NUBSLI
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# WHO OWNS OUR ACCESS?

# Private Equity, Multinational Corporations and the Commercialisation of BSL Interpreting

**NUBSLI Report for the Trade Union Congress**

2026

*A policy and campaigning briefing on the changing model of British Sign Language interpreting, the impact on Deaf people and interpreters, and the case for community-centred public provision.*

# Executive Summary

British Sign Language (BSL) interpreting is not simply a commercial service. It is essential infrastructure that enables Deaf people to access healthcare, education, employment, justice, public services and democratic participation. Yet the way BSL interpreting is commissioned and delivered is changing.

Over recent years, interpreting provision has increasingly been moved into commercial procurement systems in which agencies, brokerage platforms and large language-service companies compete for public-sector contracts. At the same time, technology has enabled interpreting to be delivered remotely and increasingly through centralised platforms.

These developments are often presented as increasing efficiency, choice and value for money. But there is a more fundamental question that public bodies must ask:

*Who owns and controls the infrastructure through which Deaf people access essential public services?*

The concern is not simply that individual companies are growing. It is that outsourcing, large framework agreements, acquisitions and consolidation can progressively concentrate essential communication services in the hands of a small number of large corporations.

This matters because interpreting is not an interchangeable commodity.

A BSL interpreter is not simply a mechanism for transferring words from one language to another. Interpreters must understand context, culture, register, terminology, professional environments and the specific communication needs of the Deaf person. In many settings they must also recognise when communication is breaking down and advocate for adjustments that enable meaningful participation.

When provision is reduced to a transaction (a booking, a time slot or a price per minute) these professional and human considerations can disappear.

The consequences can be serious.

For Deaf people, poor interpreting provision can mean delayed or incorrect information, reduced participation, inadequate informed consent, distress and exclusion from decisions about their own lives.

For interpreters, commercialisation can mean downward pressure on fees and employment conditions, increased workloads, reduced professional autonomy and the erosion of sustainable careers.

For public services, apparent short-term savings can create significant downstream costs when communication fails.

This report argues that public bodies must move away from commissioning models based primarily on cost, convenience and volume.

The trade union movement should recognise access to BSL as both a disability rights issue and a workers' rights issue.

The conditions under which interpreters work directly affect the quality and availability of communication access for Deaf people.

The alternative to multinational consolidation is not to reject technology or professional services. It is to build models in which communication services remain accountable to the communities and workers who depend upon them.

Community-owned and cooperative models demonstrate that another approach is possible.

BSL access should not become another essential public service controlled by a small number of multinational corporations.

## NUBSLI calls for

- Public-sector contracts for BSL interpreting should not be awarded on lowest cost alone.
- Deaf people must be able to choose face-to-face interpreting where this is required to meet their communication needs.
- VRS/VRI should complement, not automatically replace, face-to-face interpreting.
- Public-service interpreting should not be delegated to AI without robust evidence of safety, accuracy and suitability.
- Commissioners should involve Deaf people and qualified BSL professionals in the design, procurement and evaluation of interpreting services.
- Contracts should include clear requirements for interpreter qualifications, experience, preparation, professional support and safe working conditions.
- Public procurement should consider the impact of ownership and market consolidation on service quality, workforce conditions and community benefit.
- Public money should support locally rooted and community-owned models where these can provide safe, high-quality services.

# 1. Introduction

In 2018, NUBSLI published its *Dossier of Disgrace*, documenting concerns about the growing use of framework agreements, subcontracting and commercial procurement within BSL interpreting.

Since then, the market has continued to change.

Public bodies increasingly procure interpreting through large contracts and framework agreements. Interpreting agencies and brokerage services sit between public-sector organisations and individual interpreters. Digital platforms increasingly determine how assignments are allocated. Video interpreting and Video Relay Services have expanded. At the same time, multinational language-service corporations have increased their involvement in communication and accessibility services.

The result is a fundamental shift in the structure of the sector.

