

Sensory Impairment

Sensory impairment refers to people who are deaf or hard of hearing; blind or partially sighted; or combined sight and hearing loss (also known as dual sensory loss). In the UK, one in 30 people has sight loss, nine million are deaf or hard of hearing, and 23,000 deaf-blind people have developed hearing loss. By 2050, the number of people with sight loss is set to double due to increases in risk factors such as obesity, diabetes and age.

There is limited information about the number of people with sensory impairment in North Somerset. While registration of visual impairment with the Local Authority is statutory registration of hearing impairment is not. As of February 2011, there were 715 people registered blind and 668 partially sighted. The majority (83%) of blind and partially sighted (86%) are older adults. Most blind (62%) and partially sighted people (63%) are female. A total of 153 people were registered either deaf or hard of hearing, and 6 appeared on both registers. National estimates indicate 100 people in North Somerset have dual sensory loss. Most people with a hearing impairment (74%) were older adults and female (61%).

A range of services are available to those with sensory impairment provided by the council and voluntary groups. For those with visual impairment, this includes services related to registrations; rehabilitation; equipment display and provision; social inclusion activities; parking and travel schemes; and access to books. For those with hearing impairment this include a social worker for people with learning disabilities; equipment and support services; and sign language support for the theatre. For those with dual sensory loss, the council provide a guide communicator services for some people.

A recent review of services highlighted strengths and challenges of current service provision. The clearest gap was the low visibility of and priority given to the issue of people with a dual sensory impairment. An action plan was developed to address these issues. Engagement with groups experiencing sensory impairment indicates that most people have no difficulties with access to services although some had experienced difficulties accessing information and places.

Challenges for consideration

There is a need to improve the accuracy of data on the numbers of people with sensory impairment; improve or sustain services for those with dual sensory impairment; and continue to meet the information and access needs of this population.

Author: Alun Davies, Planning and Policy Manager, Adult Social Services and Housing, North Somerset Council.

Date: June 2011

Why is this important?

For the purposes of this summary sensory impairment refers to:

- * Deaf people and people who are hard-of-hearing
- * Blind people and people who are partially-sighted
- * People with severe combined sight and hearing loss (dual sensory loss Deaf blind)

The content of this summary relating to North Somerset Council has been taken from the North Somerset Council Review of Services for People with a Sensory Impairment undertaken in 2009.

The following national information has been compiled from information on the web sites of the Royal National Institute for the Blind, the Royal National Institute for Deaf People, and Sense.

What are the needs of the population?

Almost two million people in the UK are living with sight loss, approximately one person in thirty. Sight loss affects people of all ages, but its occurrence increases markedly with age. 1 in 5 people aged 75 and over are living with sight loss. 1 in 2 people aged 90 and over are living with sight loss. Nearly two-thirds of people living with sight loss are women. People from black and minority ethnic communities are at greater risk of some of the leading causes of sight loss. As many as three quarters of people with learning disabilities are estimated to have either refractive error or to be blind or partially sighted.

The number of people in the UK with sight loss is set to increase dramatically in the future. In addition, there is a growing incidence in key underlying causes of sight loss, such as obesity and diabetes. It is predicted that by 2020 the number of people with sight loss will rise to over 2,250,000. By 2050, the numbers of people with sight loss in the UK will double to nearly four million.

There are estimated to be about 9 million deaf and hard of hearing people in the UK. The number is rising as the number of people over the age of 60 increases. About 698,000 of these are severely or profoundly deaf. 450,000 severely or profoundly deaf people cannot hear well enough to use a voice telephone, even with equipment to make it louder.

Most of the 9 million deaf and hard of hearing people in the UK have developed a hearing loss as they get older. Only about 2% of young adults are deaf or hard of hearing. Around the age of 50 the proportion of deaf people begins to increase sharply and 55% of people over 60 are deaf or hard of hearing. A high proportion of severely or profoundly deaf people have other disabilities as well.

Among those under 60, 45% have additional disabilities. These are more likely to be physical disabilities. Among severely or profoundly deaf people over 60 years, 77% have some additional disability. For 45%, this means significant dexterity or sight difficulties, or both.

