



An Uncertain Future:

Findings from a Profession Exit Survey of British Sign Language/English Interpreters

**National Union of British Sign Language Interpreters
(NUBSLI)**

NUBSLI

Unite the Union
Unite House
128 Theobald's Road
London
WC1X 8TN
email: communications@nubsli.com

Report by Catherine Hale

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Executive Summary

This report is a response to concerns about evidence that a large percentage of skilled and experienced British Sign Language/English Interpreters (SLIs) plan to leave the profession. Our Exit Survey (run separately from the Survey of Interpreter's Working Conditions) aims to develop our understanding of the reasons behind this apparent trend. We are looking into the career plans of those who have left or reduced their commitment to the British Sign Language/English interpreting (SLI) profession to diversify their income, or are planning to do so in the next five years.

The findings raise alarm in relation to the sustainability of the SLI profession and the consequences for the Deaf and deafblind community that depends on the profession to exercise its citizenship rights.

Our previous survey from early 2015¹ showed that almost a quarter of the total 1,100 registered members of the NRCPD said they were "definitely" or "maybe" planning to leave the SLI profession; 82% of this group cited uncertainty within the profession as their main reason.

Among those feeling pushed out of the profession by uncertainty, 93% were Registered Sign Language Interpreters (RSLIs); and nearly half had 10 years' experience in the profession, or more.

The driver for this uncertainty appears to be changes to procurement arrangements for SLIs. These have placed agencies under increasing pressure to make cost reductions. This will have had an inevitable downward pressure on pay rates, to the extent that they have fallen significantly below the market rates for skilled and experienced SLIs.

This places pressure on trainees to take work, sometimes in highly sensitive legal or clinical contexts, for which they may lack the necessary skill and experience. The end result is a reduction in service to clients; an unfair burden on trainees and the loss of expertise from experienced SLIs.

Deaf and deafblind people rely on the SLI profession for access to employment, health and social care services including child protection, the criminal justice system and to ensure their rights under the Mental Health Act. Those responsible for commissioning and delivering SLI services must consider the impact on this community and its citizenship rights as well as the working conditions of SLI professionals.

The results of our latest Exit Survey corroborated our earlier findings. Nearly three in four of those leaving or reducing their commitment to the profession cited job insecurity as the biggest factor behind their decision. More than half of them plan to leave the Deaf/SLI sector altogether.

These findings raise further concerns over the sustainability of the profession in the face of prevailing pressures on end suppliers to reduce costs. NUBSLI has identified shortcomings in the new Crown Commercial Services (CCS) framework agreement which are likely to exacerbate this trend.

¹ NUBSLI (2015) Survey of BSL interpreters' working conditions

Our latest survey suggests, moreover, that it is not only RSLIs but also trainees (TSLIs) who are abandoning their commitment to the profession because poor pay and conditions make their investment in training and registration untenable. One trainee told us:

“I’m not able to earn enough to continue to pay training fees. I encounter hostility and discouragement from registered SLIs who believe I am taking their work. I feel undervalued - nobody appreciates that what I do, even as a trainee, is in any way Skillfull.... It is now affecting my mental and physical health, has entirely depleted my savings and there is no practical way to continue. I will work until my TSLI badge runs out and then give up.”

This suggests that changes to procurement arrangements are not only driving skilled and experienced SLIs out of the profession, but discouraging new entrants and placing the future supply of SLI services in jeopardy. It takes, on average, seven years to train a competent SLI.

NUBSLI has identified trends which, if left unchecked, could herald the end of the viability of the SLI profession. Action must be taken now to prevent this: the consequences of failing to meet this challenge will be grave for the Government, delivery bodies, suppliers and the Deaf and deafblind community.

Key Findings

- We heard from 79 RSLIs and TSLIs in the first four weeks of this monitoring exercise.
- Nearly 3 out of 4 said they had already left the SLI profession altogether or were planning to do so in the next five years.
- 70% cited “too much insecurity in the profession” as a reason for leaving or reducing their commitment to it.
- While 70% had worked full time in the profession, none of our respondents planned to work more than 15 days per month as a SLI. The majority planned to reduce their commitment to interpreting to between 7 and 15 days per month in the short term.
- Over a half of respondents were planning to work in a field outside of the Deaf or SLI sector.
- Insecurity did not only affect RSLIs. We heard from trainees who were giving up because they were not earning enough to support their training and registration process.

