Mental Health Services:
Reducing Communication Barriers for Deaf Service Users
Accessing Mental Health Services

February 2011
Acknowledgements

Thank you to the service providers for their responses to the LiNk survey.
1. Introduction

1.1 What is Islington LINK?

Islington LINk (Local Involvement Network) is an independent organisation, led by a
network of elected volunteers from the local community (both individuals and
representatives of community and voluntary organisations). LINks were set up in
every local authority area in England in 2008, under the ‘Local Government and
Public Involvement in Health Act’ 2007. They act as a **channel for the community
voice on health and social care services**, collecting local people’s views and
experiences and reporting these to the people responsible for local health and social

1.2 Why is the LINk investigating access to mental health services for Deaf
service users?

Islington LINk was approached by local Deaf service users who wanted to find out
how local NHS services were responding to the needs of Deaf service users with
mental health needs.

The Deaf service users stated that there is a higher incidence of Mental Health
problems within the Deaf community. Research into mental health and deafness is
limited, but some of the evidence from Deaf charity Sign Health suggests that Deaf
people are more likely to experience a mental health problem than hearing people.
(1).

It was suggested that Deaf people were having difficulty in accessing Mental Health
services in Islington. Islington Deaf Campaign’s ‘Response to Discrimination Law
Green Paper 2007’ highlighted that nine Deaf Islington residents had at some point
experienced access problems caused by language barriers.

The LINk set up a working group to find out what was being doing in local health and
social care organisations to support communication with British Sign Language users
(signers) and signpost them to mental health services benchmarked against ‘Mental
Health and Deafness, Towards Equality and Access’ 2005. (2)

2. Methodology: How we carried out the research

The LINk working group wrote to local organisations providing health care that it
believed would be covered by the Department of Health’s report ‘Mental Health and
Deafness, Towards Equality and Access’ 2005. LINk’s have a right to a reply within
twenty working days, and so decided that writing to local providers with a series of
questions relating to the report’s action plan would be the best way of gathering
responses.

The LINk wrote to:
• NHS Islington, responsible for primary care in the borough
• Whittington NHS Hospital, responsible for elective care, maternity services and accident and emergency services
• Camden and Islington NHS Foundation Trust, responsible for a range of specialist mental health services across Islington and neighbouring borough Camden.

3. Findings

Camden and Islington NHS Foundation Trust and NHS Islington responded jointly, a response was also sent from the Whittington Hospital NHS Trust.

NHS Islington stated that they work in partnership with London Borough of Islington (LBI) to promote a universal access to their services. Together these organisations fund a dedicated sign language interpreting team which includes British Sign Language interpreters, palantypists, lip-speakers and other specialists. In response to requests from service users, a male interpreter has been recruited to respond when service users have a preference for a male interpreter. Hearing loops are also fitted in all but one of the community health team’s offices with loops to be fitted in the remaining office within the next 12 months.

Camden and Islington NHS Foundation Trust stated that the Trust does not routinely collate information on how many Deaf residents have mental health needs so it was not possible for them to tell LINk how many service users exist at present and whether that number is growing.

NHS Islington and Camden and Islington NHS Foundation Trust do not run any specific courses for staff to learn British Sign Language or Sign Supported English, though staff do have access to disability equality training and also deaf awareness training which includes basic signing. With regard to recruiting more Deaf people to work in mental health services, the Trusts operate Equal Opportunities Policies and value diversity in the workplace.

NHS Islington has links with local and national organisations representing Deaf people such as the Royal Association for Deaf People and Disability Action in Islington. NHS Islington also holds a regular Disability Equality Steering group which has Deaf representatives. Public meetings are also facilitated with BSL interpreters to ensure that the views of Deaf residents can be collected.

NHS Islington has not identified a primary care centre which could develop a specialist interest to meet the needs of Deaf people. Firstly, NHS Islington aims to promote universal access so people can access services at any point. Secondly a pan-London feasibility study revealed that a London-wide GP practice specifically for Deaf people was unaffordable and unsustainable.
The Whittington NHS Trust stated that as they are not a mental health services provider the report does not apply to them but that they do offer a BSL interpreting service. The service includes a BSL trained staff member and the use of agency staff. The Trust stated that it finds it difficult to access interpreters at short notice because of a national shortage of suitably qualified interpreters. The Trust welcomes feedback from service users on how to make all aspects of their services better, including services and access for Deaf users. The Trust is also looking in to the use of video phones with their telephone interpreting services provider.

Endnotes:
Appendix A: Questions to service providers

Islington LINk has set up a working group to find out more about service access for Deaf service users based on the Department of Health’s 2005 report ‘Mental Health and Deafness, Towards Equity and Access’.

The report outlines a series of recommendations for reducing communication barriers for Deaf service users and I am writing to ask you

1. What actions NHS Islington has taken in response to these recommendations 
2. What improvements in communication have come about as a result?

For a copy of the full report:

In particular the working group is interested to learn about how effective Local Needs Assessments have been in identifying the mental health needs of the borough’s Deaf residents, and the needs of Deaf Blind residents and Deaf elders.

To explore further the effectiveness of Local Needs Assessment, the LINk is also writing to ask you:

3. How many Deaf residents with Mental Health needs have been identified?
4. Has this number increased as the Needs Assessment has developed?

5. What methods does the Trust employ to facilitate communication with D/deaf service users; British Sign Language (BSL) Interpreters, video phone-calls or video-emails?

6. Has any work been done to encourage Mental Health service staff to learn BSL (British Sign Language) or SSE (Signed Supported English)?

7. Has any work been done to increase the number of Deaf people working in mental health services locally? And how successful has this been?

8. What links have been developed with local and national organisations that represent Deaf people to develop awareness and understanding of the needs of Deaf residents?

9. Has NHS Islington identified a GP (or primary care) practice within its boundaries which could develop a special interest to meet the needs of Deaf people in the borough?
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Islington LINk Membership Form

Contact details

Title ……………. First name …………. Surname …………………..

Organisation (if applicable) ………………………………………..

Address …………………………………………………………………

Post code ………… Email …………………………………………

Telephone Number ………………………………………

Please let us know your areas of interest/ expertise in Health and Social Care:

☐ Primary Care (eg doctors, dentists, podiatry, eye tests)
☐ Secondary Care (eg hospitals, specialist clinics)
☐ Social/ Community Care (eg Meals on Wheels/Home Help/District nurse)
☐ Residential Care and Nursing Homes
☐ Emergency services (e.g. ambulance service)
☐ Other (Please state below)

Services for:

☐ Children & Young People ☐ Older People ☐ Carers
☐ Disabled People ☐ People with learning difficulties
☐ People with mental health issues ☐ Black and Minority Ethnic (BME)
☐ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT)
☐ Other:

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