What was once predominantly a relationship between a Deaf person, an interpreter and a public service can increasingly become a chain involving:

*public body → framework → multinational or large agency → subcontractor → interpreter → Deaf person.*

Each additional layer can create distance between the person who needs communication access and the professional delivering it. This is not simply an administrative issue. It is a question of power, accountability and ownership.

When a public service is outsourced, the public body may still have a legal responsibility to provide accessible services. But operational control can increasingly sit with private companies whose primary responsibility is to their owners and commercial interests.

## 2. From Public Service to Commercial Provision

The increasing commercialisation of BSL interpreting represents a significant change in the way communication support is commissioned, organised and delivered. As interpreting provision becomes increasingly integrated into procurement frameworks and commercial supply chains, there is a risk that the complexity of interpreting as a professional and relational service is reduced to a question of cost and contractual delivery.

Public-sector procurement processes can encourage organisations to evaluate interpreting provision according to measurable criteria such as price, response times, volume and availability. While these considerations are relevant to the effective commissioning of any service, they do not necessarily reflect the factors that determine the quality and appropriateness of an interpreting assignment. The requirements of a routine appointment, for example, may differ considerably from those of a complex medical consultation, safeguarding meeting, court hearing, mental health assessment or end-of-life discussion. Such assignments may require specialist knowledge, preparation, continuity and an understanding of the wider context in which communication is taking place.

A commissioning model that primarily treats interpreting as a commodity risks overlooking these distinctions. The emphasis shifts from determining what communication support is required in a particular context to determining how that support can be delivered within the parameters of a contract. In turn, this can place greater emphasis on the availability and cost of interpreters than on their suitability for the assignment or the preferences of the Deaf person.

This is particularly significant because the relationship between an interpreter and a Deaf person is not simply transactional. Effective interpreting requires professional judgement, linguistic and cultural competence, contextual knowledge and, in many circumstances, an understanding of the individual Deaf person's communication needs. Where procurement arrangements place greater distance between the Deaf person and the professional responsible for facilitating communication, opportunities for choice, continuity and professional judgement may be reduced.

Commercial models of provision can therefore have implications beyond the financial arrangements of the contract itself. Where price, volume and rapid fulfilment become dominant measures of service performance, there is a risk that important qualitative aspects of interpreting are insufficiently recognised within commissioning decisions. The resulting service may be technically available while nevertheless failing to provide communication that is appropriate and effective for the Deaf person.

The issue is not whether interpreting services should be commissioned efficiently, nor whether commercial organisations have a legitimate role in providing them. Rather, it is whether existing procurement approaches adequately account for the distinctive characteristics of BSL interpreting and the consequences of treating an essential communication service primarily as a market commodity.

For NUBSLI, this distinction is fundamental. The question facing public bodies should not simply be how an interpreter can be supplied at the lowest possible cost, but how they can ensure that Deaf people receive appropriate, high-quality communication support that reflects the context, complexity and importance of the service they are accessing.

NUBSLI believes that the answer must be public need.

## 3. What Interpreters Provide: More Than Language Transfer

Interpreters do not simply relay information from one language to another. NUBSLI identifies a wider contribution that can be essential to safe and effective communication:

- Cultural mediation between Deaf and hearing cultures.
- Contextual explanation and professional judgement where this is required for accurate communication.
- Advocacy for Deaf people to ensure that they are able to participate and be heard.
- Reassurance and communication support, particularly in situations where Deaf people may be isolated.
- Management of communication between multiple participants.
- Recognition of potential communication problems and the ability to respond professionally.

These contributions can also generate savings elsewhere in public services. Accurate communication can reduce repeat appointments and can help identify safeguarding or communication risks at the time they arise. The central procurement question should therefore not be simply how much an interpreter costs, but what effective communication access enables a public service to achieve.

## 4. The False Economy of Cutting Interpreting Provision

A recurring theme in the case studies is that apparently cheaper interpreting arrangements can create additional costs and risks elsewhere. An interpreter booked for too little time may result in a procedure being abandoned or repeated. Inadequate access can require family members to intervene, delay decisions, or increase the risk of misunderstanding.