Introduction

Background to this survey

The National Union of Sign Language Interpreters (NUBSLI) is a newly formed branch of Unite. Established in May, 2014, the branch now represents approximately 30% of the British Sign Language/English interpreting (SLI) profession. (NUBSLI currently has 343 members, based on a profession size of 1159, taken from NRCPD latest figures).

In 2015, NUBSLI undertook a survey of British Sign Language/English interpreters (SLIs); both members and non-members; to ascertain the state of the working conditions in the profession. The drive for this was partly to assess the impact of changes to the Department for Work and Pensions' Access to Work (AtW) funding over the previous eighteen months, and also to look at the future prospects for our industry.

In total, 485 SLIs responded to the survey; approximately half the total number of interpreters registered with the National Register of Communications Professionals working with Deaf and Deafblind People (NRCPD). Almost a half of respondents said they were "definitely" or "maybe" planning to leave the profession.

Insecurity within the profession was the main factor for 82% of this group. Around 50% told us that "agencies don't pay sustainable rates". Only half said they always had enough work and most of those who didn't always have enough work cited unacceptably low rates of pay offered by agencies as the reason for this.

We also received approximately 250 comments from respondents. The most common themes were the poor practices of agencies, payment issues, the undervaluing of their professional skills, lack of recognition from the Deaf community and problems with AtW funding. The comments also gave a clear sense that SLIs enjoyed their jobs and were committed to providing quality of service.

Changes to the procurement of British Sign Language/English interpreting services

In the past few years, the Government, hospital trusts and others have changed the procurement landscape for SLI services. Under new commissioning arrangements, contracts have been awarded to new and larger supply agencies. This has resulted in a reduction in pay and working conditions for SLIs.

For example, in 2011 the Ministry of Justice signed a framework agreement for language and interpretation services with a company called Applied Language Solutions (which was subsequently purchased by Capita). The aim of establishing the contract was to improve the efficiency of the existing system.² However, the framework resulted in hundreds of interpreters giving up court work, as the working conditions being offered were unsustainable. As evidenced in the latest National Audit office report (<https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/The-Ministry-of-Justices-language-services-contract-Progress-update.pdf>).

² National Audit Office (2014) *The Ministry of Justice's language services contract: Progress Update*.

Access to Work

In 2013/14, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) began reviewing its AtW costs for supporting disabled people into employment.

This was partly prompted by a concern that support for Deaf people accounted for a disproportionately large amount of AtW spending and that this was largely due to SLI related costs.³ As a result, changes were made to budgets and guidance without consultation with Deaf people or the SLI profession.

According to the Work and Pension's Committee report, the DWP's application of the guidance on full-time Support Workers (known as "the 30 hour rule"), and the capping of hourly rates to substantially below market rates in relation to British Sign Language (BSL) had a profoundly detrimental impact on the ability of many Deaf BSL users to source the effective interpretation they needed to do their jobs. Numerous witnesses reported that it had resulted in their AtW budgets being reduced by 50% or more, leaving them unable to source appropriate support or pay SLIs' invoices.

The changes to SLI pay rates and conditions demonstrated "a lack of understanding by DWP of how BSL interpretation is currently provided and used"⁴. As a result of these changes, SLIs have faced the choice of accepting unsafe working conditions and unsustainable levels of pay, or no longer taking Access to Work bookings.

Crown Commercial Services (CCS) national framework agreement

In 2014, the Government, via the CCS, began engaging with interested parties to develop a public sector wide framework agreement for the purchase of language services, which includes interpreting services for Deaf and deafblind people.

The aim of the national framework agreement is to permit a public body to enter into a contract for goods and services without needing go through a lengthy, and often costly, public procurement process. However, after a survey of members, NUBSLI expressed a number of concerns over the draft framework agreement and its impact on job security and the sustainability of the SLI profession.

Key failings of the draft framework document identified by NUBSLI in our consultation response include:

- **Failure to provide end suppliers with a clear statement of the pay received by the SLI.**

This is an important omission, as it could have the effect of undermining commissioning authorities' perception that it is receiving value for money from spending on SLI. In such circumstances it is important that end suppliers (SLIs) are fully aware of the overall cost of the service they are providing in order to be able to negotiate sustainable pay rates. NUBSLI published guidance on ⁵fees for freelance SLIs on our website. We believe that these should be used (and amended as updated) in the framework agreement as the benchmark rates of pay for SLIs.