Deaf-blindness is a unique disability. It is sometimes known as dual sensory impairment or multi-sensory impairment and is more than a combination of visual and hearing impairments. It is important to stress that many deaf-blind people may not be totally deaf and totally blind. Many of the UK's 23,000 deaf-blind people have some remaining hearing and vision. Some, though, have nearly complete loss of both senses. The largest group of deaf-blind people have developed hearing and vision problems as they get older. Of all the people in the UK over 75 who have a visual impairment around half will also be hard of hearing as well.

There is limited information about the numbers of people with a sensory impairment in North Somerset. The most comprehensive, but not definitive, source of information is the registers kept by the Local Authority. The register of people with a visual impairment is statutory, whilst the register for people with a hearing impairment is not. There is no separate register for people with a dual sensory impairment. These figures are obtained by comparing the two registers.

The following figures are accurate as of February 2011:

- Registered blind- 715
- Registered partially sighted – 668

- Deaf without speech 9
- Deaf with speech 31
- Hard of hearing 113

People registered with both a hearing and visual impairment 6 people on both registers

- Blind older adults- 596
- Blind younger adults- 114
- Blind children- 4

- Partially sighted older adults- 572
- Partially sighted younger adults- 81
- Partially sighted children- 14

- Deaf without speech older adults 5
- Deaf without speech younger adults 4
- Deaf with speech older adults 16
- Deaf with speech younger adults 15

- Hard of hearing older adults- 92
- Hard of hearing younger adults- 20

On both registers: 4 older adults, 2 younger adults

- Blind, Female- 442
- Blind, Male- 273
- Partially sighted, Female- 421
- Partially sighted, Male- 247
- Deaf without speech, Female- 4
- Deaf without speech, Male- 5
- Deaf with speech, Female- 13
- Deaf with speech, Male- 18
- Hard of Hearing, Female- 69
- Hard of hearing, Male- 44
- Blind, 132 adults in receipt of services during 2010-11
- Partially sighted, 120 adults in receipt of services during 2010-11
- Deaf without speech, 0 adults in receipt of services during 2010-11
- Deaf with speech, 1 adults in receipt of services during 2010-11
- Hard of hearing, 5 adults in receipt of services during 2010-11

Current Service Provision

North Somerset Council

The services the council provides to people with a sensory impairment can be divided into those services that are specifically focused on the needs of people with a sensory impairment and those that are focused on all disabled people. There is also the key issue of all other services being accessible to people with a sensory impairment. These are all described briefly in the following paragraphs.

Specific services for people with a visual impairment and people with a hearing impairment

For people with a visual impairment the council contracts an external voluntary sector organisation, Vision North Somerset (formerly Woodspring Association of

Blind P) to provide a number of services. These include registrations, rehabilitation, equipment display and provision, and social inclusion activities.

The council funds the provision of Talking Book machines and membership of the Talking Book service of the RNIB. It also purchases large-print and audio books for the library service.

For people with a hearing impairment there is a half-time Social Worker for deaf and hard-of-hearing people within Adult Social Services and Housing. Many of the people who receive assistance from the social worker are people who are profoundly and/or pre-lingually deaf. Due to difficulties in communicating with both the council as a whole and other service providers, a significant proportion of the social worker's time is taken up assisting and supporting people to access and find their way round other services. The council also contracts with an external voluntary organisation, the Bristol Centre for Deaf People, to provide specific services including the provision of equipment and a support group for deaf adults who also have a learning disability.

Services for People with Dual Sensory Loss

The only specialised service the council provides at present is purchasing guide communicator services for people who are assessed as being eligible for Adult Social Services under the Fair Access to Care (FAC) criteria. The authority has a very low awareness of the numbers of people with a dual sensory loss in comparison to the assessment based on extrapolation of national data. The extrapolation shows that there should be around 100 people with a dual sensory impairment in North Somerset, but the council has records of much fewer than this. It is therefore recommended that further work is undertaken to try and establish more accurate figures.

Services for all Disabled People

The Adult Social Services and Housing Directorate provides a number of services to support Disabled people and older people living in the community which people with a sensory impairment are able to choose to use if they meet the eligibility criteria for those services. The services include occupational therapy equipment, day services, respite care, funding for residential care and nursing homes.

