

NUBSLI evidence for the market review of British Sign Language and communications provision for people who are deaf or have hearing loss – deafblind and deafblind interpreting

109 people responded to the questions about interpreting with deafblind people in NUBSLI's survey. The responses have been shared with the market review as agreed. This is NUBSLI's evidence, drawing from the responses and other feedback and discussion with members.

Deafblind interpreting - an explanation of terms and registration:

Deafblindness is relatively low incidence. In 2010 it is estimated that 132,000 people in the UK have "severe impairments of both hearing and vision".¹ The majority of these are people over the age of 70 who have acquired gradual visual and hearing loss related to the ageing process.

Deafblind people use one or more communication methods, often related to the degree of sight or hearing they currently have, whether they became deaf or blind first, and whether or not they used BSL before they became blind.

Communication methods include BSL and English, and also:

Visual frame. Signing in a way that the deafblind can see, using the sight they have. This may mean sitting a particular distance away, signing within a smaller space, signing at a particular pace, adapting signs, wearing particular colours, lighting the environment in particular ways. Each deafblind person will have different requirements, and it will often mean that they need 1:1 interpreting support, since it may not suit or be appropriate to other Deaf and/or deafblind people.

Tactile BSL (hands on). The deafblind person will rest their hands on the interpreter's hands whilst they sign. This can only be done 1:1.

Deafblind manual. The deafblind manual interpreter will fingerspell words in English on the deafblind person's hands. This can only be done 1:1

Social Haptic communication. Conveying additional information about the environment through touch.²

Many deafblind people require assistance with travel. In employment this may be through Travel to Work, where ATW pay the additional costs of travelling to work, and/or through a travel buddy, where ATW pay for someone to accompany someone to and from work.

¹ CEDR report - Estimating the Number of People with Co-Occurring Vision and Hearing Impairments in the UK.

<https://www.sense.org.uk/publications/estimatingpeoplevisionhearingloss>

² For more information about the range of communication methods see

<https://www.sense.org.uk/content/methods-communicating-people-who-are-deafblind>

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This may also be provided through a communicator guide, who will both guide someone, and support communication.

NUBSLI's evidence

Professional skills and registration:

BSL/English Interpreters may have specialist skills in visual frame interpreting, tactile BSL interpreting, deafblind manual, and use of social haptic communication techniques.

They may also have skills in guiding.

However currently there is only a register for deafblind manual interpreters³ and only SASLI registers communicator guides⁴.

“I have Level 3 communication and guiding (2006) and I have done further training as CPD. There appears to be no current way I can formally register as an interpreter with DB people.”

“I would be more comfortable with specific training and registration for this work.” Other comments reflected the need for more training.

For the market to work effectively there needs to be clarity in the professional skills required, which need to be reflected in categories of registration and/or explicit recognition of specialist skills.

“... I now do very little [interpreting with deafblind people] as I cannot afford to continue.”

These specialist skills take time and investment to develop, and yet people working with deafblind people report that the fees available are often less than would be paid for BSL/English interpreting. See comments in next sections for more evidence of this.

Direct Payments:

NUBSLI asked *“There have been changes to Direct Payments to Deafblind people. Has this affected the interpreting work you do with them (since January 2015)?”*

29 (74%)⁵ people reported that they do about the same, and 10 (26%) people reported that they do a little less (6, 10%) or substantially less or none (6, 15%).

³ NRCPD <http://www.signature.org.uk/nrcpd>

SASLI <http://www.sasli.co.uk/policies/registration-policy/>

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Numbers expressed as percentages are rounded to nearest whole number.

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No one reported doing more work with deafblind people.

Whilst numbers of respondents are low, this is a significant change in one direction. There is no evidence to suggest that the need for deafblind interpreting has decreased.

“The main issue with direct payments are that the specialist skills needed to work and communicate with Deafblind people are not taken into consideration. Those who are trained and qualified have done so at great expense and is reflected in their costs, this makes it difficult for people who are Deafblind; they need a high quality service but their funds often are restricted ...”

“A lot of the work I used to do is now being done by an agency who employs communicator guides to do the work previously done by interpreters. I understand there are a few who are qualified deafblind manual interpreters but a great many that aren't (partly because there has been no training or exams for this for many years). I believe I am requested for bookings seen as more 'challenging' and [I am seen] as a last resort due to my fee.”

There was also recognition that support for deafblind people is variable:

“Not all deafblind people get direct payments - each area has different criteria and it's not an equitable service.”

Access to Work:

NUBSLI asked *“There have been some changes to AtW packages with Deafblind people, including for new packages the cap. Has this affected the interpreting work you do with them (since January 2015)?”*

24 (67%) people reported that they do about the same, and 12 (33%) people reported that they do a little less (7, 19%) or substantially less or none (5, 14%). No one reported doing more work with deafblind people.

Whilst numbers of respondents are low, this is a significant change in one direction. There is no evidence to suggest that the need for deafblind interpreting has decreased.

A number of respondents raised issues about problems with Access to Work advisers' understanding of deafblindness, and the impact that has on the deafblind person, and the interpreter working with them.

“One of my clients is struggling for her ATW as the advisor does not understand her fluctuating needs due to her condition. A lot of her time is spent dealing with ATW rather than her day job. Invoices are being returned as her budget was used up before the renewal date. This is a result of an insufficient budget being set for the support needs.”

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“I have supported a client that is profoundly Deaf and has very little sight but works full-time in a professional capacity. Their needs are increasing as vision deteriorates and yet the DWP (ATW) continue to review and try to reduce funding for interpreter support and encourage that less or ... cheaper (trainee) support is used. Such an individual is of high-value to the economy and is not appreciated as such.”

“One client is having real difficulties with ATW. Their adviser is not providing information in their preferred format (large print) which makes responding to ATW questions or querying any points extremely difficult. Their sight condition is deteriorating and due to this their need for ATW support is increasing. However there is little awareness of deafblindness by the adviser. The client is spending a considerable amount of time responding to ATW and trying to get their contract in place and their day job is being greatly affected. Their budget has now run out and ATW are simply returning invoices rather than explaining the current situation.”

When two interpreters are needed:

Interpreting work with deafblind people can be particularly intensive and tiring, especially when using hands-on or deafblind manual. And so to ensure interpreters stay healthy they need to take regular breaks and swap with a co-worker.

We asked *“In your experience, where two interpreters are needed to co-work for Deafblind interpreting, how often does this happen?”*

Respondents had mixed experience:

“There is no one worker, let alone a co-worker.”

There is no co-worker because of a *“lack of understanding by purchasers of the need for co-working”* and a *“lack of understanding/knowledge on the booker's part of a need for co-workers”*.

“When required, there has always been a co-worker or relay booked”

Summary:

For a significant proportion of interpreters working with deafblind people (who responded to the survey) the work no longer pays enough to be viable as part of a career, and so they have reduced or stopped their work in this area. As the reductions in AtW funding and disability benefits take effect, we are likely to see more interpreters finding that this specialist work is no longer viable. The level of support available to deafblind people needs to take account of the true cost of procuring these specialist skills in order to reverse this trend.