

2024/25

Deaf Community Engagement Project Review



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Well Doncaster



Funded by
UK Government

Introduction

Since January 2024, Citizens Advice Doncaster Borough has operated the Deaf Community Engagement project- funded by a grant from Doncaster Council. The project aimed to improve access to advice services for the Deaf community in Doncaster, particularly around debt and welfare benefits. Despite initial challenges, the project has been a success, demonstrating positive engagement with the community and achieving key outcomes aligned with the Thrive framework.

Key Achievements.

Increased Community Engagement: A dedicated Facebook page for Deaf service users was established, enabling direct communication and the sharing of important updates.

Successful Outreach and Workshops: Community workshops were held to improve trust and accessibility, covering topics such as financial literacy and welfare rights.

Specialist Support Integration: Clients were connected with a specialist energy advice team, ensuring targeted support for energy-related financial difficulties.

Positive Client Outcomes: The service supported at least 77 cases, addressing a range of issues including benefits, debt, housing, and consumer advice.

Financial Impact: Income gains for clients exceeded £40,977, with additional financial assistance secured through reimbursements and grants.



James Woods
CEO

"Ensuring that our services are truly inclusive means breaking down barriers that have long excluded Deaf individuals from vital advice and support. We are committed to making our services accessible to all, and this project has been a significant step in achieving that goal"

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Message From Our Adviser Chloe



Chloe
BSL Advisor

The Deaf BSL Advice Project had a slow start as we worked to build trust within the Deaf community and encourage Deaf people to engage with the service. However, once awareness grew, we saw a significant increase in individuals reaching out for support.

The project allowed us to provide tailored advice in British Sign Language (BSL), ensuring that Deaf individuals could access information in their first language. This empowered them to make informed choices about their rights and options. Additionally, we were able to act on Deaf client's behalf when services were inaccessible, breaking down barriers and advocating for equal access.

Overall, the project has demonstrated the clear need for a dedicated BSL advice service. It has had a meaningful impact on the Deaf community by improving access to information and essential support.

"It has been an absolute pleasure to engage with and work alongside the Deaf community through this project. Building relationships, providing tailored support, and ensuring access to advice in British Sign Language (BSL) has been both rewarding and invaluable.

This experience has reinforced the importance of Deaf awareness and accessibility in all services. I sincerely hope that more organizations recognize the need for inclusive, accessible support and take meaningful steps toward breaking down barriers for the Deaf community."

Aims of the project

The BSL Community Engagement Adviser project was developed to address critical gaps in accessibility for the Deaf community in Doncaster, ensuring that Deaf individuals have equitable access to essential advice and support services.

01. Improve Access to Advice and Support for Deaf Individuals

Provide specialist advice directly in British Sign Language on key issues such as debt, benefits, housing, and financial stability. This approach removes communication barriers, without relying on interpreters as an add-on service.

02. Increase Engagement and Trust within the Deaf Community

Build stronger relationships with Deaf residents by providing a dedicated and culturally appropriate service.

Develop targeted outreach efforts, including a dedicated Facebook page for Deaf users and community-led workshops.



Deaf Support

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Get help from a BSL Advisor:

- Gas and electricity bills
- Benefits
- Housing
- Making a complaint
- Work problems
- General advice

Contact us:
Phone: 07378905716 (TEXT ONLY)
Email: deaf@citizensadvice-doncasterborough.org

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03. Empower Deaf Individuals Through Tailored Support

Provide education on financial well-being, energy costs, and benefits entitlements, ensuring Deaf residents can make informed decisions.

Offer specialist energy advice to help Deaf individuals navigate fuel poverty and financial hardship

04. Address Inequalities and Reduce Barriers to Services

Ensure that Deaf individuals receive advice services tailored to their specific needs, recognizing the impact of language deprivation and knowledge gaps. This includes equitable access through appropriate communication methods, extended appointment times, and in-depth explanations to ensure true understanding and empowerment

Challenges



01. Building Trust within the Deaf Community

- Initially, engagement was low due to historical distrust of mainstream advice services.
- Overcoming this required consistent presence and tailored communication approaches, including BSL video content and Deaf-led outreach efforts.



