

Item:

Title: Spotlight on d/Deaf people and British Sign Language (BSL)
 Users in Health and Social Care

Gweithredu / Action required	For information
Amseru / Timing	Routine
Argymhelliad / Recommendation	That the Board receives and notes the contents of this report.
Risg / Risk	Reputational risk if Llais does not effectively hear from, or represent, d/Deaf people. Strategic delivery risk if engagement with d/Deaf people is inconsistent or not embedded across Llais' core functions, reducing the organisation's ability to meet its statutory purpose and strategic commitments. Capability and capacity risk arising from the specialist skills, safeguards and resources required to engage safely, ethically and meaningfully with d/Deaf people, particularly during increased demand.
Cyllid / Finance	N/A
Amcan Cynllun Corfforaethol / Corporate Plan Objective/Amcan Rhaglen/ Programme objective	This work directly supports the Llais Strategic Plan 2024–27: SO 01 Drive a national conversation - Amplifying the voices of d/Deaf people, particularly those experiencing inequality and poorer outcomes SO 02 Push for services that meet people's needs - Using lived experience from d/Deaf people to influence service improvement and accountability SO 05. Grow and improve as an organisation - Strengthening engagement and advocacy functions It supports the People's Principles, including being listened to, dignity, clear communication and joined-up care.
Ecwiti, Amrywiaeth a Chynhwysiant / Equity, Diversity & Inclusion	This work has strong equity and diversity relevance. Disability is a protected characteristic, and d/Deaf

	people experience distinct barriers within health and social care systems. Those with disabilities are particularly likely to experience poor access and outcomes. Targeted engagement and advocacy with d/Deaf people supports Llais' commitment to reducing inequality and making sure that less often heard voices shape service improvement.
Cyfathrebu / Communications	Please tick one of the following boxes if this activity will have an impact on: Internal: our people ☒ External: our customers/partners/stakeholders ☒ External: our organisation's reputation ☒
Cymeradwyaeth / Approval/Clearance	Ben Eaton, Strategic Director of Organisational Strategy and Engagement
Trafodaethau/ Penderfyniadau Blaenorol / Previous discussions/decisions	N/A
Awdur/ Cyflwyno / Author/presenting	Roxanne Treacy, Director of Communication Engagement and Insight and Rebecca Lythgoe, Head of Insights and Engagement
Dyddiad / Date	21 st October 2026

Cefndir / Background

This paper provides an overview of Llais' growing work with D/Deaf people.

Key messages

- Accessible communication remains one of the most significant barriers experienced by d/Deaf people when accessing health and social care services.
- Evidence from engagement, advocacy, research and representation activity shows consistent concerns about interpreter provision, inaccessible appointment systems, reasonable adjustments and access to audiology services.
- Llais has successfully influenced national policy and service improvement through representations to Public Health Wales, consultation responses and engagement with Welsh Government.
- Through staff training, website developments and partnership working, Llais is strengthening its own accessibility while influencing wider system change.
- The forthcoming BSL (Wales) Act presents an opportunity to improve services and strengthen the voice of d/Deaf people across Wales

Our engagement, policy, advocacy and complaints casework consistently highlight communication as one of the most significant factors affecting the experience of d/Deaf people in health and social care. Across multiple sources people tell us that difficulties accessing information, interpreters, appointments and specialist hearing services can affect not only their experience of care but also their ability to participate fully in decisions about their health and wellbeing.

The consistency of these experiences suggests these are not isolated issues but reflect wider system challenges across health and social care services in Wales. This suggests that accessible communication is not yet consistently embedded as a core component of safe, person-centred care.

What we have been hearing from the d/Deaf community

Emergency care

Our All-Wales Same Day Urgent Care project identified challenges for deaf people accessing services. One attendee who was able to communicate using BSL described having to support a deaf patient in an emergency department because appropriate communication support was not available, limiting staff's ability to communicate effectively with the individual.

More broadly, the project highlighted the importance of accessible communication, timely information and services that respond to people's individual needs, reinforcing themes we continue to hear from d/Deaf communities across Wales.