³ HoC Work and Pensions Committee (2014) *Improving Access to Work for disabled people. Second Report of Session 2014/15.*

⁴ Hoc Work and Pensions Committee (2014) *ibid.*

⁵ <http://www.nubsli.com/interpreter-fees.php>

- **Failure to require agencies to have banded rates for specialists.**

Many SLIs have developed skills during years of experience of working in specialised, and often very sensitive, areas. These include work in the criminal, civil and family courts and physical and mental health services. SLIs with these skills can expect to receive a significant premium; their work requires not only significant interpreter/translator skills but also specialist technical knowledge and a clear understanding of the culture of the institutions in which they are hired to practice. The CCS framework does not take account of this by providing a requirement that agencies have banded rates for specialists. NUBSLI has warned CCS that this approach poses the risk that some agencies fall to the temptation of supplying less well qualified/experienced SLIs in a bid to reduce costs.

- **Failure to include travel costs as a mandatory element.**

NUBSLI has notified the CCS of concerns about the failure of the framework agreement to include travel costs as a mandatory element of freelance SLIs' terms and conditions on more than one occasion. We do not believe this should be left to individual contracts at the call off stage as they are unlikely to pay for these unless compulsory. This means that the interpreter will be forced to absorb the cost and further add to the cost pressure being placed on interpreters. NUBSLI has case study evidence from members showing that failure to pay travel expenses is common in some parts of the country and we are concerned about the impact this practice, which is becoming more widespread, could have on the sustainability of the profession. Imposing the burden of travel costs on SLIs would be particularly damaging in rural areas where it is costly to park, such as at hospitals, and in cities where charges to reduce traffic congestion are being imposed.

- **Inadequate performance monitoring and contract management.**

NUBSLI believe that stronger performance monitoring and contract management would help to maintain high standards in the provision of SLI services. Where services fall below agreed standards, it will make it easier for commissioning bodies to hold agencies to account and better show when Deaf and deafblind people are being put at risk by a failure to provide the level of safeguarding required in legislation. This is especially important where poor performance on the part of an SLI professional could result in an unfavourable, or even harmful, outcome for a member of the Deaf or deafblind community; for example, in the courts or in a hospital environment.

Methods

In November 2015, NUBSLI became increasingly concerned about the numbers of Registered Sign Language Interpreters (RSLIs) and trainees (TSLIs) who had told us anecdotally, as well as in our earlier 2015 Survey of Working Conditions, that they were leaving the profession or diversifying their income. In response, we created an Exit Interview survey. The aim of this ongoing monitoring exercise is to begin tracking any developing trends or changes and to look at what more we can do to support SLIs, either to remain in the profession or in their decision to move on.

The survey was conducted online, using the Survey Monkey tool, hosted on the NUBSLI website. Participants were recruited via social media, our website and emails to our members as well as non-members from the NRCPD register. The survey opened on 19th November 2015 and by 17th December 2015 we had received 79 responses (7% of the profession overall, 6% RSLIs and 1% TSLIs). This report is therefore based on the first four

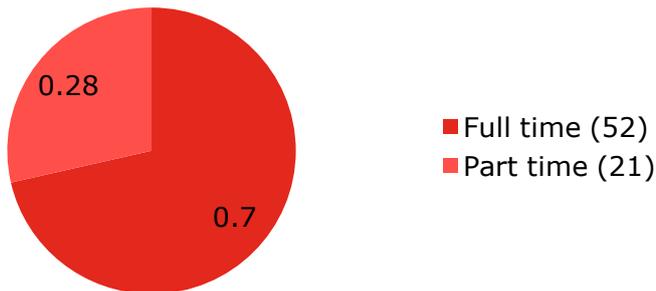
weeks of data gathered, although the survey remains open and is currently promoted on the NUBSLI website.

Each question offered multiple choice answers and participants were asked to tick all that applied. There was also an opportunity for TSLIs to give more detailed feedback.

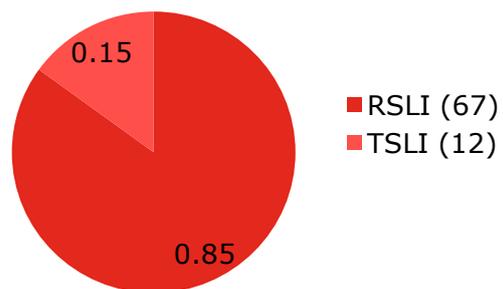
Survey findings

Who did we hear from?

