

## **Briefing note: 2011 Census data on number of BSL users** *UKCoD/DAC – project to estimate need, demand and cost of relay services for d/Deaf people in the UK*

### ***Introduction***

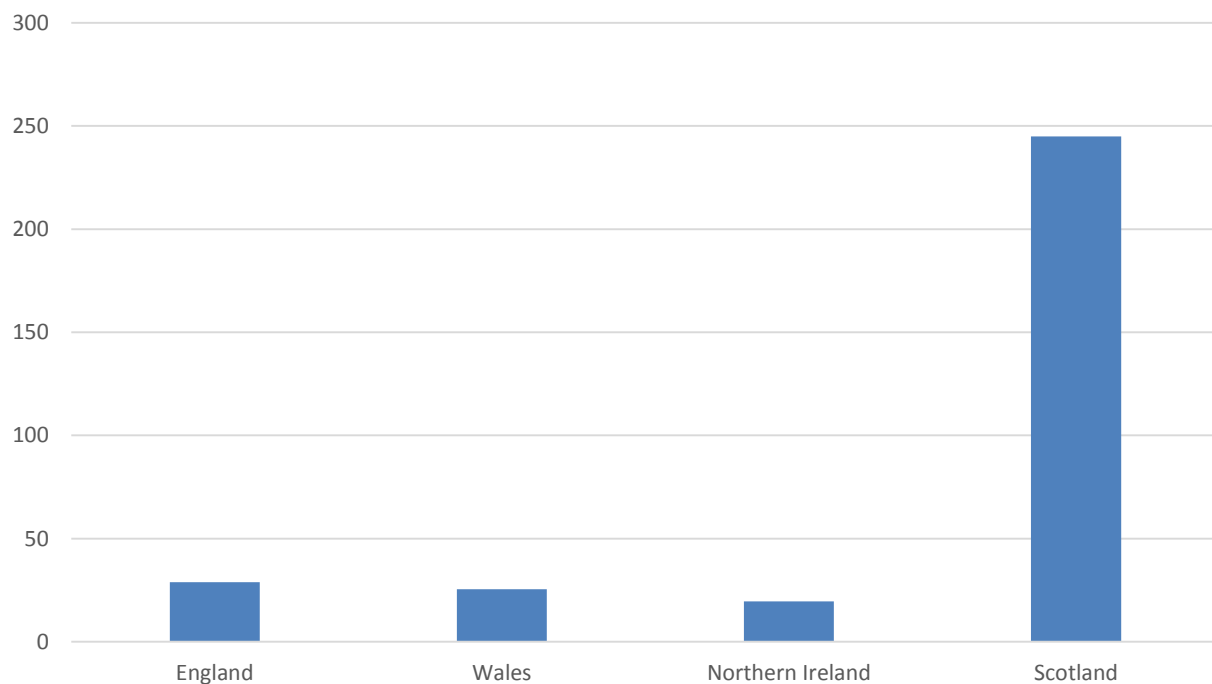
The 2011 Census contained a question on languages which, for the first time, enabled individuals to self-identify as BSL users. Data from the Census in relation to England and Wales were published in early 2013. In relation to Scotland, these data were published at the end of September 2013.

The raw data from the Scotland and England and Wales census give a confusing and contradictory picture in terms of a potential measure of the number of people whose first or preferred language is British Sign Language. In Scotland, the Census data suggests that some 12,533 of the 5,118,223 people aged three and over counted as resident in Scotland at the time of the Census were BSL users (National Records of Scotland, 2013). That would be equivalent to 245 people in every 100,000.

In contrast, the figure for England and Wales is 15,487 out of 53,961,451 (Office of National Statistics, 2013), or 29 people in every 100,000. Given the different prevalence rates suggested by these two sets of Census data, it is important to understand what the data actually measure, whether there are valid and reasonable explanations for this difference, what 'reality check' is provided by other data and to identify the implications for the current project to estimate need, demand and cost of relay services for d/Deaf people in the UK.

### ***What do the Census actually measure?***

If taken as a simple measure of the number of BSL users, the Census data provide a contradictory picture of the likely prevalence of BSL use in the UK. The graph below demonstrates the rate of BSL, per 100,000 people, for the four countries of the UK, based on the census data.



