

## MAPPING OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEAFBLIND PEOPLE ACROSS EUROPE: Executive Summary

As more people across Europe experience deafblindness it is vital that their support needs are met. This project is the first to explore the differences between states in their approach to disability rights, social care and legislative responses for deafblind people. It calls for improved recognition of deafblindness as a specific and distinct condition, and underlines a need to develop a common framework in order to systematically assess the situations of deafblind people now and in the future.

### Recommendations

#### At a European level:

- A *Common Framework* must be established to regularly collect standardised data relating to deafblind rights, opportunities and services in each state in order to assess and compare differences and developments
- Development of a *European Deafblind Resource Centre* – a centre of excellence that deafblind organisations can use as a resource for skill development, good practice and knowledge exchange
- *Publication of data* relating to deafblindness e.g. via Eurostat
- A *Common European Budget for technical assistance* must be established to ensure that essential technology is affordable for deafblind people in Europe

#### At a state government level:

- *Official legal recognition* of deafblindness as a unique condition is imperative; this is essential for deafblind people's needs and experiences to be recognised and considered in disability legislation and policy changes
- *Standardised census questions* must be established in each state to collect data on the number of people with sight *and* hearing impairments; so that the extent of deafblindness is understood and captured
- *Deafblind people should receive a specific budget for communication support*; this is an essential service, as is more *training* for deafblind people, families, teachers and support workers in communication methods
- Health professionals must focus on *early identification and recording of deafblindness*; this would improve outcomes for deafblind people (e.g. for education and employment) and would provide better prevalence rate data
- Recognition that deafblindness is *most common amongst older people*; a focus on early detection and support could prevent more serious health issues in this population
- *Formalisation of consultation mechanisms* between deafblind organisations and government policy makers

## Background

The specific needs of deafblind people are not routinely considered in disability policy. There has been some attempt at improving the life experiences and opportunities of disabled people across the EU under the United Nations Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) but there is little discussion about how these commitments could be extended to those facing problems with communication, mobility and access to information.

This is a summary of findings and recommendations from a two year project financed by the European Commission under its Lifelong Learning Programme: the Grundtvig Learning Partnership. The aim of the project was to explore the rights and opportunities for deafblind people across Europe, providing the first overview of opportunities and services for deafblind people across Europe.

## What is deafblindness?

The condition of deafblindness is not well recognised although it is becoming more common in line with the ageing demographic of Europe. Deafblindness refers to any degree of dual-sensory impairment and is different to the separate conditions of blindness and deafness. It is *the combination* of both impairments that creates the most significant issues for individuals; hence deafblindness should be recognised as a distinct and unique disability.

## Conclusion

What is evident from this project is that the lack of recognition that deafblindness is a specific and distinct condition has a significant and often detrimental impact on the lives of deafblind people across Europe.

Deafblindness is not the same as deafness *or* blindness but frequently deafblind people must join or apply for services via organisations that do not cater for their specific needs.

Specific deafblind service provision is an emerging entity, especially in states where organisations for the deafblind are still relatively new but this should be seen as an opportunity, not a drawback. The development of a European Deafblind Resource Centre would create more opportunities to share this learning. Without adequate resources, it is unlikely that new services will be developed responsively to deafblindness.

Whilst the UNCRPD has legislated for better inclusion and equality for disabled people in social life, it is clear that legal rights and practical rights are not equated for many deafblind people. In reality this means that even if a legal right exists in relation to support, a lack of resources negates this right in practice and even where resources exist generally, these may not be accessible to a deafblind person.

Many more people will experience deafblindness in the future and this report calls for the development of common framework under which we assess provision for deafblindness systematically across each state. Deafblind organisations have shown dedication to improving opportunities for deafblind people: this is the best indicator that positive change is possible, so long as there is better support from our government administrations to do so.

**For more information see the project website [www.deafblindindicators.eu](http://www.deafblindindicators.eu) or email [info@deafblindindicators.eu](mailto:info@deafblindindicators.eu)**