

UCL Deaf Migrants Project Report

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Introduction

The experiences of migrants arriving to the UK has been well documented in research and the media (e.g. [APPG, 2017](#)). On the 23rd February, the experiences and needs of Deaf Migrants living in London was explored over a two-day event at UCL supported by UCL Grand Challenges of Cultural Understanding and Justice & Equality fund.

[British Sign Language](#)

[International Sign](#)

The aim of the project was to examine potential areas for future research with this population, the current service provision in London and to identify how best to influence policy at a national and local level to improve outcomes for Deaf Migrants in London. Ten Deaf Migrants (from Kuwait, Afghanistan, Turkey, Brazil, Ukraine, Jordan and Iran) participated in activities and discussions facilitated by a Deaf Migrants, Dmytro Prykhodko. This enabled full ownership of the discussions from the Deaf Migrants, participation to fully document and understand the needs of Deaf Migrants.

Development

In October 2022, Tyron Woolfe and Indie Beedie were successful in obtaining funding for the event. The event was announced via [Limping Chicken](#) a national blog for Deaf people and all who work with them. Deaf Migrants were recruited by [City Lit](#) (a college with specialist courses for deaf students in London) and [Deaf Plus](#) (a charity that delivers support and services to Deaf people). Full participatory consent was obtained from the Deaf Migrants. In order to facilitate communication between the researchers, external organisations and the migrants themselves, Deaf International Sign interpreters¹ and British Sign Language interpreters were utilised. BSL was useful for some

¹ National sign languages differ all over the world and they are not based on spoken language. International Sign is not a language per se but is like a pidgin, i.e. simplified communication for those who do not share a common sign language.

participants who have lived in the UK long enough to learn some BSL. The project also provided access to a Deaf Clinical Psychologist during the event to signpost and provide wellbeing and emotional support.

Barriers

At the end of the first day the group highlighted what they felt were the biggest barriers Deaf Migrants faced on arrival in the UK

- *That no-one hears their voices, they don't have a say.*
- *Limited access to information, both written and signed.*
- *Access to the Deaf community – migrants wanting to be placed near networks and areas where there is a larger deaf population.*
- *Access to learning English – insufficient amount of time to learn English. For example, at City Lit migrants receive 3 hours a week of English tuition a week.*
- *Being able to learn British Sign Language effectively.*
- *Being unaware of rights.*
- *The limited number of International Sign Interpreters.*
- *Having no option to access national sign languages (such as Ukrainian Sign Language) for interpreting needs, when hearing migrants get spoken access to theirs via Language line for example.*
- *Confusion over who provides what services. A google search will show that certain deaf organisations help deaf people but when they make contact, migrants are turned away or told there is a criterion that excludes them.*
- *Having consistent levels of support from organisations, migrants found initial contact with some organisations positive but then reduced levels of communication as time goes by.*

Proposed solutions

The Deaf Migrants came up with some solutions for how to improve outcomes.

- *Creating a person-centred approach to communication; not every Deaf Migrants will understand International Sign.*
- *Effective signposting for Deaf Migrants; suggestions included signposting to Deaf services directly from the Home Office and Local Authorities.*
- *Regular, faster and frequent access to British Sign Language and English courses*
- *The need for access to the Deaf community and other Deaf Migrants to be prioritised.*
- *Greater support for access to written information*
- *Having a proper forum/platform in order to be heard and be able to contribute to the policy and service agenda.*

Learning and discussion

On the second day of the event, academics at UCL and across the UK, the Deaf Migrants, representatives from Deaf Plus, the British Deaf Association, Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership (VCSE) and the Greater London Authority (GLA) were invited to facilitate further conversations, share knowledge from their respective fields and contribute to future learning.

Nina Sivunen, a Deaf PhD researcher from Finland looking at Deaf Migrants' language experiences and Dr Steve Emery and Sanchu Iyer, both Deaf academics from the Mobile Deaf project at Herriot Watt University - which took an ethnographic approach covering deaf people's mobilities including migrating and seeking refuge over a 5-year study, presented some of their research. This was followed by the Deaf Migrants shared their experiences followed by a discussion on possible future steps to be taken to address the needs of Deaf Migrants in London today.

Throughout day two it was clear that Deaf Migrants want to have voice and to be heard, they want to be supported to participate in discussions

and decision making that directly impact them and mechanisms put in place so they are able to be heard. There was lots of discussion about signposting and providing specialist support for Deaf Migrants, after being inspired by Nina Sivunen, where migrants learn Finnish and Finnish Sign Language and are supported in their re-integration to citizen life [at a training centre](#).

We considered whether the concept of a 'centre' for Deaf Migrants needs to be explored further, whether a physical space is needed or mainly a unified and centralized offer of support. We also found there was confusion amongst the Deaf Migrants over who is able to give immigration advice and support and that this isn't always clearly communicated that only those registered with training from the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner are able to do so. Communicating this ahead clearly would set clearer expectations and what can be provided by organisations and reduce frustrations.

When discussing the need for more BSL teaching, it became apparent that this is not only confined to Deaf Migrants experience but that of the wider UK deaf community, where there is a clear need for more courses. There is also need for more skilled teachers to be able to teach. The BSL Act 2022 is an area which presents potential opportunities to influence and shape future policy in relation to the right of Deaf Migrants.

What does the future hold?

What this project has successfully managed to do is to bring together information about what is needed and experienced by Deaf Migrants in London. It is noteworthy that day one's conversations between Deaf Migrants supports and reinforces the findings of the work done by the Mobile Deaf Project such as finding suitable deaf services, language learning and the importance of community.

The value of research is not to be underestimated in helping us to understand the experience and needs of Deaf Migrants and providing

evidence of these experiences to inform policy and practice. In the future, it is necessary to move forward by exploring implementation research, particularly in reducing mental well-being risk factors, developing potential interventions and looking at the nature of second language learning in this community.

However, it is important to remember research alone is not enough.

Action is needed to address these experiences, through the development of services and programs which are responsive to the needs mentioned. Partnerships are needed between the Research, Voluntary and Statutory sector with a focus on co-production with Deaf Migrants. One migrant spoke of a group in their home country, Brazil, where migrants are supported to be heard and involved in every step of planned integration. Other ideas included the development of volunteering opportunities by Deaf British people to support Deaf Migrants, and opportunities for Deaf Migrants to be supported to volunteer.

Deaf Plus and the Greater London Authority (GLA) after day two invited the Deaf Migrants to be part of future planning of service development and influence wider [information sharing](#) for London migrants to address to the challenges faced, enabling this group of individuals to be part of the next outcomes from this event by making sure that their needs and perspective are heard and taken into account.

It will be interesting to see how these meetings unfold and what initiatives and solutions are proposed. Hopefully this collaboration will lead to concrete actions that make a real difference in the lives of Deaf Migrants in London.

Final word

We would like to thank UCL Grand Challenges of Cultural Understanding and Justice & Equality fund for their support and express our gratitude to the Deaf Migrants who shared their experiences and engaged fully

throughout. Finally, a huge thanks to Dmytro who was an excellent facilitator.

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References

- [Briefing Papers | Migration Watch UK](#)
- [APPG on Refugees - Refugees Welcome report.pdf \(refugeecouncil.org.uk\)](#)

Acknowledgements

- 10 Deaf Migrants
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