**Figure 1: Number of BSL users per 100,000 population for each home country, based on 2011 census data**

The difficulty is that the data from the Census in Scotland and that for England & Wales and Northern Ireland are not strictly comparable. The question posed (and therefore what is actually being measured) were quite different.

In England and Wales (and Northern Ireland), the Census form asked all individuals aged three and over to identify their:

**main** language.’ (my emphasis)

In contrast, the Census in Scotland asked:

*‘Other than English, what language do you speak at home?’*

In effect, the question in England was asking people to identify their main or preferred language, whereas the Scottish question could be interpreted as asking about second language (where English was the first).

It is therefore entirely plausible that BOTH data provide an accurate measure of the population using BSL; the England question providing a narrower definition than the Scotland question.

To illustrate, a couple in their 50s have two children, a boy and a girl. Both the mother and daughter are Deaf, and the daughter had a cochlear implant as a young child. In the England census, it is possible that one person in this family identified that their main language was BSL (the mother), whereas in the Scotland Census, all four family members may use BSL at home in addition to English.

### ***Reality check***

One of the more reliable data in relation to the d/Deaf population is provided by the Consortium for Research into Deaf Education (CRIDE). CRIDE undertakes regular surveys of local authority specialist education services for d/Deaf children. Although these data could not be used to provide a potential estimate of the size of the d/Deaf population to estimate need, demand and cost of relay services<sup>1</sup>, they can provide a useful reality check as to which measure (prevalence rate derived from the England or Scotland census question) is appropriate to use for the purposes of estimating need, demand and cost of relay services.

The graph overleaf compares the Census prevalence rates with those from CRIDE, based on the number of children aged 5 to 15 in the UK at the time of the 2011 Census (Office of National Statistics, 2012). The graph must be considered with some caution; the measures in the England and Scotland census are different (as outlined above) and the CRIDE measure is that of number of children who sign (whether or not with another language).

In addition, we can extrapolate from these three datasets to provide an estimate of the number of people (all ages) who are BSL users. Such an extrapolation should be viewed with extreme caution and not be used for purposes beyond providing a reality check on which data are more appropriate for the work to estimate need, demand and cost of relay services. The table overleaf gives such estimates, based on the prevalence rates implied from data from the two census questions and the CRIDE research.

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<sup>1</sup> The data present two significant problems, that of coverage and completeness. First, they only cover school aged children, and would therefore present a number of issues if used to estimate the entire population. Secondly, CRIDE makes clear that the data are not complete, as some local authorities are not included or may under-estimate the number of d/Deaf children in their schools.

	<b>Total population</b>	<b>Applying England Census prevalence rate</b>	<b>Applying Scotland Census prevalence rate</b>	<b>Applying CRIDE prevalence rate</b>
<b>England</b>	53,012,456	15,316	129,812	26,210
<b>Wales</b>	3,063,456	885	7,501	1,515
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	1,810,863	523	4,434	895
<b>Scotland</b>	5,295,000	1,530	12,966	2,618
<b>Total</b>	63,181,775	18,254	154,713	31,238

