Social work staff normally undertake these assessments.
- 4.11 These arrangements are experienced as confusing by those needing a service. The division of services between profoundly deaf and hard of hearing is unhelpful. In the last financial year only £2,985 of the hard of hearing equipment budget was spent from a total budget of £4,680. This needs to be considered alongside a general complaint from the Hard of Hearing group about the lack of service.
- 4.12 The deaf community in Milton Keynes is between 200 and 250 people. With the best information available, this number is an increasing. The RNID provided equipment assessment to 77 households in 1998/99. The RNID is seeing approximately one family new to Milton Keynes, every month.
- 4.13 The deaf community sees the current interpreting service as a quality service. Recent changes in the monitoring arrangements have facilitated comparative costings to be established. The RNID costs are competitive, providing the budget is fully used. The RNID is not always able to provide an interpreter when needed at short notice. This needs to be considered in future plans.
- 4.14 There are great concerns within the deaf community about the lack of interpreting in relation to health provision. There are plans to include the PCG and the local health trusts in future consultations with the deaf community.
- 4.15 There are between 4000 and 5000 people in Milton Keynes who have received a service through audiology. In the last financial year 441 people acquired a hearing aid for the first time and there were approximately 3000 contacts with the audiology service for repairs and maintenance of hearing aids.
- 4.16 The Hard of Hearing Group has expressed concern about the lack of service. In a recent survey of people with a hearing impairment, 77 people responded to the questionnaire. Out of 230 pieces of equipment within those households only 21 pieces had been provided by Adult Social Care.
- 4.17 There has been no increase in the resourcing of either provision to take into account demographic change since 1995. In considering services elsewhere, other local authorities spend is consistently higher than in Milton Keynes.
- 4.18 The current register of people who are deaf and hard of hearing does not reflect in any way the number of people who could receive a service. There are concerns that people do not know what is available and therefore are not accessing the service.
- 4.19 In older communities the church often plays a significant role in services, for example in providing a building and supporting a deaf club. However none of this has been available in Milton Keynes. The deaf club in Milton Keynes used a

Council day centre as a base until 1995. The introduction of a monthly rent resulted in the club moving and then closing.

- 4.20 The new Milton Keynes Deaf Club opened its door in October 1999. It has a base at Tower Drive Centre and is supported through the Modernising Social Services-Prevention Grant. The deaf club offers weekly meetings and a range of social events. They have applied for charitable status and hope to secure funding for a permanent base in the future.
- 4.21 The various recommendations of this review report, which pertain specifically to the services provided within the Neighbourhood Services Directorate, were agreed by Neighbourhood Services Committee on 9 November 1999. It was agreed at that time, that the corporate issues should be considered at the next meeting of the Panel.
- 4.22 A copy of the report of the Review is attached as **Annex A** and the Action Plan is attached at **Annex B**.

## 5. **Issues and Choices**

- 5.1 For the deaf community to communicate effectively with Council staff or access any services, the provision of skilled interpreting is essential. Whether it is a planning application, a Council Tax query, a parents evening or a need for Community Care, in order to ensure equal access and an equality of service, Council staff should arrange for a BSL interpreter to be available for any formal interview. It is important to recognise that people, who are deaf, are competent citizens who are disadvantaged by obstacles within the hearing environment. The provision of interpreters overcomes these obstacles. It is essential to see this as a communication issue not a social care issue.
- 5.2 The Goods and Services section of the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) came into force in October 1999. This requires that any organisation providing services should take reasonable steps to ensure that people receive an equal standard of service regardless of any disability. This responsibility applies to Milton Keynes Council as a whole.
- 5.3 As arrangements stand, existing services for the deaf community are within Education, Children's Services and Adult Social Care. A decision was taken in Summer 1999 to extend the existing interpreting contract to include the Housing Service. These arrangements for interpreting are separate and remain unco-ordinated. The Resources and Environment Directorates are not included in any exiting arrangements.
- 5.4 A corporate contract for interpreting, backed up with a policy statement and guidance for staff, would ensure a co-ordinated and quality service.
- 5.5 This could be achieved by pooling existing budgets and negotiating with Directorates not contributing to the existing contract to contribute in future. These negotiations will need to be undertaken at a corporate level.
- 5.6 For people who are hard of hearing, the availability of a loop systems greatly improves the possibility of good communication. The absence of loop systems result in a poorer service and misunderstandings. The only loop system in Council

Offices, is the one in the Council Chamber. Nothing is available in key reception areas at Saxon Court or the Civic Offices or the District Offices. There are no additional meeting rooms or interview rooms with permanent loop systems.

- 5.7 In an ideal situation loop systems would be widely available throughout Council buildings. However given the financial constraints facing the Council, ensuring that loop facilities are provided in each of the main reception areas at Saxon Court and the Civic Offices and that a portable system is available in each main building, would be a start in improving the accessibility of services. This would ideally be achieved within the next financial year 2000/01.

## 6. **Implications**

### 6.1 Environmental

None.

### 6.2 Equalities

The recommendations of this report have a key role to play in relation the Council's making progress against Equalities Action Plan. The recommendations will facilitate equality of service and equality of access.

### 6.3 Financial

The financial implications can only be estimated at this stage. Initial estimates regarding the loop systems suggest that this initial work could be achieved for approximately £5000. Discussion has begun with the Resources Directorate regarding possible financial support for the work.

Both Learning and Development and Neighbourhood Services have identified budgets for deaf interpreting service. They are the main users of the interpreting service but the Resources and Environment Directorates should have interpreting time available as well. There would need to be further work and negotiations with all directorates to develop detailed proposals for an efficient and more corporate arrangements for the provision of BSL interpreting.

### 6.4 Legal

The requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) are outlined in detail earlier in the report.

### 6.5 Staff and Accommodation

There are no staffing or accommodation issues in the recommendations of this report. The work in reception areas would cause a brief and minor disruption.

## 7. **Conclusions**

- 7.1 Milton Keynes Council is committed to the implementation the Equalities Action Plan which has developed from the Equalities Audit and the issues presented in this report should be considered as part of that plan. The establishment of a corporate contract for BSL interpreting and the development of policy and guidance

regarding the use of interpreters will ensure that the deaf community can access Council services and participate on an equal footing. The introduction of loop systems into Council premises will enable the many hard of hearing people to access services and to participate more effectively.

- 7.2 These improvements are comparatively simple and relatively low in cost, yet for the people with a hearing impairment who need to communicate with the Council the difference will be significant.

Background Papers: Neighbourhood Services Committee Report 9 November 1999  
Review of Services for People who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing  
Review Action Plan