GP Access

Our wider research into GP services across Wales identified a number of issues that are particularly relevant to d/Deaf people and BSL users. The research found that hearing difficulties were among the communication needs affecting access to GP services, whilst heavy reliance on telephone booking systems, limited availability of information in accessible formats and a lack of understanding of additional communication requirements were identified as significant barriers. These findings reinforce concerns raised through our engagement with d/Deaf communities and highlight the need for health services to adopt more accessible and inclusive approaches to communication.

Complaints advocacy: What people are experiencing

Over the last few years, our complaints advocacy and enquiries service has received a number of contacts relating to deafness, hearing loss, audiology services and British Sign Language (BSL) access. These cases show a strikingly consistent picture across health and social care services: communication barriers and difficulties accessing services continue to have a significant impact on d/Deaf people and BSL users.

Common themes include:

- Failure to provide appropriate BSL interpretation and communication support.
- Reliance on telephone-based appointment systems and inaccessible communication channels.
- Patients being expected to arrange their own interpreters.
- Lack of understanding of deaf communication needs across healthcare settings.
- Long waits for audiology assessments, diagnostics and treatment.
- Difficulties accessing hearing rehabilitation, hearing aid reviews and follow-up support.
- Failures to make reasonable adjustments for deaf patients.

We have had 57 cases relating to deafness and BSL access and a further 17 audiology-specific cases.

Impact on people's lives

These issues are not just administrative barriers. Casework demonstrates the impact communication failures and delays can have on people's health, wellbeing, independence and safety. Examples include:

- People reporting deterioration in hearing while waiting for assessment or treatment.

- Children experiencing delays in hearing assessments that affected their education and social inclusion.
- Deaf patients being unable to participate fully in decisions about their care due to interpreter failures.
- Individuals reporting increased isolation, anxiety and loss of independence when accessible communication routes were removed or unavailable.

"I felt invisible because no one could communicate with me."

"I relied on family members because no interpreter was available."

Regional distribution

Audiology cases

Region / Health Board	Count
Aneurin Bevan / Gwent related	6
Cwm Taf Morgannwg	5
Swansea Bay / NPT	4
Powys	3
Hywel Dda / West Wales	3

(Some cases reference more than one organisation, totals exceed the number of cases.)

Audiology concerns are concentrated around:

- Access to assessment and treatment.
- Hearing aid provision and support.
- ENT referral pathways.
- Ear wax removal pathways.
- Delayed diagnostics and appointments.

Deaf / BSL cases

Region	Approximate Count
Gwent	28
West Wales	11
Powys	8
Cardiff & Vale	6
Cwm Taf Morgannwg	4
Swansea Bay / NPT	4
North Wales	6

Although case numbers vary across Wales, the issues raised are remarkably consistent. Concerns regarding interpreter provision, hospital communication, audiology access and reasonable adjustments are reported across multiple regions, suggesting systemic rather than localised challenges.

Manylion / Detail

From insight to impact: overview

Through our engagement, complaints advocacy, enquiries and influencing work, Llais has identified consistent barriers experienced by d/Deaf people across Wales. These include difficulties accessing interpreters, inaccessible appointment systems, limited availability of information in BSL and other accessible formats, barriers to audiology services and failures to make reasonable adjustments. These themes have been consistently reported across our engagement activity, complaints advocacy casework and policy work, suggesting they are systemic challenges rather than isolated incidents.

By bringing together this intelligence from across the organisation, Llais has been able to influence service improvement, inform national policy discussions and secure commitments aimed at improving access to health and social care services for d/Deaf people.

What we heard

Communication remains one of the most significant barriers affecting d/Deaf people's experiences of health and social care.

People report difficulties accessing interpreters, making appointments, receiving information in accessible formats and participating fully in decisions about their care. Complaints advocacy casework highlights the impact these barriers can have on health outcomes, independence, dignity and wellbeing. Concerns about these issues are consistent across Wales and across multiple service settings.

What we did

- Used insights from engagement and complaints advocacy to influence national policy and service improvement discussions.
- Made formal representations to Public Health Wales regarding deaf people's experiences of screening services.
- Used our statutory powers to seek assurances from local authorities regarding the future of specialist BSL domiciliary care services.
- Submitted evidence to consultations and inquiries, including the British Sign Language (Wales) Bill, the Disabled People's Rights Plan and the future of General Practice in Wales.
- Strengthened our own accessibility through staff training, website development and partnership working with the Deaf community.