**Case study: clinical procedure**
A Deaf patient abandoned a lung biopsy after an interpreter had not been booked. When the procedure was rebooked, the interpreter was again initially booked for insufficient time. The interpreter was able to remain longer, and the surgeon subsequently commented on the value of having appropriate communication support.

This case study highlights that the cheapest interpreting option is not necessarily the most cost-effective option.

If a Deaf person receives poor communication in a healthcare appointment, for example, the immediate saving from using an unsuitable or inappropriate interpreting arrangement may be insignificant compared with the consequences.

Communication failure can result in:

- appointments being repeated;
- additional staff time;
- delayed treatment;
- complaints;
- safeguarding concerns;
- misunderstandings;
- inappropriate decisions;
- loss of trust; and
- poorer outcomes.

The same principle applies across public services.

An interpreting service should therefore be assessed according to its total value and outcome, not simply its initial price.

A procurement model that saves money on the interpreting line while creating additional costs elsewhere is not efficient.

# 5. Private Equity and Market Consolidation

For NUBSLI, the concern is not simply the commercialisation of interpreting services, but the increasing concentration of provision among a smaller number of large companies. Through acquisitions and expansion into related services, larger providers can increase their market share and their role across different areas of communication provision.

This represents a significant change from a sector characterised by a greater number of smaller, locally based providers. While smaller providers are not without their own challenges, increasing concentration can reduce competition, limit choice and give larger companies greater influence over how services are commissioned and delivered.

This is particularly significant where companies operate across several areas of the market, including face-to-face interpreting, VRI, VRS and wider language or technology services. Public procurement can further contribute to this concentration where large contracts and framework agreements favour organisations with the capacity and infrastructure to operate at scale.

The issue for public bodies is therefore not only the quality of an individual provider, but also the wider implications of who owns and controls an increasing proportion of communication services. Greater transparency around corporate ownership, acquisitions, subcontracting and market share is necessary to ensure that public procurement does not inadvertently contribute to excessive concentration within an essential service.

# 6. Multinational Corporations and the BSL Market

There is already evidence of major multinational companies expanding their presence in interpreting and communication services.

Sorenson operates in the UK through Sign Language Interactions/Sorenson Interpreting and provides VRS, VRI and face-to-face interpreting. Sorenson describes itself as a global language-services provider and states that Ariel Alternatives holds a majority stake in the company. Ariel Alternatives is a private asset-management firm.

LanguageLine is another example of corporate consolidation. LanguageLine Solutions UK states that it is wholly owned by Teleperformance SE, a French-headquartered multinational corporation with a global workforce of more than 440,000 people.

LanguageLine's own corporate history records that Teleperformance acquired LanguageLine Solutions in 2016. LanguageLine subsequently acquired Capita Translation and Interpreting in 2022.

Teleperformance has also expanded its Deaf communication portfolio internationally. In 2025 it completed the acquisition of ZP Better Together, a provider of VRS and other communication services for Deaf and hard-of-hearing people in North America.

These examples demonstrate a wider trend: Companies are not necessarily remaining within one narrow interpreting service. They are expanding across technologies, delivery models and communication markets.

That does not automatically mean that every service provided by a large company is poor as the issue is structural.

When multinational companies acquire providers, enter new markets and compete for large public-sector contracts, the interpreting sector becomes increasingly integrated into global corporate structures.

Public authorities therefore need to understand not only who is tendering for a contract, but who ultimately owns the company, what other services it controls, who its subcontractors are and how much of the market it already occupies.

# 7. VRS and VRI: Technology Must Not Remove Choice

Video Relay Service (VRS) connects people in different locations through a remote sign language interpreter. Video Remote Interpreting (VRI) involves participants being together in one location while the interpreter joins remotely.

Remote interpreting can have legitimate uses. The central issue is suitability and choice. NUBSLI is concerned when VRS/VRI is introduced primarily as a cheaper alternative to face-to-face interpreting, including in settings where the Deaf person requires an interpreter who can see and respond to the full communication environment.