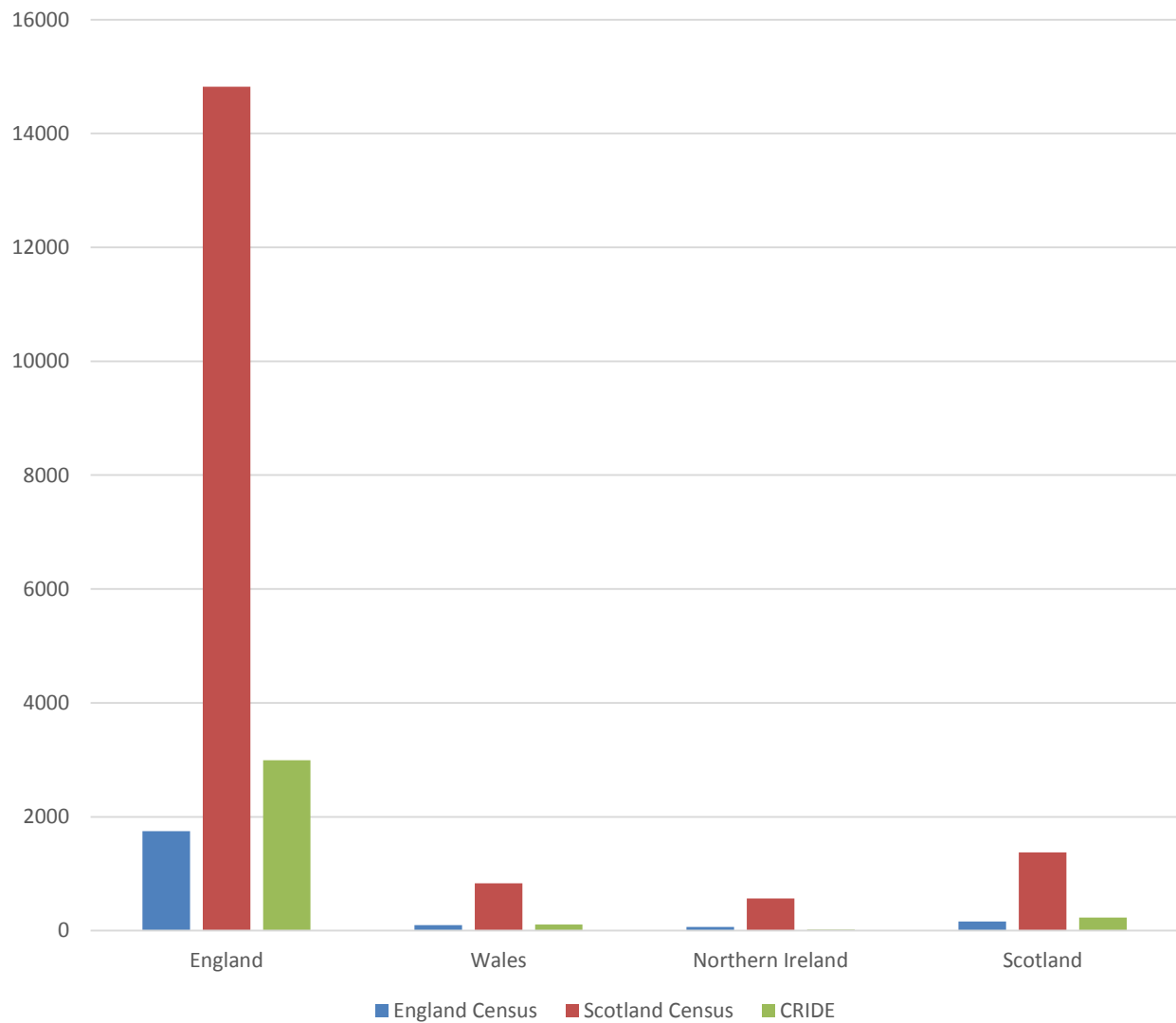
**Table 1: Potential estimates of BSL user population based on three measures**

### ***Implications***

The Delphi study was undertaken before the data on BSL users from the Scottish census were published. Based on the views of experts who participated in the Delphi, it has been proposed to use the 2011 Census data from England to estimate the size of the UK Deaf population. However, it was recognised that the census may under-estimate the size of the population, and participants suggested that the England census data should be uplifted by fifty percent to account for this. Using such an uplift, the number of people in the UK whose main language is BSL would be just over 27,000.

Given the question posed in the Scotland census, I would suggest that it is likely to include a number of people who use BSL but who are not Deaf. This is a useful measure, and one that should be used by the Deaf community for a number of purposes. However, the measure is too wide for the purposes of estimating need, demand and cost of relay services for d/Deaf people in the UK. Research evidence, and data from video relay service (VRS) pilots outside the UK, suggest that a vast majority of VRS calls are initiated by a Deaf person. Warnicke and Plejert (2012), for example, estimate that ninety percent of calls are initiated by a Deaf person.

Therefore, it is important that we use data that provide an estimate of the number of Deaf people whose first or preferred language is BSL. The England census data, when uplifted, would appear to be the most appropriate measure for these purposes.



**Figure 2: Comparison of CRIDE, England and Scotland census estimated number of school aged children BSL users**

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