Previous or current commitment to BSL/English interpreting



Fully qualified/registered vs trainee SLIs

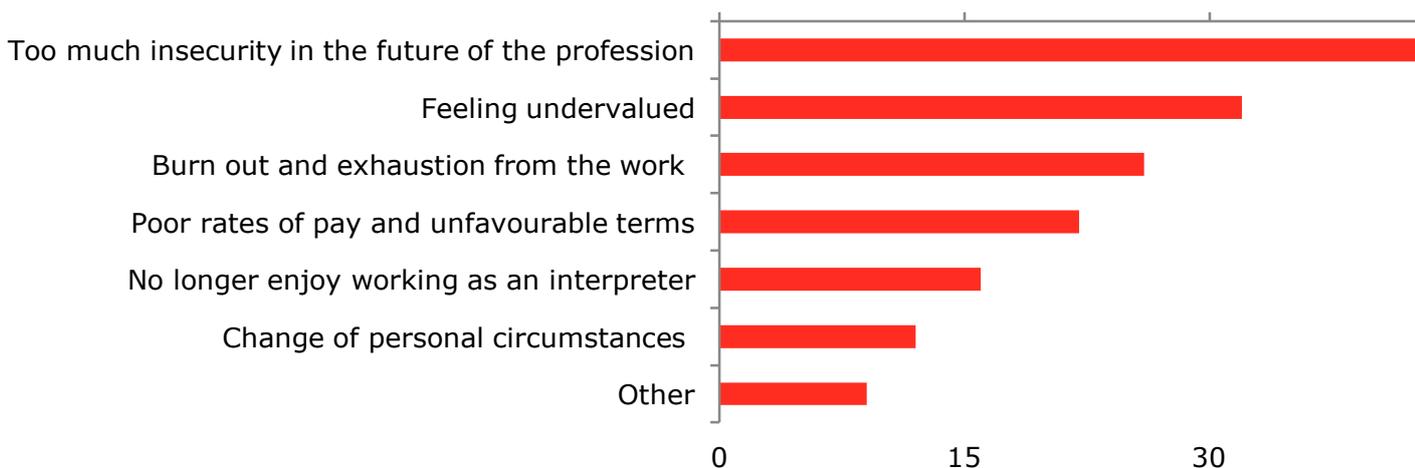


The majority of respondents to our survey were, or had recently been, working full time as SLIs. Fifteen percent were trainees.

What were the drivers of changes in commitment?

We asked respondents to select their reasons for leaving or reducing their commitment to the SLI profession. Respondents could select more than one option.

Q1. What is your reason for this action? N=79



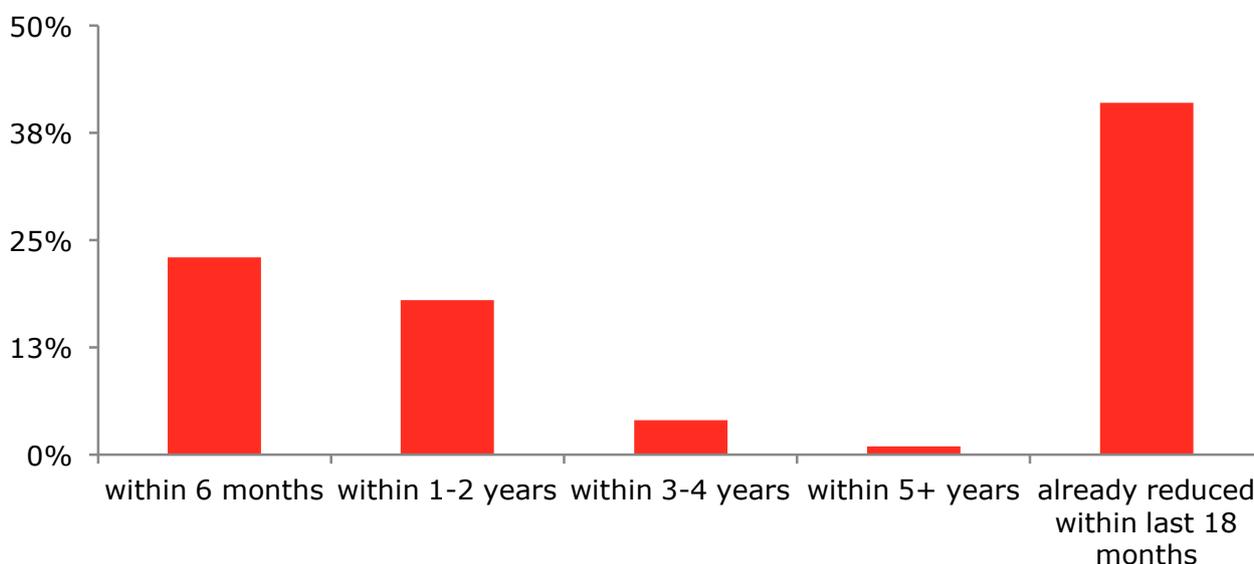
70% of respondents said their decision to leave or reduce their commitment to the SLI profession was due to its insecure nature. A considerable sub-group cited feeling undervalued with regard to their skills (41%), burn out and exhaustion from the nature of the work, including its emotional impact, (33%) and unfavourable rates of pay and conditions making their commitment to the profession financially unsustainable (28%).

