

Barriers and Challenges Faced by Deaf Tenants in the Private Rented Sector, with Steven Cafferty

00:00:01 Gillian

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00:00:23 Gillian

Today my guest is Steven Cafferty from Deaf Action. And today we're going to discuss the challenges and barriers that hard of hearing and deaf people face within the private rented sector.

00:00:34 Gillian

So, Steven, before we get into today's show, our listeners may want to know that you are profoundly deaf. Can you describe your own deafness?

00:00:44 Steven

Yeah, absolutely. Thank you for having me on the show today as well. So, there are four different spectrums of hearing loss. You've got mild, moderate, severe and profound. And I sit in the profound bracket. So, I was actually born hearing. I got meningitis when I was born. And I lost my hearing through meningitis. So, I speak orally, but I do use sign language as well. I grew up in a hearing world. All my family are hearing too.

I was the first person [in my area] to go to a mainstream school too, and there weren't any deaf kids where I was from, which is Perth. But I went to a few deaf youth clubs when I was about 8 or 9 and deaf camps as well and I got into deaf sport as a teenager as well. So, I gradually learned some sign language there. And when I joined Deaf Action a few years ago, I completed my Level 2 in British Sign Language.

00:01:49 Gillian

Right. Before we talk about experiences of renting. Can you tell us about Deaf Action, as it was the first organisation of its kind in the world.

00:01:58 Steven

Yeah, that that's true. Deaf Action was founded in 1835. It was originally known as Edinburgh Deaf and Dumb Benevolent Society. Of course, we don't use that term now because things have obviously changed a lot more. We've been at our home on Albany Street in Edinburgh since 1889 which also included a deaf church where we had services, weddings, christenings, and even funerals were held. The church isn't in use anymore, but we're still here at the heart of the deaf community in Edinburgh.

Today we offer many different services to interpretation and communication support, employability and digital skills, wellbeing and counselling services, translation, support services and many more.

In fact, last year we also set up the first ever Edinburgh Deaf Festival to celebrate deaf culture. And of course, we also offer a specialist equipment service to which is one of the reasons I'm here to talk to you today.

00:03:01 Gillian

Yes. I'll ask you about just slightly later, but what's Deaf Action's vision, mission value and social aims?

00:03:14 Steven

Our vision is inclusive communities, free from barriers and where deaf people can fulfil their potential and thrive and be the best that they can be. We exist to support all the people and that includes the people who British Sign Language, or BSL, and those who are deaf, deafblind or hard of hearing. Our mission is to empower deaf people to achieve their potential, to participate in society with equality of access and opportunity, and we do all that through our services for deaf people.

00:03:51 Gillian

OK, so with half of the employees consisting of deaf people, in what exact ways does it benefit the organisations position?

00:03:59 Steven

We're very proud to be deaf-led organisation. Almost half of our staff are deaf and many more have grown up with deaf family and friends. There isn't just one type of deafness, and the charity does reflect that. There are deaf people who use BSL, there's hard of hearing people who use spoken English and then everything in between.

Deaf people are just so different and unique in their own way. Someone who has grown up with BSL and someone who is experiencing age-related hearing loss in later life will be completely different.

But we've all experienced barriers and whether that's through gender, religion or disability, so we can empathise with that. And I think that's why I get on really well with my own clients, because I have a general understanding of what they're going through. But having that collective experience means that we truly understand the needs of our community and the challenges that deaf people face.

00:05:06 Gillian

Let's talk about the barriers and challenges that hard of hearing and deaf people face when looking for a place to rent. How many deaf people approximately are in rented accommodation in Scotland and what would you say are the main challenges when applying for available properties and viewings themselves?

00:05:24 Steven

Based on the research, we estimate around 150,000 people in Scotland with some degree of hearing loss that rent. For many deaf people, British Sign language is their first language with English being a second language. Often the information about renting a home is only available in English. It contains a lot of jargon. It's not accessible to all deaf people, so already they're on the back foot.

There are a lack of contact options sometimes when arranging viewings or dealing with landlords. On their website or business card, it's maybe usually just a contact number. So, for a lot of deaf people using the phone isn't always an option.