02. Awareness and Accessibility Barriers

- Many Deaf service users were unaware of their entitlements or struggled to navigate complex benefits systems.
- Addressing this challenge involved making information accessible in BSL and/or creating visual guides.



03. Expanding Service Reach

- While engagement improved, further outreach is needed in rural areas and among older Deaf individuals who may not use social media.
- Future plans should focus on in-person engagement strategies and collaborations with local Deaf organisations.



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Making the Difference – Key Stats

Interpreting the Numbers: Impact Beyond the Stats

While the overall case numbers may appear modest, it's important to recognise that these figures represent significant progress with a client group that has historically been underrepresented and underserved.

The Deaf community often faces multiple barriers to accessing mainstream services, including communication challenges, lack of trust, and a limited understanding of their rights. Many of the individuals supported through this project were not previously engaging with any form of advice or support. That we have been able to reach and support them is a powerful indicator of impact.

These numbers reflect new connections, trust built from scratch, and the start of ongoing engagement—a real achievement for such a marginalised group.



41

Clients Supported



69

Issues with Benefits
or Tax Credits



286

Separate issues
dealt with



23

Clients had issues with
travel or transport



26

Clients had housing
issues



29

Clients had debt or
employment issues



46

Universal credit issues



357

Activities for clients



32

Community Awareness
events



19

Referrals made for
energy advice



£76,035

**Financial gains for clients who would have not had access to
this support locally**

Expanding Our Offer Through Additional Funding



By establishing this dedicated service, we've been able to demonstrate both the need and the value of accessible support for the Deaf community, which has helped us secure additional funding to expand our work. As a direct result, we've successfully added a Deaf adviser to our energy advice team, further enhancing the support we can offer around energy bills, fuel poverty, smart meters, and trust fund applications—areas where Deaf individuals often face significant disadvantage due to inaccessible information and services.

This expansion is incredibly important because energy-related issues are some of the most complex and urgent problems our clients face, and Deaf clients were previously unable to access this specialist support without relying on external interpreters or informal help. By embedding a Deaf adviser within the team, we've ensured that Deaf clients can access expert, direct advice in BSL, giving them greater independence, understanding, and control over their energy usage and household finances.

This not only improves outcomes for individuals but also moves us closer to our goal of a fully inclusive advice service across all areas of need.



£21,733

Financial gains for clients who would have not had access to this support locally

What have the Deaf community said?

"The Deaf Support service at Citizens Advice is brilliant. It is valuable and needed. I am satisfied and happy with the service. It helps so much, for example: it means I can receive letters and have them explained fully in my first language (BSL). Thank you for this service. If this service was not here I would be worried about where I can turn to for support."

- Deaf Client (Translated from BSL)

"The support is really good, it means I can get help and advice in lots of different areas." -Deaf Client (Translated from BSL)

"I feel fortunate to have this service at CAD, now I don't have to rely on my family as much." - Deaf Client (Translated from BSL)

"I've made sure to tell other Deaf people about this service and encouraged them to use it" -Deaf Client (Translated from BSL)

"I am 100% happy with this service, it's brilliant"
- Deaf Client (Translated from BSL)

Lessons Learned and How We've Adapted Our Approach

Accessibility Must Be Embedded, Not an Afterthought

- We learned that standard approaches to advice provision often excluded Deaf individuals.
- As a result we are working to embed Deaf accessible services into our core offer ensuring the Deaf community receive the same level of support as our hearing clients.

Trust and Visibility Take Time to Build

- Engagement was initially low due to historical distrust of mainstream services.
- To address this, we shifted our outreach approach, attending community events, strengthening partnerships with local Deaf groups, and launching a dedicated Facebook page for Deaf users to improve direct communication and trust.