"I feel undervalued at my agency and feel the market is not stable enough to go freelance."
- Trainee SLI

Reducing commitment to the British Sign Language/English interpreting profession

Nearly 7 in 10 (68/78) of respondents said they had already planned, or were planning to, reduce their commitment to the SLI profession to diversify their source of income.

When do you plan to reduce your commitment to BSL/English interpreting? N=68



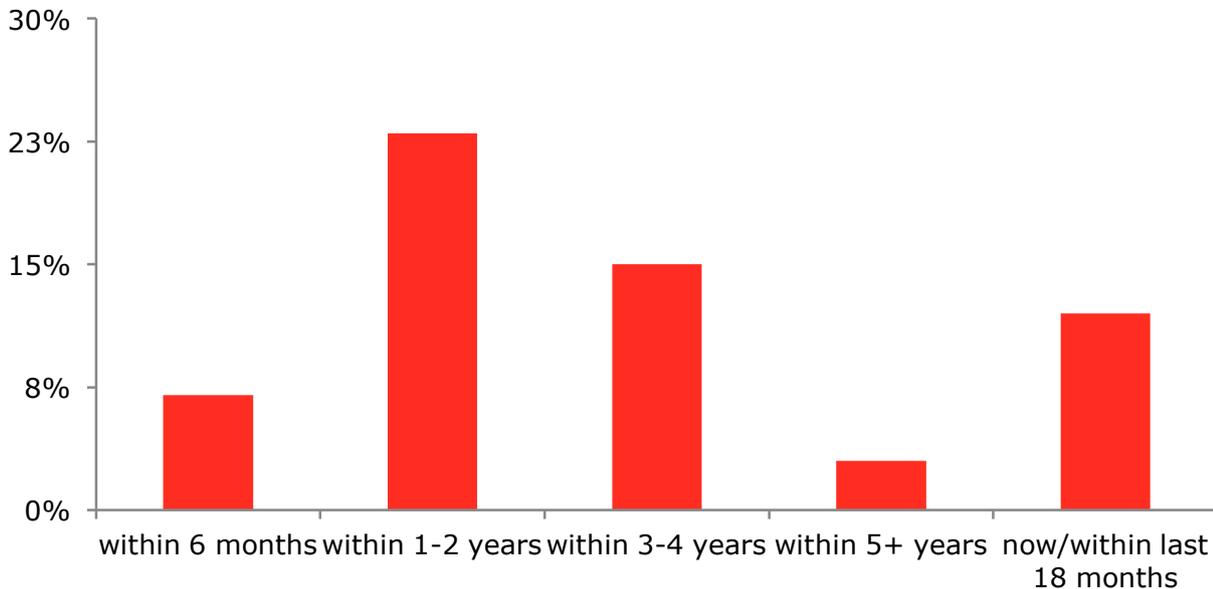
Of this group 41% had already taken steps to reduce the time spent in interpreting work and a further 41% were planning to do so within the next two years.

"There's not enough support for trainees, a lack of suitable jobs offered and it's too expensive to maintain registration, insurance and DBS fees on the amount of income I have coming in." - Trainee SLI

Leaving the profession altogether

Nearly 6 in 10 (44/75) of respondents said they had recently left, or were planning to leave the profession altogether.

When do you plan to leave the BSL/English interpreting profession? N=44



Within this group, the majority (23%) said they were planning to leave the SLI profession within one to two years.