What changed

As a result of this work:

- Public Health Wales committed to expanding BSL resources across screening programmes, improving identification of communication needs, exploring Video Relay Services and embedding accessibility within its screening equity strategy.
- Public Health Wales also committed to better monitoring Deaf people's experiences and invited ongoing dialogue with Llais to support further improvement work.
- Local authorities provided assurances regarding continuity of specialist BSL domiciliary care support and committed to involving affected individuals in decisions about future services.
- The experiences of d/Deaf people have informed national policy discussions on accessible communication, complaints processes and implementation of the British Sign Language (Wales) Act.
- Llais has increased its own capability through BSL training, partnership working and the development of more accessible services.

While many improvements remain in progress, these examples demonstrate a clear line from the experiences people shared with us, to the action taken by Llais, to the commitments and changes secured as a result.

Improving access to Llais services

We are working with Action Deafness Cymru and Deaf Health Wales to explore ways that we can improve our services to be more accessible, particularly for BSL users. We will be consulting on a range of options including Video Relay Services and deaf-to-deaf customer service support with the Deaf community to ensure that anything we put in place works for the people who use it.

They are also helping us think about our service design and how we might better communicate who we are, what we do and what we can offer so deaf people get to know that we are here for them too.

We sit on the steering group for the All-Wales Communication and Information Standards. These standards are designed to ensure that communication and information from NHS and health bodies is accessible and understandable for people with a range of communication styles. This includes English as a second-language, Welsh language, Easy read and BSL.

Regional Partnership Working: Gwent BSL People Participation Panel

Llais in the Gwent region has been instrumental in setting up the British Sign Language (BSL) People Participation Panel hosted by Aneurin Bevan University Health Board. The panel brings together Health Board leaders, Action Deafness Cymru, people with lived experience and partner organisations to support service improvement through co-production for d/Deaf, deafened, hard of hearing and deafblind people.

Working closely with advocacy clients and panel organisers, Llais helps ensure that people with direct experience of health and care services are able to contribute to discussions and shape improvements. Individuals who have accessed our complaints advocacy service have attended the panel to share their experiences and

perspectives, helping decision-makers understand the impact of communication barriers and accessibility issues. The panel meets quarterly and provides an important mechanism for ongoing engagement with the Deaf community.

Feedback shared through the panel has highlighted a range of issues affecting access to healthcare, including communication barriers, access to interpreters, accessibility of information, informed consent, and the impact these challenges can have on patient safety, dignity and equality. The panel has helped identify both day-to-day service issues and wider systemic challenges, supporting improvements in areas such as accessible appointment information, interpreter provision, complaints processes and patient engagement.

The partnership has also strengthened referral pathways between the d/Deaf community and Llais' complaints advocacy service, increasing awareness of the support available and helping people raise concerns when communication needs have not been met. This collaborative approach continues to create opportunities for further service improvement work, including recent engagement with community-based Deaf support networks and discussions with healthcare services on improving appointment accessibility.

Learning and Development

We have offered an introductory BSL course to all public-facing staff across Llais. We are also offering a formal British Sign Language Level 1 qualification to a selection of staff across every regional team within Llais to increase our ability to offer basic sign to BSL users, increasing inclusion.

As part of our wider learning and development programme we are talking with our partners to see what else we may be able to offer to increase our awareness and understanding of d/Deaf culture.

Website Development

Our new site is being developed with Civic who have access to an accessibility team.

We are working with them on ways we can embed BSL into our website. This includes thinking about the length of the text we display on our pages to make it easier to develop BSL overlays, using tools like ReachDeck and considering widgets for sign language in different parts of the site.

Informing and influencing national policy on d/Deaf people

Insights gathered through our engagement with d/Deaf people have contributed to the development of the People's Principles, particularly those relating to accessible communication, inclusive and equitable services, involvement in decisions about care, and ensuring people's individual needs are understood and respected.

