INTERACT

*The INTERACT (Investigating New Types of Engagement, Response and Contact Technologies in Policing) project explored the use of new technologies in interactions between the police and public, and how police can build legitimacy with various publics amidst changes to police contact.*

BRIEFING 5 - **October 2024**

# Deaf British Sign Language Users' Experiences of Technology and Policing

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## Key Points:

- Trust in the ability of the police to address access needs for deaf BSL users in this research is low.
- Trust in the police is evaluated based on not only how the police behave, but also on the technology required and the provision of translation services.
- If technology is not adequate, this communicates to deaf individuals that their needs have not been fully taken into account and this can damage trust and confidence in the police.
- Police services need to consider how best to work with deaf individuals to make sure their needs are designed into new technologies for communication.


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## Background

In the UK, there are around 90,000 deaf people who identify as members of a cultural and linguistic minority. This group primarily communicates using British Sign Language (BSL), which is their preferred language. BSL is a rich and fully developed visual language, encompassing its own grammar and vocabulary, distinct from spoken English. While the linguistic needs of deaf signers are often viewed primarily as issues of disability access, it can be beneficial to adopt an intersectional approach that recognises them as part of both a linguistic minority and a disability minority (Robinson & Henner, 2018). By applying this intersectional lens, the police can begin to acknowledge the unique experiences and identities of deaf signers, especially when introducing technology to reform how the police serve deaf signers.

In recent years policing in the UK has increasingly pursued three related developments for the provision and delivery of policing: policing mediated by technology, the incorporation of procedural justice theory into the delivery of policing, and a drive to enhance access to policing for minoritised groups. However, procedural justice theory has typically assumed that 'contact' between the police and members of the public takes place between two humans in a shared physical space who share the same language. The use of technologies in policing changes this relationship. For the BSL-using deaf community, contact with the police often requires the presence and use of technology in some way, usually via a BSL-interpreter who has been contacted via a technologically-enabled video relay service (VRS). A VRS involves a deaf person making contact with a trained interpreter remotely via video technology, such as on a phone, tablet, or computer.

A significant advantage of the increasing use of technology in society for deaf people has been the ability to use video communication on devices such as tablets, smart phones or computers, to communicate in the individuals' preferred language. However, research has demonstrated that the approach to implementation of technology to adress accessibility needs for deaf individuals repeatedly excludes deaf individuals (and interpreters) as groups whose experiences are relevant to the design of these (Lumsden & Black, 2022). Without engaging deaf individuals, critical questions arise concerning how the problem of access for deaf people is framed and by whom.  The purpose of this research was to understand how deaf BSL users in England and Scotland have experienced policing that involves technology.

## What we did

We undertook two focus groups aimed at exploring the impact of technology in policing for deaf individuals. The focus groups were held in England and Scotland in 2023 and engaged deaf participants who use BSL. A total of ten participants took part, five in each focus group, with a range of ages and a 60/40 male to female gender split. This is a small group of participants and so these findings are indicative, and we do not make claims to generalisability. These focus groups were conducted in BSL by Dr Robert Skinner who is a native signer. The focus groups were video recorded across multiple devises to ensure a range of angles to capture all signed communication. These videos were then 'dubbed' into spoken English and were then transcribed into written English and cross-checked against the original BSL video recording to ensure accuracy in translation. It is important to note that this research was not designed or delivered by deaf academics, which would be best practice in this field of research. We did, however, consult with leaders in deaf advocacy spaces throughout the design process and shared our findings with deaf audiences through community events.

## Key findings

- Participants in both sites had poor evaluations of police treatment and poor expectations of police encounters regardless of whether or not technology was involved. This was particularly the case for the key theme of 'voice', which in procedural justice terms refers to the ability and opportunity to communicate and feel attentively listened to.

- Participants across both focus groups were keen to establish that they did not feel they were (or would be) given appropriate opportunities to communicate their experiences to, and to be taken seriously by, the police. Participants described approaching their interactions with the police with a high level of unease and scepticism, they expected communication to be a challenge, and felt the police had not done enough to address this basic need.

- Police efforts to use technology appeared to do little to address these concerns. Although video relay technology was viewed as a valuable tool for gaining initial access to police services, the reality is that, although deaf people can make contact with police call centres using video relay services, once the police arrive at the scene the call is terminated. This ultimately cuts off access to communication with police at the moment the police arrive.

- Participants described evaluating the services of policing based on multiple stages of interaction. This includes their experience of contact with the police, their experiences of contact with interpreters and their experiences of using technology. A poor experience with technology (such as slow-loading or lack of internet connection) or with interpreters (such as misinterpretation or concerns around trustworthiness or confidentiality) contribute to deaf individuals' overall evaluation of the police service.

- Although some police services use BSL webpages to publish information in a way that is accessible to deaf BSL users, this function is often 'one way'. If a deaf individual wishes to make contact with the police online, such as responding to a police survey or reporting a crime online, they are required to do so using written English. For participants in this research, this demonstrated the failure of policing to truly understand the communication needs of deaf individuals. From participants' perspectives this suggested an insincerity in police approaches to promoting BSL communication.

- Finally, the presence of inadequate technology can damage trust in the police as this technology is seen as a symbol of police misunderstanding and under-appreciation of deaf individuals' needs.

- Participants expressed a need for 'language-concordant' services (the ability to communicate in preferred language) that included cultural as well as linguistic representation in policing. Although participants demonstrated a preference for communicating with officers who can speak BSL, such as Police Link Officers for the Deaf (who are hearing officers who are trained to some degree in BSL) compared to communicating with non-BSL speaking officers via technology, some participants expressed that they would ultimately prefer to communicate with police officers who are deaf and who could represent and understand deaf culture as well as language.

## Implications

- Amongst this user group, trust in the police is a relayed experience and depends on the experience of all the actors (technology, interpreters, and police) involved in the journey. To build trust, police may need to consider how to work better with interpreting video relay services and deaf people to ensure the whole system of communication is fit for purpose.
- Police need to establish a plan for communication with BSL users when officers arrive and the video-relay call is ended. This may be achieved by contacting interpreting services accessed through their mobile data terminals in advance of arrival.
- Police services may wish to consider cultural as well as linguistic representation amongst their staff and officers and make consideration for employing deaf officers or staff.
- In internet-based contact, such as online surveys or online reporting forms, police services need to consider that written English is often not appropriate for deaf BSL users and instead consider ways that deaf individuals can communicate using BSL.


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