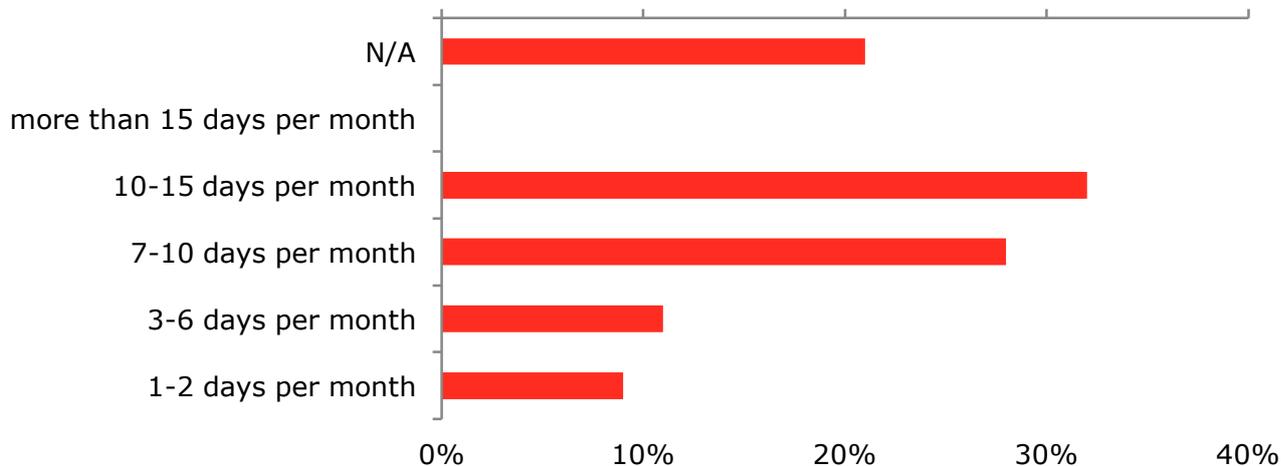
Many respondents indicated intentions to reducing commitment as well as leaving the profession altogether. The trend appears to be for reducing commitment and diversifying income immediately, or in the short term, with a proportion of this group going on to leave the profession altogether in the medium or longer term.

"I wasn't earning enough up support an income and training. I chose to earn an income in a different field." - Trainee SLI

Planned commitments to interpreting in the future

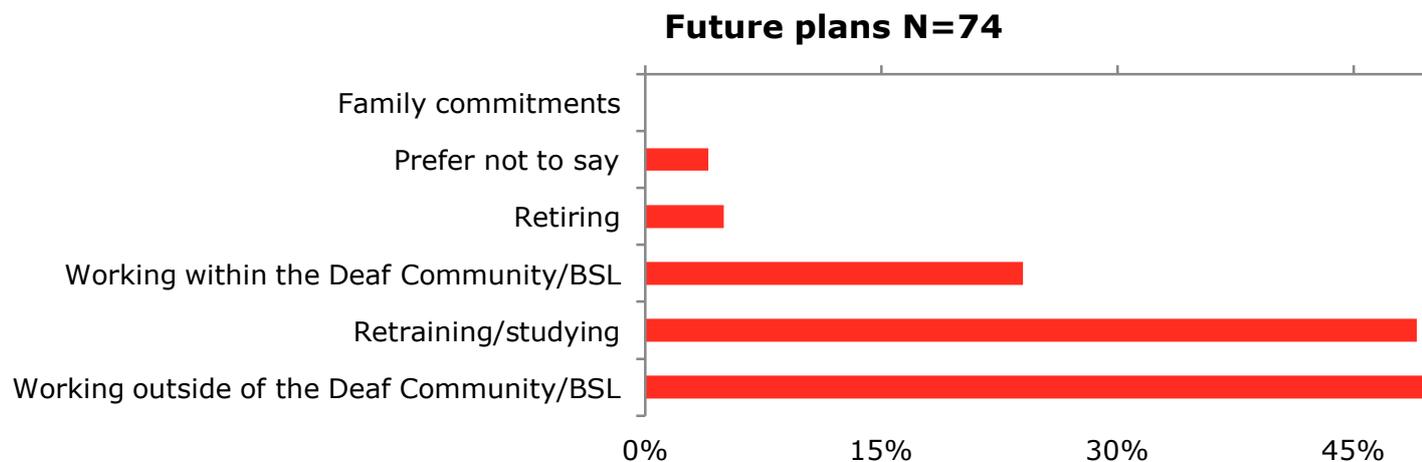
Four out of five respondents anticipated spending between just 7 and 15 days per month working as SLIs in the future. No respondents planned to interpret for more than 15 days per month.

How much time to you plan to commit to BSL/English interpreting in the future?



Loss of skill and investment in the Deaf community

We asked respondents more about their plans for reducing their commitment or diversifying their income in the future.



Respondents could select more than one answer to this question.