There are particular risks in high-risk environments, including safeguarding and clinical settings. A remote interpreter may miss an aside, glance, gesture or interaction between people in the room. Preparation and post-appointment clarification is rare in these cases.

It is worth noting that most UK VRS/I companies have been bought out by large multinational companies who are pushing the poor practices onto the UK market.

NUBSLI believes:

- VRS/VRI should not be treated as a default replacement for face-to-face provision.
- The Deaf person's communication needs and preference should be central to the decision.
- High-risk settings require particular scrutiny of whether remote interpreting is safe and appropriate.
- Remote models should include appropriate preparation, professional standards and safeguards.

# 7. The Impact on BSL Interpreters

The quality of BSL provision cannot be separated from the conditions under which interpreters work. Sign language interpreters are at an occupational risk from strain injury, high call volumes, limited control over diaries, reduced professional relationships with Deaf communities and the potential loss of experienced interpreters.

The experience of VRS workers in the United States provides an important warning.

The ASL Interpreters Union/OPEIU has been organising VRS interpreters around concerns including workload, burnout, service quality and working conditions. In 2025, OPEIU reported that interpreters were organising at two major VRS providers: private-equity-backed Sorenson and Teleperformance-owned ZP Better Together.

OPEIU has also publicly raised concerns about declining service quality and the working conditions experienced by VRS interpreters.

This is directly relevant to the UK debate as it demonstrates why the relationship between worker conditions and service quality cannot be ignored.

OPEIU report:

- 86% of interpreters working in VRS suffer from repetitive strain injury.
- 87% of interpreters are female with caring responsibilities - the need to work from home is being exploited by companies, forcing unfair working conditions on staff.
- Interpreters are expected to answer 360 plus calls per day.
- Interpreters have no control over their diaries.
- Interpreters cannot develop relationships with the community they serve.
- Monopolies of large multi-nationals, not rooted in the community.
- Refusal of large tech companies to recognise unionisation.

The relationship between working conditions and access is straightforward: if experienced interpreters leave the profession or stop accepting particular forms of work, the available pool of appropriately skilled interpreters becomes smaller. That can then increase pressure to use remote or lower-cost alternatives.

Fair pay, safe workloads, professional development, union representation and professional autonomy are not separate from Deaf people's access. A sustainable interpreting workforce is a prerequisite for sustainable access.

# 8. The Impact on Deaf People

The ultimate consequence of these structural changes is experienced by Deaf people.

Communication access is a fundamental part of participating in society. When interpreting is inadequate, the Deaf person does not simply receive a poorer "customer experience". They can lose their ability to:

- understand information;
- give informed consent;
- participate in decisions;
- challenge professionals;
- access justice;
- understand medical options;
- communicate their wishes;
- protect themselves;
- advocate for their children; or
- participate equally in public life.

This is why interpreting cannot be treated as an ordinary procurement commodity.

# 9. Case Studies: What Happens When Access Fails

The following examples are drawn from the case studies supplied to NUBSLI. They demonstrate recurring themes rather than isolated administrative inconveniences.

## Case Study 1 — Family members used instead of an interpreter

At a hospital appointment, an interpreter arrived before the scheduled time but was told that the consultant was already seeing the Deaf patient and that the service was 'fine with the family members interpreting'. The interpreter was sent away without evidence that the Deaf person had been properly consulted about this decision.

This demonstrates how access can be removed at the point of service even where a qualified interpreter has been booked and is physically present. Misunderstandings can affect diagnosis, treatment decisions and the family's ability to participate in care.

## Case Study 2 — Incorrect booking information

An interpreter was sent to the wrong hospital following incorrect booking information. Although the correct hospital was informed and the interpreter travelled there, staff proceeded with the appointment using the patient's partner and written English. The patient had left by the time the interpreter arrived.

The example demonstrates that where interpreting arrangements are not properly coordinated, Deaf people can arrive at appointments without appropriate communication support, or interpreters can be sent to the wrong location. The resulting disruption wastes everyone's time and can delay essential care.

