



Briefing: The National Union of British Sign Language Interpreters

British Sign Language (BSL) Interpreting emerged as a profession in the 1980s, when qualifications and standards were established to improve the quality and provision of access for Deaf BSL users. Prior to this, Social Workers were used and Deaf BSL users were all supported as "cases", coming under the definition of vulnerable adults. BSL was officially recognised as Britain's fourth language on 18th March 2003, yet the number of BSL users in the UK remains unclear, due to a lack of accurate data. This is in itself quite revealing, illustrating the low level of importance given to the Deaf community as a minority group.

In 2015, BSL interpreting continues to be a small profession with only 1,137 registered interpreters (both fully qualified and trainee) working.

We currently have two professional organisations, the Association of Sign Language Interpreters (ASLI) and Visual Language Professionals (VLP). Both were established to provide support to BSL interpreters and to promote and maintain high standards and encourage good practice throughout the profession. We are regulated by NRCPD and alternative registers. The National Registers of Communication Professionals working with Deaf and Deafblind People (NRCPD) regulates communication professionals who work with deaf and deafblind people. Their job is to safeguard the wellbeing and interests of people who rely on those professionals by checking that every sign language interpreter is properly trained to do their job safely and consistently. They set standards of professional practice and make sure only professionals who meet those standards can carry an NRCPD photo ID card.

The profession is being placed under threat by ill thought-through government policies that cut BSL provision and cap rates, making the seven years training required to become a fully qualified interpreter unviable. Changes to Access to Work and the introduction of a national framework agreement are removing Deaf BSL users right to control their own interpreting support whilst placing safeguarding (in not demanding regulated interpreters) at significant risk. This framework covers all areas funded by government, eg NHS, DWP etc and the consequences could be catastrophic placing Deaf individuals in an unsafe and vulnerable position.

We call for the following:

- 1. For NUBSLI to be consulted on any policy or guidance that relates to the provision of BSL interpreters.**
- 2. For access costs for BSL interpreters to be factored into all public service provision (ensuring access for Deaf BSL users, and the provision of BSL interpreters not to be considered as an additional cost).**
- 3. For provision of coworkers as standard (currently BSL interpreters long term Health is being compromised. BSL interpreters are likely to develop Upper Limb Disorder – a life-long condition – without adequate support).**
- 4. For the Interpreters Freelance Fee Structure to be recognised by government (thereby protecting the future of the BSL profession and ensuring our high quality services can be maintained).**
- 5. For interpreters to be paid on time and be able to claim late payment charges from DWP.**
- 6. For BSL access funded by the public purse to be limited only to fully qualified (RSLI) or trainee interpreters (TSLI) who are registered with NRCPD or alternative registers.**

Who we are:

The National Union of British Sign Language Interpreters was established in May 2014 as a branch of Unite the Union. The first branch meeting was held on 25th June 2014 where committee members were elected. In the first five months, NUBSLI grew from just 20 interpreters to 200. We now stand represent a third of the profession.

With the change in the political landscape, BSL interpreters felt that there was a need to move to protect the profession. A union such as Unite is able to provide political and legal support as well as assisting the branch in campaigning. A union such as Unite provides opportunities to work with other professions on single campaign issues, and share both experience and good practice.

NUBSLI is a sister branch of NUPIT (National Union for Professional Interpreters and Translators) and we are also members of the Professional Interpreters for Justice (PI4J) campaign. This campaign brings together interpreting/translating professionals who want to reverse the outsourcing to Applied Language Solutions (ALS) or other commercial agencies, and see the reintroduction of direct employment of freelance interpreters by the courts and police services.

BSL Qualifications explained:

BSL levels 1-3 are language qualifications awarded by Signature. They contain no interpreting training and cannot be considered adequate qualifications for anyone providing BSL access. We are aware that Signature are currently developing a level 4 course which contains an introduction to interpreting element. Again this does not provide adequate training to interpret and NUBSLI do not recognise those holding it as possessing any interpreting skills. It takes approximately 7 years to qualify as an interpreter. There is no short cut as the skill and knowledge required is something that can only be developed with experience.

To understand the difference between someone with basic language skills and a qualified interpreter, please watch this short video: <https://youtu.be/M6gQDJbQF5o>

NUBSLI Campaigns:

1. Our **Scrap the Framework** (#ScrapTheFramework) was established in February 2015 in response to the government's intention to establish a national framework for interpreting and translation. The reasons for our opposition are:

- It is not robust or fit for purpose.
- Safeguarding is not guaranteed.
- Standards of access will fall.
- There is no choice/control for users.
- It will be damaging to SME's (Small & Medium sized businesses), creating a monopoly market.
- It does not allow for equality of access if under qualified personnel are used.
- Organisations advising the government are potential suppliers and have commercial interests.
- We do not believe it is cost effective or will save taxpayers money.

We want the framework agreement to be scrapped with immediate effect, and a full consultation with both the Deaf and interpreting communities.

What is a framework agreement?

A framework agreement is an agreement put in place with any number of suppliers for the provision of products or services. CCS combines into one organisation, Government Procurement Service (GPS), the commercial function of the Cabinet Office, and common goods/services

procured by departments. They act on behalf of the Crown to drive further savings for the taxpayer and to improve quality of commercial and procurement activity across the public sector.

A tender process is run in order to evaluate the suppliers that wish to become part of the framework. Tenders follow EU procurement regulations and are published on Contracts Finder and are open to any supplier to submit a response. If successful in their evaluation a supplier will be awarded a place on the framework. Most frameworks last for between two and four years until they expire, after which their terms and conditions are no longer valid. A new tender process may be run in order to create a replacement framework.

2. NUBSLI is currently campaigning with the **Stop Changes To Access To Work Campaign** (#StopChanges2AtW) to demand improvements to Access to Work provision, which has recently deteriorated with changes to guidance that was began in 2011 but are set to continue under the current government. Changes to the Access to Work scheme that are placing Deaf and disabled people's jobs and life chances at risk. For more information please go to: <http://www.StopChanges2AtW.wotdpress.com>.

Please support this campaign by signing the petition: <https://you.38degrees.org.uk/petitions/stop-changes-to-access-to-work>

Access to Work:

An Access to Work grant can pay for practical support if you have a disability, health or mental health condition to help you start working, stay in work, move into self-employment or start a business. (<https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work/overview>). The Sayce report "Getting in, staying in and getting on: Disability employment support fit for the future" (http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/49779/sayce-report.pdf) which was accepted by the government, stated that for every £1 spent on AtW a sum of £1.48 was reaped by the treasury. It has been widely called the governments "best kept secret".

Why Access to Work is so important:

If we go back 25 -28 years ago, Deaf job clubs existed. Deaf BSL users were never expected to get good jobs and the life chances of Deaf people therefore remained low. Since the establishment of AtW, Deaf people are now in high profile roles and succeed in virtually all professions. This goes hand in hand with the development of BSL interpreting as a profession. High interpreting standards and qualifications have been the catalyst to this change.

For more information on any of the information contained in this document please contact: branchsecretary@nubsli.com.



**Unite the Union
Unite House
128 Theobald's Road,
London
WC1X 8TN**