These priorities are reflected in the vision for health and social care set out in [The Health and Social Care We Want](#).

We have looked to influence national health and social care policy affecting d/Deaf people through representations and consultation responses:

Impact of Llais Representation to Public Health Wales on Deaf People's Access to Screening Services

Following concerns raised by Donna Coleman, Strategic Lead for Women's Health at Llais and Regional Director for West Wales, regarding d/Deaf people's experiences of breast and cervical screening services, Dr Tracey Cooper, Chief Executive of Public Health Wales, provided a detailed response outlining existing arrangements and a number of commitments to improve accessibility across screening programmes.

Key issues raised by Llais

The representation highlighted concerns from members of the Deaf community about:

- Access to appropriate communication support during screening appointments.
- Availability of British Sign Language (BSL) information.
- Difficulties accessing interpreters.
- Confidence in providing informed consent.

- Reluctance among some individuals to raise concerns or complaints about their experiences.

Outcomes and commitments secured

As a result of the concerns raised, Public Health Wales confirmed:

A programme of work is underway to ensure screening information is available in alternative and accessible formats across all screening programmes.

BSL resources have already been developed for breast, bowel, abdominal aortic aneurysm and diabetic eye screening, with plans to expand BSL provision further, including within cervical screening.

Screening programmes are improving the identification and support of communication needs, including automatic interpreter requests for future breast screening appointments where a need has previously been identified.

Public Health Wales is exploring the introduction of a Video Relay Service (VRS), such as SignLive, within the developing lung cancer screening programme, with potential for wider adoption across screening services.

The needs of Deaf people have been explicitly reflected within the refreshed Screening Equity Strategy and associated action plan, including commitments around accessible information, communication support and partnership working.

Public Health Wales reaffirmed its commitment to implementing the All-Wales Accessible Communication and Information Standards (ACIS) and preparing for future requirements arising from the forthcoming BSL legislation.

Improvements to monitoring and feedback

Public Health Wales also outlined measures to better understand Deaf people's experiences, including:

Ongoing engagement with Deaf communities and organisations in the development of BSL resources.

Partnership working through community meetings, advocacy networks and screening engagement forums.

Introduction of the People's Experience Survey across clinic-based screening services from August 2026, including questions about preferred communication language, access to communication support and compliance with Accessible Communication Standards.

Overall impact

The representation prompted a positive and constructive response from Public Health Wales, securing assurances that Deaf people's experiences are being considered across all screening programmes, not only breast and cervical screening. It also resulted in commitments to expand BSL provision, strengthen communication support, improve experience monitoring and embed accessibility considerations within strategic programme development and future service planning. Public Health Wales has also invited further dialogue with Llais to support ongoing improvement work.

Impact of Llais Representation on BSL Domiciliary Care Services

Following concerns raised by members of the d/Deaf community and the Wales Council for Deaf People, Llais became aware that Achieve Together, a specialist provider of domiciliary care delivered through British Sign Language (BSL), had given notice that it intended to cease providing services. This created significant uncertainty for people who relied on the service to live independently and access support through their preferred language.

Through engagement with individuals affected, we heard directly about the importance of specialist BSL-accessible support in enabling people to manage daily life, attend healthcare appointments, access employment opportunities, maintain social connections, and remain independent. Many people described significant anxiety about the future of their care and support.

In response, Llais worked closely with the d/Deaf community and partner organisations to ensure these experiences were heard. Using our statutory powers of representation, we wrote to local authorities across Wales seeking assurances on

continuity of care, future commissioning arrangements, involvement of people affected in decision-making, and the protection of accessible services for d/Deaf people.

As a result, local authorities provided assurances that existing support arrangements would continue while alternative long-term solutions were developed. Responses also demonstrated a commitment to engaging people affected throughout the process, maintaining access to specialist expertise wherever possible, and ensuring individuals retained choice and control over future support arrangements.

Response to the Consultation on the Draft Disabled People's Rights Plan

In our [response to the Welsh Government's consultation on the Draft Disabled People's Rights Plan](#), Llais highlighted the importance of improving access and inclusion for D/deaf people and BSL users. We called for consistent BSL standards across health and social care services, regular monitoring of BSL provision, improved digital accessibility, and meaningful co-production with D/deaf communities. We also emphasised that access to BSL should be recognised as a rights issue rather than a discretionary service provision.