## Case Study 3 — Child protection and remote interpreting

In a police interview an online interpreter was used for an initial account from a 10-year-old child. When a specialist interpreter later attended for a video-recorded statement, a difference in terminology used by the online interpreter became significant to the officer's understanding of the child's maturity and language. The recording had to be stopped and rearranged for a time when an intermediary could be present, delaying the process, adding expense and ultimately retraumatizing the child.

The source case study argues that specialist work requires appropriate training and that remote systems must not be treated as interchangeable with specialist face-to-face provision. Safeguarding situations require particularly careful communication. Remote interpreting may be inappropriate where the circumstances require detailed interaction, observation of non-verbal communication or the establishment of trust.

## Case Study 4 — Inpatient and end-of-life care

A case study describes a Deaf inpatient receiving inadequate communication support, including attempts to use written communication for medical consent and repeated reliance on family members. The family reported concerns about food allergies, medication and communication during doctors' rounds, alongside significant distress caused by repeatedly having to request interpreters.

This illustrates the consequences when communication support is treated as an optional administrative service rather than an integral part of safe care.

## Case Study 5 — Consent and diagnosis

In another case, a Deaf patient signed a consent form after a consultant indicated where to sign, but the patient had not understood why the operation was taking place. It later emerged that the patient had skin cancer and had not been given that information in BSL.

This is a stark example that informed consent requires meaningful communication. A Deaf person cannot properly consent to treatment if information has not been communicated in a language and manner they understand.

# 10. AI and BSL

AI presents particular challenges for BSL because BSL is a complex, three-dimensional language involving handshape, movement, facial expression, body position, spatial referencing and culturally specific language use. AI and automated sign-language technologies introduce another dimension to this debate.

NUBSLI is not opposed to technological development. Technology can provide useful tools and may increase access in specific circumstances. But technology must not be adopted simply because it exists.

The key questions should be:

- What problem is the technology solving?
- Who designed it?
- Who owns it?
- What data has been used to develop it?
- Who benefits financially?
- Who is accountable when it gets something wrong?
- What happens to professional interpreting jobs?
- Has the Deaf community been meaningfully involved?

These questions become particularly important as major corporations invest in AI-driven sign-language technology.

Sorenson, for example, has publicly identified AI-driven automated sign-language translation as part of its growth strategy and acquired OmniBridge and Hand Talk in 2025 in order to develop automated sign-language translation capabilities.

This illustrates why AI cannot be considered separately from ownership.

If the companies controlling interpreting services also control the technology intended to automate interpreting, the question becomes:

Are we simply changing the method of delivery, or are we transferring increasing control over Deaf people's communication infrastructure to a small number of corporations?

Technology should complement human interpreting where appropriate. It should not be allowed to undermine professional standards, Deaf people's linguistic rights or the interpreting workforce.

# 11. Community Wealth Building: Another Model Is Possible

NUBSLI believe that an alternative to multinational consolidation is locally rooted, community-owned provision. The principle is that public money should create community benefit rather than simply being extracted from the service through commercial margins.

Signalise Co-operative is identified as an example of a multi-stakeholder cooperative involving Deaf members, BSL interpreters and investor members. This model combines face-to-face and video interpreting while retaining Deaf people's choice about which form of provision is appropriate.

The wider proposition is that community-owned interpreting hubs could be developed in different parts of the UK. Such models could keep economic value within local communities, provide stronger relationships between workers and service users, and give Deaf people a greater role in the design of services.

The question should not simply be whether a service is public or private. It should also be who owns it, who controls it, who benefits from it, and whether Deaf people and workers have a meaningful voice.

Public procurement should actively consider whether community-owned and cooperative models can deliver services.

# 10. What Good Commissioning Should Look Like

NUBSLI believes that public bodies should commission BSL interpreting around the needs of Deaf people rather than the convenience of procurement systems.