The data shows the highest proportion of respondents were planning to study or retrain. Worryingly, many more of this group were moving towards an unrelated profession, rather than planning to remain within the sector.

This represents a significant loss of skill and investment into the profession and we are concerned for the consequences on the quality of service offered.

Conclusion

In the first four weeks of running our Profession Exit Survey, NUBSLI received responses from 79 Registered and Trainee SLIs who were intending to leave or reduce their commitment to the SLI profession, or who had recently already done so. This survey has sought evidence of trends in the career trajectories of our members in order to predict future levels of entry into and exit from the profession.

The numbers planning to leave or reduce SLI work exceeded our expectations and confirmed our growing concerns over the future of the SLI industry. Around two in five had already reduced their commitment to SLI work to diversify their income, and 3 in 5 planned to leave the profession altogether, mostly within one to two years. 70% of our respondents were, or had been, working full time as SLIs, yet none were planning to work for more than 15 days per month in the profession in the near future. The majority planned to work in a field unrelated to the SLI industry or the Deaf community.

This exit of skilled and experienced SLIs from the profession will negatively impact upon the quality and availability of service provided.

BSL/English interpreting is crucial to ensuring that the legal rights of the Deaf and deafblind community, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006 and the Equality Act 2010, are upheld. The quality of SLI services affects access to employment, access to justice, healthcare and the right to liberty. The de-professionalisation of the SLI industry would mean a regression in the progress made by Deaf and deafblind people in accessing their human rights over the last 20 years.

This Exit Survey has also highlighted the vulnerability of Trainee SLIs. It is particularly worrying to see new and highly committed entrants to the profession giving up their chosen career because pay rates are too low to sustain their training and registration fees. The undermining of professional esteem and high levels of demoralisation from trainees, as well as from RSLIs, gives cause for concern.

Although the number of SLIs registered with the NRCPD does not show a reduction over recent years, this stability of membership undoubtedly masks a high turnover of entry and exit into the profession. It takes, on average, seven years to train a fully competent SLI and some areas of their work, such as mental health and child protection, require even more specialist experience and skill.

If the activity highlighted in this report continues, the industry stands to lose new entrants as well as its highly skilled and experienced members. This is likely to result in an overall drop in the number of registered SLIs.

Job insecurity was by far the biggest factor in respondents' decisions to leave or reduce their commitment to the SLI sector. Recent changes to the procurement framework of SLI services by Government bodies such as the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Work and Pensions, and now under the CCS national framework agreement, have brought about reductions in pay and worsening working conditions. For many, this has meant that SLI work no longer pays, and there is no longer enough work to sustain a career in interpreting.

Our recommendations are therefore aimed at all those involved in the commissioning, procurement and supply of SLI services. Please join with us in protecting the future of the SLI profession and ensuring an appropriate quality of service to the Deaf and deafblind community.

Recommendations

Respect the skills of the British Sign Language/English interpreting profession.

We call on the Government/CCS to consult regularly with organisations representing SLIs, including NUBSLI, NUPIT and Professional Interpreters for Justice (PI4J), on matters of quality, standards and independent regulation, and to develop best practice guidance on pay and conditions for SLIs.

With regard to the new national framework agreement, our recommendations include:

1. Provide cost transparency at all points in the supply chain. Agencies should be obliged under the national framework agreement to provide SLIs with details of the fees they are receiving for the work they undertake.
2. Require agencies to have banded rates for specialists.
3. The payment of transport costs should be a mandatory element of freelance SLIs' terms and conditions under the framework agreement.
4. Agencies should be required under the framework agreement to monitor the performance of SLIs who are unable to provide evidence that their skills meet specified minimum standards.

Respect the fees and terms and conditions of British Sign Language/English interpreters

We call on SLI supply agencies to support NUBSLI's fee guidance and pay SLIs sustainable rates, and not to bid for contracts below these rates.

In particular, see Appendix 2 for full NUBSLI guidance on fees and conditions with respect to

1. Call out fees
2. Cancellation terms
3. Travel expenses
4. Banded rates of pay to reflect levels of skill and specialism among SLIs

Support for trainees

NUBSLI is currently working on a trainee pack and is looking to set up a buddy scheme for trainees who need support. Updates on this work will be posted on our website and social media accounts.

Please note: NUBSLI will continue to monitor any new exit interviews received on a quarterly basis and will be sharing this information with members.

We will continue to conduct an annual survey to monitor any changes to the profession.