Evidence to the Inquiry into the Future of General Practice in Wales

In our [evidence to the Senedd inquiry on the future of general practice in Wales](#), Llais highlighted barriers faced by people with hearing loss and other communication needs when accessing GP services. Feedback included difficulties using telephone-based appointment systems, concerns about having to rely on others to communicate on their behalf, and the need for staff to better understand and respond to a range of communication needs. We called for greater use of reasonable adjustments and alternative communication methods to ensure equitable access to primary care services.

These examples demonstrate how Llais has been advocating for improved accessibility and communication across health and social care, while ensuring the experiences of D/deaf people and people with sensory loss are reflected in national policy discussions and service improvement work.

Llais Consultation Response on the Reform of General Dental Services in Wales

In our [response to the Welsh Government consultation on reforming General Dental Services](#), Llais highlighted the needs of people with significant communication requirements, including BSL users. We raised concerns that providing information in alternative formats only on request does not constitute an active offer of support and

may create additional barriers and anxiety when accessing dental services. We called for inclusive service design, accessible communication, and targeted support to ensure that reforms do not inadvertently disadvantage people with communication needs.

In our response to the consultation on proposed changes to the Putting Things Right process, Llais emphasised the importance of accessible communication, understanding individuals' communication preferences, and ensuring appropriate support is available to enable people to participate fully in the complaints process.

British Sign Language (Wales) Bill: Llais Response to the Senedd Equality and Social Justice Committee

We contributed evidence to the Committee's scrutiny of the British Sign Language (Wales) Bill, drawing on experiences from our engagement, representation and complaints advocacy work.

Our submission highlighted Llais's commitment to accessible and inclusive services, including the use of BSL interpreters, video relay services, accessible communications practices and plans to expand BSL training for public-facing staff.

Evidence gathered from service users demonstrated the positive impact that even basic BSL skills and Deaf awareness had on people's willingness and ability to engage with services.

The response identified significant barriers faced by BSL users in accessing health and social care services. These included difficulties accessing qualified interpreters, challenges communicating with GP services, inaccessible appointment systems, over-reliance on remote interpretation technology and inconsistent Deaf awareness among providers.

We reported supporting 20 complaints where BSL or Deaf-related communication barriers had been a central issue, spanning primary care, hospitals, social care and outpatient services.

We also highlighted concerns that the proposed changes to the NHS complaints process under the Listening to People framework could increase demand for qualified interpreters and create risks to meeting statutory timescales unless interpreter capacity and accessibility arrangements were strengthened.

Our key message to the Committee was that timely access to appropriate interpretation services was essential if BSL users were to participate fully and equitably in healthcare, social care and complaints processes. We recommended further work to develop a shared framework for access to and monitoring of interpreter provision across Wales, alongside a greater focus on accessible communication and Deaf awareness.

Preparing for the implementation of the British Sign Language (Wales) Act

Recognising the significant opportunities arising from the implementation of the British Sign Language (Wales) Act, Llais has begun exploring how we can further strengthen our support for d/Deaf people and BSL users.

Our Head of Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Wellbeing and Executive Director of Planning and Delivery have met with Welsh Government officials to discuss ways of building BSL and Deaf awareness competency across Llais and the wider public sector.

Discussions have also explored opportunities to strengthen advocacy support for d/Deaf people, including consideration of specialist advocacy or champion roles that could help ensure BSL users are able to access services, raise concerns and have their voices heard.

While these discussions remain at an early stage, they demonstrate our commitment to not only responding to current issues but also preparing for the future requirements and expectations arising from the British Sign Language (Wales) Act. The work already underway across Llais, including staff training, service accessibility improvements, policy engagement and representation activity, places the

organisation in a strong position to support implementation of the Act and influence improvements in health and social care services for d/Deaf people.

Complaints advocacy

Gemma reached out to us for help after being repeatedly denied accessible GP appointments. Here is how our complaints advocacy service helped her:

<https://youtu.be/K-6qwPMQEag?si=fl1R1tl3oDpO39sA>

Podcast series: "Llais in Conversation With..."

