

Working with a BSL/English Interpreter

Role of Interpreter

The main role of a BSL/English Interpreter is to facilitate communication between users of British Sign Language (BSL) and users of spoken English. Interpreters will use their skill and knowledge of the 2 languages, and their understanding of any cultural differences that might exist between those for whom they are interpreting, to receive a message given in one language and pass it on in the other language.

All interpreters who have been registered by the IRP with CACDP are expected to conform to the [Code of Ethics](#) and [Guidelines for Professional Practice](#) and be familiar with the [Complaints and Disciplinary Procedure](#) as they appear in this Directory. This means that they will remain impartial and will not give advice, express opinions or get involved in the interaction. This does not, of course, preclude them from advising on interpreting issues pertinent to the situation, nor from making any breakdown in communication explicit. They will maintain confidentiality.

Members of the Register of BSL/English Interpreters will have demonstrated that they have achieved a nationally agreed standard in interpreting. They will be in a position to respond to interpreting requests in a wide variety of settings, such as:

- Legal and quasi-judicial
- Education
- Health and Social Services
- Mental Health
- Theatre, Arts, Television
- Employment
- Leisure
- Other specialisms

Trainee Interpreters and Junior Trainee Interpreters are likely to have less experience, having worked in a narrower range of settings, and may, therefore, be more restricted in the type of assignment they are able to accept. Interpreters have a responsibility to only accept assignments that they judge to be within their competence, having taken all the relevant factors into account.

Wherever possible, and in line with the National Agreement, it is recommended that only **Members of the Register of BSL/English Interpreters (MRSLI)** be booked to interpret in legal settings.

Interpreting Process

Sign language interpreters may look very active with their hands, but in fact most of the hard work is going on in their heads. They have to listen carefully to, or watch the message, extract the meaning and then find an appropriate way to express the message in the second language.

As with any other language which is interpreted, there is not a 'word-for-sign' correspondence between BSL and English and each language has its own grammatical structure.

This means:

- Only one message can be interpreted at a time. In meetings it is therefore important to ensure that only one person speaks or signs at a time. If this does not happen the interpreter may have to stop and request that people speak one at a time.
- The interpreting process requires intense concentration and can be very tiring. At top speed interpreters may be processing up to 20,000 words in an hour. **The optimum period of interpreting is 20 minutes.** Interpreters can work for longer than this but over long periods the quality of the interpretation will suffer. For meetings or events of longer than 2 hours (or of a particularly intense nature) it is often necessary to book more than one interpreter. It is always necessary to allow for breaks, particularly if only one interpreter is used.
- The mental processing takes time and people will experience a delay as the message passes from one language to another.
- Sometimes an interpreter may need to interrupt the person speaking or signing to ask for repetition or clarification to enable them to interpret what is being said.

Position of the Interpreter

Interpreters always have to consider seating arrangements in terms of lighting and background:

- There should be plenty of light on the interpreter. Interpreters should not be placed in front of a window or with light coming from behind as this darkens the face.
- The background behind the interpreter should be visually clear and calm. A vividly patterned wallpaper or harsh white background can be distracting or straining on the eye.

The ideal position for the interpreter will also depend on the type of assignment. For example, in a job interview it is helpful if the interviewer and the applicant face one another with the interpreter next to the hearing person or to one side. In a round table meeting the interpreter should be positioned opposite any Deaf participants. At a conference, with a Deaf presenter, the interpreter will need to be placed opposite the Deaf person, often in the front row of the audience in order to see the signing clearly. For a hearing presenter, the interpreter is better placed as close as possible to the presenter and near to any visual aids so that the Deaf people in the audience can view both quickly and easily. Wherever possible always consult the Deaf user and the interpreter about their appropriate positioning.

Communicating Visually

When a hearing person is speaking the Deaf person will need to watch the interpreter. It is important that when this is happening the speaker remembers:

- To look directly at the Deaf person even though he/she will not always be able to look back.
- To speak and refer to the Deaf person directly. For example in a job interview the interviewer might ask "Was **your** journey here ok?" and the applicant might reply, "yes, I came by train". The interpreter would use 'your' and 'I' to convey the meaning.
- Not to ask the interpreter questions or make comments directly to the interpreter.
- To allow time for Deaf people to look at visual material (e.g. slides, overhead projector slides, paper) before referring to this material.
- To allow time for Deaf people to take notes if they wish before the discussion continues.

Watching an interpreter for a long period of time can be very tiring. Whereas hearing people can rest their eyes and still hear what is said, if a Deaf person ceases to watch an

interpreter, vital information may be missed. Deaf people will therefore often appreciate it if breaks can be built into long or intensive programmes.

How to Book an Interpreter

Bearing in mind the shortage of suitably qualified interpreters available, it is important to book interpreters several weeks in advance wherever possible, or to be prepared to be flexible about dates and times.

It is essential to book an interpreter who is suitably qualified for the assignment or the communication needs of both Deaf and hearing participants will not be met. It is also important to consult the Deaf person to ask what kind of communication service they require **before** the booking is made.

Checklist

When booking an interpreter the following initial information should be provided:

- type of assignment (job interview, conference, meeting etc) and subject matter
- date, time and length of assignment
- location of assignment.

This will allow the interpreter to decide whether he/she is available and capable of undertaking the assignment. In doing so, he/she may wish to discuss other details, such as:

- how many people are involved and who they are
- requirements of the Deaf/hearing people involved
- fees and travel expenses (accommodation if applicable)
- address of assignment and name of contact person on site
- telephone contact details
- a programme for the event (if applicable) and what will take place (e.g. lectures, workshops, will a video or slides be shown?, will the event be video recorded?, ...)

The interpreter's permission should be sought before audio or video recording any assignment is undertaken.

Confirmation

The booking should be confirmed in writing, whenever possible, outlining the relevant details discussed and agreed, together with details of where and to whom invoices should be sent.

Preparation

Any papers relevant to an assignment should be sent to interpreters well in advance. This will allow them to search for specialist vocabulary and to familiarise themselves with the subject and the people involved before an assignment. For example:

- minutes and agenda
- copies of summaries of speeches and lectures
- programme of the event
- any background information relating to the topic, the people involved, the organisation responsible for the event etc
- a location map

All such information should be kept confidential by the interpreter and returned or destroyed after the assignment has been completed.

Use of the CACDP Kitemark

Some registered BSL/English Interpreters may use the CACDP kitemark in their publicity material. This kitemark is shown below.