Good commissioning should:

1. Put Deaf people's communication needs first.
2. Recognise BSL as a language, not simply an accessibility add-on.
3. Allow Deaf people meaningful choice wherever possible.
4. Use face-to-face interpreting where it is appropriate and necessary.
5. Use VRI and VRS as complementary tools, not automatic substitutes.
6. Recognise specialist interpreting requirements.
7. Support continuity of interpreters where appropriate.
8. Pay interpreters fairly.
9. Protect interpreters from unsafe workloads.
10. Require transparency around ownership and subcontracting.
11. Assess the impact of contracts on market concentration.
12. Include Deaf people and interpreters in procurement design and evaluation.
13. Measure outcomes rather than simply counting bookings.
14. Include meaningful social and community value.
15. Create clear mechanisms for Deaf people to challenge poor provision

# 11. NUBSLI Calls on the Trade Union Movement to Act

NUBSLI calls on the TUC and affiliated unions to recognise commercialisation and corporate consolidation of BSL interpreting as both a workers' rights issue and a disability rights issue.

We call for:

**1. A review of public-sector procurement**

The TUC should support scrutiny of how interpreting services are currently commissioned and whether procurement is contributing to market concentration.

**2. An end to lowest-cost commissioning**

Public bodies should not select interpreting provision primarily on the basis of price.

**3. Stronger workforce protections**

Interpreters should receive fair remuneration, safe workloads, adequate breaks and sustainable working conditions.

**4. Deaf people's involvement**

Deaf people must be involved meaningfully in the design, commissioning and evaluation of communication services.

**5. Transparency of ownership**

Public contracts should require disclosure of corporate ownership, investment structures, parent companies and significant subcontracting arrangements.

**6. Competition and market-concentration safeguards**

Public procurement should assess whether contracts are strengthening excessive corporate concentration in essential communication services.

**7. Appropriate use of technology**

VRS, VRI and AI should be used where they meet the Deaf person's communication needs, not simply because they reduce costs.

**8. Protection of professional interpreting**

Technology must not be used as a mechanism for driving down interpreting fees or eliminating professional roles without consideration of quality, safety and Deaf people's rights.

**9. Support for community ownership**

Public bodies should consider cooperative, Deaf-led and community-owned models when commissioning interpreting services.

**10. A union voice in the debate**

Interpreters must have a collective voice in decisions that affect their working lives and the future of their profession.

# 12. Conclusion: Who Controls Access?

The challenges facing BSL interpreting cannot be considered solely in terms of technology, efficiency or procurement. They also concern the ownership and organisation of an essential communication service, and the implications of increasing commercialisation and market concentration for Deaf people and interpreters.

The growth of multinational and investment-backed companies within the sector raises important questions about how communication services are commissioned, who controls their delivery and how accountable providers are to the communities they serve. These questions become increasingly important as companies expand across different areas of interpreting, technology and language provision.

NUBSLI does not argue that commercial organisations, technology or remote interpreting have no place within the sector. Rather, there must be appropriate safeguards to ensure that commercial interests do not take precedence over the quality of communication, Deaf people's choice and linguistic rights, or the working conditions of interpreters.

Public procurement has an important role to play in determining the structure of the market. It should therefore support high-quality provision, fair and sustainable employment, meaningful Deaf community involvement and genuine choice, while avoiding arrangements that unnecessarily contribute to further market concentration.

There is also a need to consider alternative models of provision. Cooperative, Deaf-led and community-based organisations can offer different approaches to ownership and accountability, keeping greater control and economic value within the communities that rely on these services.

Ultimately, BSL interpreting should be understood as an essential component of equal access to public services, rather than simply another service to be purchased at the lowest possible cost. The quality of interpreting is inseparable from the conditions in which interpreters work, and the structure of the market has implications for both.

The trade union movement has an important role in challenging the privatisation and commercialisation of essential public services and in ensuring that workers and the communities they serve have a meaningful voice in how those services are organised.

For BSL interpreting, this means asking not only whether a service is available, but who owns and controls that service, how decisions about provision are made, who benefits from public expenditure, and whether the service remains accountable to Deaf people and the professionals who deliver it.