Appendix 1 – Full schedule of Profession Exit Survey questions

Preamble:

If you are taking steps to either leave the profession altogether, or reduce your commitment to interpreting and diversify your income, (or you already have), could you please answer the following. Could you also please answer if you commenced on a path of training to become a BSL/English Interpreter but decided to pull out along the way:

Question 1: Could you select your reason for taking this action?

Question 2: If you are leaving the profession altogether when do you anticipate this happening? Within the next:

Question 3: If you are reducing your commitment to the interpreting profession to diversify your source of income, when do you anticipate this happening? Within the next:

Question 4: For those diversifying and reducing the time spent interpreting, could you state whether you currently work, (or previously worked) full or part time.

Question 5: For those diversifying and reducing the time spent interpreting, could you state your anticipated, (or known) interpreting commitment in the future:

Question 6: In what way are you leaving the profession/diversifying your income?

Question 7: If you decided to pull out of your training to become a qualified interpreter, what stage did you reach? Can you give us a brief explanation as to why you changed your mind about continuing to train.

Appendix 2 – NUBSLI guidance on pay and conditions for British Sign Language/English interpreters

Freelance fees for interpreting engagements for BSL/English interpreters/translators

1 April 2015 - 31 March 2016

These figures are guidance only to the fees that NUBSLI members are likely to charge.

Please note that higher rates may be charged to reflect the experience and specialist knowledge of the interpreter or translator.

Freelance fees

BSL/English interpreters generally work in half or full day sessions. However, a call out fee may be charged if an assignment is local to the interpreter or short in duration. View interpreter fees guidance.

Specialist work

Specialist work may incur a higher fee. This includes any assignment which requires additional training, specific expertise and/or a substantial amount of preparation. This may include work such as: mental health, legal, child protection, theatre/performance, television and conferences.

Interpreter provision

Due to the physical and mental demands of interpreting, two interpreters may be required depending on the duration and/or intensity of the work involved. Interpreters will discuss this with you at the time of booking. Larger teams may be called for in specialist settings, such as conferences and Crown Court.

Evening and weekend rates

Interpreting during evening hours, at weekends, or on public holidays will usually be charged at the higher rate of time and a half.

Recording

BSL/English Interpreters reserve the right to decline to be filmed or otherwise recorded whilst working (except when such recording is inherent within legal proceedings). Any consent to recordings intended for broadcast or publication is likely to incur an additional fee.

Cancellation charges

0 - 7 days prior to date of assignment: 100% of agreed fee

8 - 14 days prior to date of assignment: 50% of agreed fee

Travel and accommodation expenses

Travel expenses will be paid to cover travel to and from the assignment, and for any travel required as part of the booking. This will be charged at £0.45 per mile for travel by car, or at standard fare rate for public transport.

When an assignment requires an overnight stay, reasonable accommodation expenses will be paid.

Interpreters reserve the right to charge for travel time.

Terms of payment

Payment to be made in full within 30 days of receipt of invoice. After 30 days, charges will be applied as per Late Payment Legislation.

Trainee interpreters

Interpreting assignments of a legal nature or those with higher possible risk implications are not suitable for trainees to undertake. The types of domain this could include are: court, law, police, mental health, child protection, conferences and any work involving the signing of any legal documentation (not an exhaustive list).

Further to this, it is advisable to discuss the details and potential complexity of an assignment with individual trainee interpreters to ensure that they are sufficiently experienced to undertake the work.

Freelance fees guide for fully qualified interpreters (RSLI) and trainee interpreters (TSLI) or equivalent:

London	RSLI/TSLI
Minimum call out fee	£90/£90
Half day	£125/£120
Full day	£250/£230
Central & East Anglia	RSLI/TSLI
Minimum call out fee	£90/£80
Half day	£120/£100
Full day	£240/£200
South East	RSLI/TSLI
Minimum call out fee	£90/£80
Half day	£120/£110
Full day	£240/£220
West & East Midlands & Wales	RSLI/TSLI
Minimum call out fee	£90/£80
Half day	£120/£100
Full day	£240/£200
North West	RSLI/TSLI
Minimum call out fee	£80/£70
Half day	£100/£90
Full day	£200/£180

Yorkshire/Humber & North East	RSLI/TSLI
Minimum call out fee	£75/£70
Half day	£90/£85
Full day	£180/£170
South West	RSLI/TSLI
Minimum call out fee	£90/£80
Half day	£100/£90
Full day	£200/£180
Scotland & Northern Ireland	RSLI/TSLI
Minimum call out fee	£60/£60
Half day	£100/£90
Full day	£200/£180