Digital Inclusion is Key for Engagement

- Many Deaf clients prefer online interaction in BSL, highlighting the need for more video-based advice and digital engagement.
- Moving forward, we are expanding our use of BSL video content and ensuring that our digital platforms are fully accessible

Training and Awareness are Essential

- We realized that many mainstream advice staff lack Deaf awareness, making initial engagement difficult.
- To improve this, we are introducing basic Deaf awareness and BSL training for our advisers, ensuring that all clients receive a welcoming and inclusive experience

Sustainable Funding is Crucial

- The success of this project has proven the demand for Deaf-accessible advice, but temporary funding limits long-term impact.
- We are now embedding Deaf services into future funding bids and advocating for permanent investment in accessible advice.

Case Study

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The client, a profoundly Deaf BSL user, has multiple physical disabilities. They rely on aids such as walking sticks and electric scooters. Unable to work, they claim DLA, ESA, CTR, and HB. The client lives in a St Leger Homes property and has recently moved to a new home without a functioning oven or fridge freezer, which they could not afford to replace.

To assist, I contacted Doncaster Council's Wellbeing Team and explained the client's situation. They advised applying for the Local Assistance Scheme (LAS) and provided a referral form. As the form was complex and in English, I explained the form in BSL and completed the LAS application with the client. I ensured the council understood the client's communication needs—text or email only. Additionally, I submitted a referral to the Wellbeing Team for further support.

The following day, the client received confirmation that they were successful in their application and were awarded a cooker and a fridge freezer. This immediate support significantly improved their living conditions, ensuring they could store and prepare food safely.

During the appointment, I further explored the client's situation, identifying they had multiple debts. In BSL, I clarified the meaning of the debts and outlined the available support, directing the client to our Debt team. The client thanked me for my help, stating that if this service had not been available, they would have continued to be anxious about their debt, not knowing where to turn.

This case highlights the vital role of accessible support services in addressing financial hardship and communication-related barriers.



“Thank you so much for your help. If this service had not been available, I would have continued to be anxious about my debt, not knowing where to turn.”

- Deaf Client

(Translated from BSL into English)



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Case Study

The client, a profoundly Deaf person who uses BSL as their first language, was seeking employment. They had previous experience in various work places. They were in receipt of PIP.

The client had several concerns about their rights and entitlements including: their right to use a BSL interpreter (via Access to Work) if hired and if they qualified for certain benefits. The client also wanted advice on how to follow up on a job application with an employer, after receiving no response.

I informed the client that under the Equality Act, they had the right to access a BSL interpreter, and if denied, they could challenge the decision. I reassured them that they could work beyond retirement age and discussed flexible working options. I explored the client's savings, income and expenditures and informed the client of benefits they could or could not be eligible for.

To assist the client in following up on their job application, I called the employer on their behalf, as the employer did not have a video relay service available (a means of communicating online via video call with a BSL Interpreter).

Outcome: The client left feeling empowered, aware of their rights, and with a clear plan for their job search. This is because this advice service was available in their first language- BSL.