People who are registered blind are eligible for the Blue Badge parking scheme. People who are registered blind and people who are deaf are eligible for the Diamond Travel Card concessionary bus travel scheme. Provision is made for people with a visual impairment who use guide dogs at the Playhouse theatre, and there are occasional performances with British Sign Language support for

deaf people who are British Sign Language users. The refuse service operate a scheme by which Disabled people can apply for their bins to be taken out of their gardens and put back by the refuse collection staff.

The review of Council services for people with a sensory impairment referred to above review services against a set of standards. The outcome was

Strengths

- The council has a wide range of policies including a Corporate Equality Policy and Disability Equality Scheme and accessible information and communication guidance which create a clear framework for services for Disabled people including those with sensory impairments.
- The council seeks to include people with a sensory impairment in consultation over policies and service development and does this through a permanent engagement structure.
- The council has taken a number of positive measures over recent, years to address the under-representation of disabled people employed within the council.
- The council meets its statutory obligations regarding people with a visual impairment in terms of registration and rehabilitation with services provided by an external provider that receive very positive service user feedback.

Challenges

- While the council has clear policies regarding accessible information and communication, it is clear both from the standards survey and from the consultation (see section below) that service users with a sensory impairment and particularly profoundly deaf British Sign Language users experience significant difficulties with effective communication with council services.
- While the council has structures in place to engage with some people with a sensory impairment, many people with a sensory impairment as revealed by the consultation (see section 6 below) have never been consulted by the council about their experiences of services. There is also some experience of consultation processes not being accessible.
- There is limited awareness or communication training provided for staff and in-particular front-facing staff. Adult Social Services and Housing does provide training courses on both visual impairment awareness and

hearing impairment awareness which are highly regarded by people who attend the training although demand for these courses fluctuates. The council also provides general equalities training through its "Fair for All" course, although due to the width of issues covered direct reference to sensory impairment issues is limited.

- There is no named specific manager with responsibility for leading and overseeing services to people with a sensory impairment.
- There is little accurate information about the numbers or needs of deaf people and people with a dual sensory loss held by the council.
- Awareness amongst council services of the needs of people with a dual sensory loss and of how to meet their particular needs in service provision is not as high as it is concerning people with a visual impairment or hearing impairment.
- While Adult Social Services are developing policies and procedures to implement transformation of services and personalisation the numbers of people with a sensory impairment going through personalisation are small.

The clearest gap highlighted by the review was the very low visibility of and priority given to the issue of people with a dual sensory impairment. A report was commissioned in 2004 to identify the level of need and options for the council to respond to the need, but it was not possible to progress this work due to resource constraints. There is a clear expectation from government that a local authority does attempt both to quantify the level of need and to respond to it.

An action plan was developed to address the issues raised by the review. The plan was monitored in August 2010 and in April 2011.

Community Voice

The Council and NHS North Somerset support a Joint Planning structure of which one of the groups is a Physical and Sensory Impairment Engagement group. People with a visual impairment and people with a hearing impairment are both respectively part of and involved in this group. The group is consulted about and engaged on issues relating to people with a sensory impairment, primarily by the Council.

There was an engagement process undertaken as part of the review of Council services for people with a sensory impairment. The following are some of the issues raised during the consultation by both people with a visual impairment and people with a hearing impairment who responded.

- The majority experienced no difficulty with contacting or services received from the council.
- The majority were satisfied with the service provided by Vision North Somerset and Bristol Centre for Deaf P.
- The majority of people with a visual impairment who responded had not taken part in any council run consultation.
- A minority of people said they would find out information about the council either from Vision North Somerset or the Council's social worker for deaf people rather than contact the council directly.
- A minority of people experienced difficulty accessing either information provided by the council or the council did not provide accessible communication methods.
- A minority of people encountered access issues with "North Somerset Life" and with the Council's website.
- A minority of people experienced difficulty with the accessibility of the built environment.

Challenges for consideration by commissioners

- Need to improve the accuracy of the data regarding numbers of people with a sensory impairment in North Somerset.
- Statutory services to continue to meet the access (including information) needs of people with a sensory impairment.
- Services to explore how to improve or sustain service to people with a dual sensory impairment.