The Edinburgh market moves quickly as well. If a deaf person wanted to agree to put a deposit down to secure a place and they can't usually call up to arrange that, so they may need to do an e-mail and by the time the letting agent gets back to them, it's possibly too late so deaf people can miss out on getting the property that they want to rent.

Another barrier can be when they are going to view a property. Deaf people obviously rely on sign language or lipreading, so they could easily miss out on important information. Facial characteristics like having a beard or a lack of movement with the mouth can be a couple of factors where deaf people can miss out and for one of those reasons social anxiety is quite high with deaf people as well.

00:07:14 Gillian

OK. Do you feel that deaf people are discriminated in the vetting procedure and if so, to what extent?

00:07:27 Steven

Discrimination comes from fear of the unknown. There are so many different stereotypes of hearing loss, I think when some people assume deaf, that they're going to use sign language. And I think that landlords can be unsure of what deaf people actually need. How to communicate with them? So sometimes it can maybe just be easier to look past them. You know, hearing people meet deaf people and don't know what to expect. But we're all people. We just have different ways of communicating.

For landlords as well, there's the potential of having a deaf tenant could cost more money. For example, we may need to provide an appropriate deaf friendly smoke alarm, so you would have smoke detector as normal, but you would have a vibrating pad under the pillow with a base unit that's got a strobe light. Some deaf people that we have spoken to are worried that this would discourage a landlord from picking a deaf tenant, and landlord might also worry that the equipment could damage their property, when really that's not the case. At worse, there will be a very tiny screw, and most of the time we tend to use really strong double-sided tape.

00:08:49 Gillian

Mm-hmm. And the thing is with screws, that always can be filled, no different to pictures that are hung or things like that. I'm going to ask actually a bit more about the equipment and installation and just about the kind of funding just to make landlords more aware. So I'll go into that just a bit further, later on.

What would be your recommendations and advice to landlords and letting agents to ensure a level playing field?

00:09:19 Steven

Patience and understanding is key. Making reasonable adjustments to accommodate deaf people and being accessible. More often than not, a deaf tenant might e-mail them to say that they have certain needs and the landlord knowing those needs beforehand would make it a lot easier for both parties.

If you're showing a deaf tenant around the property, be flexible, be patient. Have a pen and paper handy as well, or use the notes or text on the phone to improve communication.

And of course, allow extra time for communication. I think sometimes when you go for a viewing they usually give you about a 30-minute slot. So, if it's quiet, maybe add an extra 30 minutes on just

to make sure there's no missed information at the end. Also, book an interpreter if necessary collaborate with deaf charities like Deaf Action for interpreting services as well.

00:10:20 Gillian

It's good advice. Cause not only securing a property comes with additional challenges, but also living in the property itself, as you just briefly mentioned before, can you tell us a bit more about these experiences in in rented accommodation?

00:10:37 Steven

From consulting with the deaf community in privately rented accommodation, they tell us that difficulties often arrived when they need to interact with their landlord or letting agent on issues such as routine inspection or any repairs that might be needed in the home. Landlords have a to reasonable adjustments for deaf and disabled people, which could include deaf friendly specialist equipment like flashing doorbells or fire alarms.

Some people, some deaf people, might feel like they don't want to upset their landlord by asking for changes to accommodation or to spend money. They don't want to put their tenancy at risk, so deaf people often feel that the onus is on them to make the adjustment themselves, or to find out the information that they need to get the equipment. Deaf people are actually 40% less likely to be in employment than hearing people, so that's a big act as well financially.

This isn't the case for all landlords, of course. Many of them are very lenient and will make adjustments if necessary. Part of the challenge is that often landlords simply don't know that they are legally obligated, or what support and information is even out there. And I'm sure if they did, many more would be happy to oblige.

00:12:05 Gillian

Yes. Deaf Action provides a wide variety of hard of hearing and deaf services as you said before to help make life easier and more fulfilling for those that feel they need them. So, one of these services is relatively new, Safe and Sound, which is it's specifically designed for Scottish landlords and tenants so can you explain about the service?

00:12:28 Steven

So Safe and Sound was designed to offer Scottish landlords and tenants equal access to information on the rental market. The service was made possible thanks to support from Safe Deposit Scotland Charitable Trust. We can offer expert advice to landlords on how to make your property safe for deaf tenants, and we can provide a quote and install any equipment for you, the main one being the smoke alarms.