An upcoming episode of our [Llais in Conversation With...](#) podcast series will focus on deaf health and access to health and care services.

The episode will feature Dr Rob Wilks (University of the West of England), Dr Sara Rhys-Jones (Swansea Bay University Health Board) and Charles Hampton II (Action Deafness Cymru), who will discuss the Deaf Health Wales project and the experiences of d/Deaf people in accessing services. Both Dr Wilks and Dr Rhys-Jones are deaf and use BSL as their preferred language, with BSL interpretation provided throughout the recording.

All episodes in the podcast series are produced with BSL translation, reflecting our commitment to accessibility and ensuring d/Deaf people can engage with our content. This episode will further support our work to raise awareness of deaf health inequalities and promote the voices of BSL users in shaping services.

Listen to us guides

During May 2026 we developed a range of guides to support organisations and groups to engage effectively with people from different communities. These guides have been co-designed with representative organisations.

So far, we have produced guides to support engagement with Deaf and BSL users, LGBTQ+ people, unpaid carers, women with chronic illnesses, people with learning disabilities and minority ethnic communities.

d/Deaf People & BSL Users – Guidance

This guidance supports the Llais People's Principles by making Deaf and BSL users' access, communication and cultural needs central.

Core Principles

- Respect Deaf culture and the diversity within d/Deaf communities
- Ask - don't assume (communication preferences vary widely)
- Remember that BSL is a language in its own right, not a support tool.
- Recognise that written English may not be someone's first or strongest language.
- Communication is shared — both sides adapt to make it work.

Communication – Key Actions (“Where”)

- Get attention in ways people can see (e.g. wave, light tap)
- Use plain, everyday language
- Offer communication choices:
- BSL interpreter
- Writing
- Text relay
- Apps
- Confirm interpreter arrangements clearly
- Provide written follow-up or transcript in simple English
- Offer feedback via video with BSL overlays

Non-BSL Users

- Ask what works best (e.g. writing, lipreading, apps, gestures)
- Reduce background noise
- Do not rely on lipreading alone
- Keep English simple
- Provide transcripts after online meetings

Environment

- Good lighting
- Face(s) clearly seen
- Low background noise
- Seating arranged so everyone can see each other
- Quiet, private space

Good Practice Actions

Involve: d/Deaf people in decision-making and co-designing services

Advocate: ensure interpreters are booked, raise concerns if Deaf people's communication rights are not met, actively challenge if support is refused or delayed

Work: with qualified, registered BSL/English interpreters matching skill and context

Build: Deaf cultural awareness and remove barriers

Strengthen: relationships by not rushing, checking understanding

Don't wait for people to ask. Offer accessible options upfront and make them easy to see.

Accessible Communication Methods

- d/Deaf apps
- Text relay
- Email
- Face-to-face
- Plain language

Through our engagement, complaints advocacy and influencing activity, Llais has been able to identify recurring barriers experienced by d/Deaf people and use this intelligence to drive improvement.

While examples of good practice exist, ongoing challenges relating to interpreter provision, accessible information, audiology services and reasonable adjustments continue to create barriers for many people.

The introduction of the British Sign Language (BSL) (Wales) Act 2026 presents a significant opportunity to improve accessibility, inclusion and participation for Deaf people across public services in Wales.

Llais is already well positioned to contribute to this agenda through our engagement, advocacy, research and policy work. Recent discussions with Welsh Government have explored opportunities to strengthen organisational competence and

understanding of d/Deaf culture, communication needs and inclusion across our workforce.

We have also begun discussions about the potential for dedicated complaints advocacy support for d/Deaf people, building on the successful model established through our specialist cancer complaints advocate. While these discussions remain at an early stage, they demonstrate the opportunities emerging from the implementation of the BSL Act and the growing recognition of the importance of accessible, specialised support.

The insight gathered through this spotlight provides a strong foundation for Llais to play a strategic role in supporting implementation of the Act and making sure that the experiences of d/Deaf people continue to influence improvements across health and social care services in Wales.