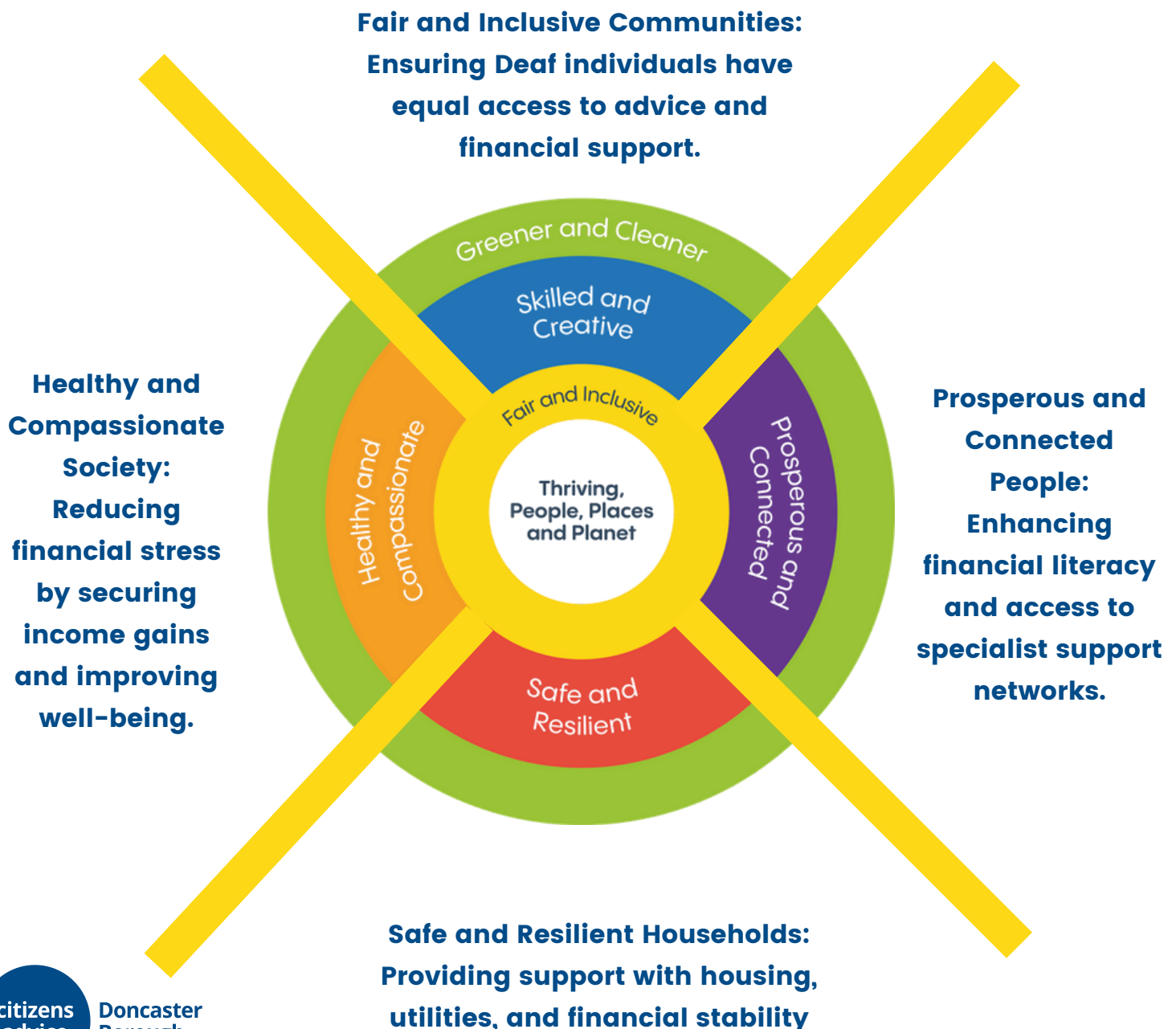
Deaf Equality:

This means that Deaf people are able to access information, services and support in their preferred language. It means Deaf people have the same opportunities to achieve the same life outcomes as anyone else.



Alignment to Delivering Together Plan

The BSL Community Engagement Adviser project embodies the principles of Doncaster Council's Delivering Together strategy, which aims to create a fairer, more inclusive, and connected Doncaster. Inspired by the need to address long-standing accessibility gaps for the Deaf community, this project aligns directly with the Council's commitment to equity, resilience, and community empowerment. By ensuring that Deaf individuals have equal access to essential advice services, the initiative contributes to the broader goals of fair and inclusive growth, improved well-being, and enhanced social connectivity.



Raising Awareness

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A key focus of the project was to raise awareness of Deaf rights and ensure that Deaf individuals know where to turn for support. Many Deaf residents in Doncaster face systemic barriers to accessing advice services, often due to a lack of accessible information and support in BSL. To bridge this gap, the project prioritized community engagement, visibility, and digital inclusion.

We actively attended local events, community forums, and Deaf group meetings to raise awareness about the rights of Deaf individuals and the support available. These engagements provided a safe space for open discussions, helping to rebuild trust in advice services and ensuring that Deaf individuals knew how and where to access support for benefits, debt, housing, and other essential issues.

Are you struggling with Living Costs?