The goal was to make the rental market accessible to deaf people, so we created accessible BSL video information to ensure that people know their rights of tenants.

We've also created a deaf awareness webinar specifically for landlords and letting agents to help them understand the barrier that deaf tenants face, and what they can do to make things easier for them.

00:13:22 Gillian

Deaf Action, they also have a team of experts who can advise on and install the specialist equipment. So, can you explain a bit more about the types of equipment as you were mentioning before and how these items are installed and funded?

00:13:41 Steven

There are lots of deaf friendly specialist equipment that can make life easier for deaf people such as flashing doorbell television amplifiers, vibrating alarm clocks and many more.

For landlords who need to keep their tenants safe, Deaf Action's specialist equipment service can provide products such as flashing doorbells. The landlords are responsible, however, to pay for the smoke alarms only. The deaf people who live in Edinburgh, Midlothian and East Lothian, they can get the flashing doorbell and vibrating alarm clock for free through our partnership with local authorities.

00:14:20 Gillian

So what other services do Deaf Action provide that are beneficial to housing related matters?

00:14:27 Steven

For landlords, we can provide deaf awareness training to help them understand their deaf tenants needs. British Sign Language courses, for landlords who want to learn some basic sign language and be able to communicate with their tenant. Even just fingerspelling or small signed words.

Interpreters and communication professionals. If you have a deaf tenant who uses sign language, landlords or letting agents can book an interpreter to make sure communication is smooth and we're not missing out on any important information.

For deaf people, and we can provide social care services to help with any issues around money; a BSL duty service for information from landlord or letting agents that BSL users would need to get translated from English.

00:15:18 Gillian

Now on another note, this has been really helpful, it's been great. Thank you. Can I just ask a bit more on the personal side? Cause I'm aware you're a keen golfer and you've had quite a successful career to date. Not 'quite'. Very. So, tell us more about this and your achievements.

00:15:36 Steven

I got into golf when I was quite young growing up and playing golf with my dad, like most fathers and sons do. And I played golf in the hearing and the deaf world as well. I got into deaf sport when I was young. And I've played other sport growing up as well, but golf was my main hobby. I became involved with Scottish Deaf Golf Association in 2009 and I played my fifth World Deaf Golf Championship at St Andrews in 2010 and we won the team event, becoming the first European country to do so.

And then I finished runner up, with my teammate finishing first as well. I managed to play a few more world deaf champions and European Championship as well. Being able to travel the world, which was amazing, had a really good experience. I won the Deaflympic bronze medal in Turkey in 2017 and I actually missed my mum's 60th birthday for that!

What I love about golf, that it gives me three, three and a half hours of peace and quiet. It's a gentlemen's game with rules and etiquette. You have to wear certain clothes in the clubhouse. It taught me manners and to respect other golfers, which in turn transferred off the course as well.

I was also the first deaf person to go to the Professional Golfers Association University in Birmingham. Unfortunately, due to circumstance and I wasn't able to complete it, but I did manage to get my level one in junior coaching which allowed me to coach British schoolkids in Dubai for a few months, which was a great opportunity but scary for an 18-year-old deaf boy.

The hearing competitions; I can play with my hearing aids in. Deaf competitions; I have to take them out so they're completely different experiences. But looking back, I've managed to achieve and experience a lot of travelling and success, more than I imagined, and I'll certainly hold that with me for the rest of my life.

00:17:45 Gillian

Gosh, well done. That's incredible. In what ways, then has golf opened up new avenues for you?

00:17:52 Steven

I've experienced different deaf cultures and languages. American Sign Language, even the Sign Language table [fingerspelling] in Norway have five extra Letters, so you learn things like that. Obviously, I've met other golfers with similar experiences to myself who have grown up in a hearing world with their own struggles and success. It's also allowed me to spread awareness on hearing loss in national golfing magazines and newspapers. I see myself as a deaf role model and through my coaching I tried to encourage children to be the best they can be, and know that if I can do it, then they can too.

00:18:36 Gillian

Excellent. Thank you very much. Steven, that's been great. Really great to meet you. Thank you.

00:18:40 Steven

Thank you much for having me.

00:18:43 Gillian

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