Book an appointment with Citizens Advice BSL Advisors:

07378 905716

deaf@citizensadvice-doncasterborough.org



Moving Home Soon?

If you are unsure what to do, book an appointment with Deaf service at Citizens Advice. We can discuss what you need to do.



07378 905716



deaf@citizensadvice-doncasterborough.org



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BSL Energy Workshop

Come and Learn more about your Gas and Electricity Meters & Bills and how to save money!

At Woodlands Library,
Windmill Balk Ln, Woodlands,
Doncaster. DN6 7SB

10th February 2025
at 1.30 pm



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If you are interested please contact us on
Email: deaf@citizensadvice-doncasterborough.org
Phone: 07378905716 (TEXT ONLY)



Recognising the importance of digital engagement, we launched a dedicated Facebook page for the Deaf community, providing regular updates in BSL, sharing accessible advice, and enabling direct engagement with advisers. This platform has played a crucial role in connecting Deaf residents with essential services, fostering peer support, and ensuring that important advice reaches those who need it most.

Through these efforts, the project has not only provided direct support but has also helped to empower the Deaf community with knowledge, confidence, and accessible resources, ensuring they know their rights and where to find the help they deserve.

"Before this project, I didn't know where to go for help. Now, with the Facebook page and community events, I can access advice in BSL and feel confident seeking support."

Deaf service user – Doncaster

Conclusion

The Deaf community in Doncaster has long faced barriers to accessing advice and support, often excluded from mainstream services due to a lack of accessible communication and specialist provision. The BSL Community Engagement Adviser project has demonstrated the transformative impact of truly accessible services, helping to improve financial stability, reduce stress, and build trust among Deaf residents.

However, this project is just the beginning of a much-needed conversation about accessibility across the city. The challenges we encountered—low initial engagement due to historic distrust, limited awareness of Deaf accessibility needs, and gaps in service provision—highlight a deeper issue. If we are serious about ensuring fair and inclusive access to support, then there must be a city-wide review of how services are designed and delivered to ensure that Deaf individuals are not left behind.

This cannot happen without sustainable funding and collaboration. While this project has proven the need and demand for Deaf-accessible advice, temporary, grant-funded initiatives alone cannot provide long-term solutions. A consistent and embedded approach is essential to ensuring that Deaf residents have the same opportunities to access advice as hearing people.

At Citizens Advice Doncaster Borough, we are proud of what this project has achieved. It has strengthened our commitment to accessibility, and as a result, we are incorporating a reduced version of this service into our core offer. While this is a positive step, we recognize that a fully funded, permanent service is the only way to provide true equity. That is why we are embedding a Deaf offer into all future funding bids where appropriate, ensuring that the support available to Deaf individuals matches the level of service offered to hearing people.

This project has shown that when accessibility is prioritized, the impact is significant. We now call on funders, policymakers, and service providers to build on this progress—to listen to the Deaf community, invest in inclusive services, and work together to make accessibility a standard, not an afterthought. With the right funding and partnerships, we can ensure that every resident in Doncaster, regardless of their communication needs, has equal access to the advice and support they deserve.



Final Call to Action

The BSL Community Engagement Adviser project has proven that targeted, accessible support for the Deaf community can make a significant difference. However, true equity will only be achieved when accessibility is embedded into all advice services, not treated as an optional extra.

We urge funders, local government, and service providers to recognize the ongoing needs of the Deaf community and work with us to ensure that Deaf individuals in Doncaster receive the same level of service as hearing people.

With sustained funding, collaboration, and a commitment to inclusion, we can create a fairer, more accessible Doncaster where no one is excluded from the support they need

Our Commitment Moving Forward

This project has reshaped how we approach accessibility, and we are committed to ensuring that Deaf individuals are no longer an underserved group in advice services. By embedding accessibility, expanding digital support, and strengthening partnerships, we aim to create a truly inclusive service that meets the needs of all Doncaster residents.

Thank you

TO ALL THE PARTNERS, CLIENTS AND STAKEHOLDER WHO
MADE THIS PROEJCT A SUCSESS

Contact

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