



WASLI is committed to the development of the profession of sign language interpreting worldwide

UK, Wales, and Northern Ireland

Name of Association: Association of Sign Language Interpreters (ASLI)

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England, Wales and Northern Ireland have a combined population of around 55 million people (inclusion of the Scottish population takes this figure above 60 million for the UK). There are no accurate figures for the number of deaf people, but figures of 50,000 to 70,000 Deaf BSL users tend to be cited most often.

The current situation for the Deaf community

British Sign Language (BSL) is recognised by the UK government as an indigenous British language, but it still does not have legal protection. This means that Deaf people's support in access to services, education and in employment comes via disability or 'equality' legislation. The most recent of this is the Equality Act implemented from 2010 http://www.equalities.gov.uk/equality_act_2010.aspx. Discrimination can also be challenged under laws relating to Human Rights.

Deaf people in the UK have comparatively good access to services and are able to find work at all levels, although most work in lower grade positions. The UK government provides funding support for all disabled people in the workplace called 'Access to Work' which enables Deaf people to access interpreting support. This support is not unlimited, but each Deaf applicant is assessed and allocated a budget that can be used for interpreting services at work.

Most deaf children are educated in mainstream schools, sometimes with sign language support but often via oral methods or a combination of types of support. There are a handful of Deaf schools around the country, but many have been closed over the last few decades because of the government policy for inclusion of as many children as possible in mainstream schools. This means that those Deaf schools that still exist are often under threat of closure. Many children are now given cochlear implants and the majority of younger deaf children are implanted.



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Sign language is visible in the media and a small percentage of television programmes have in-vision BSL interpretation. Sign language is popular in society: hundreds of thousands of hearing people have learned some basic sign language, but Deaf people often report they still face barriers in relation to access to services.

There is a national Deaf Association – the BDA (British Deaf Association, <http://bda.org.uk/>), which has been restructured this year and its current focus is campaigning for greater access to services in BSL and provision for BSL in UK law.

The current situation for Sign Language Interpreting

The UK has a registration system for sign language interpreters as a safeguard for users of interpreters. Registration requires interpreters to have insurance and a check called a Criminal Records Bureau check, which will show any past criminal convictions. All Language Service Professionals working with d/Deaf and Deafblind people, including interpreters, are now able to register with National Registers of Communication Professionals with Deaf and Deafblind People (NRCPD) www.nrcpd.org.uk.

Registration requires an interpreter to have met the National Centre for Language (CILT) National Occupational Standards, which equate to other spoken language standards of proficiency. This is currently known as Level 6 British Sign Language and Level 4 BSL/English Interpreting.

(http://www.cilt.org.uk/home/standards_and_qualifications/uk_occupational_standards/interpreting.aspx)

Many interpreters achieve these standards through study at University. There are undergraduate courses available which enable students to achieve part of their interpreter training, which is then completed as part of a Masters level qualification. Increasing numbers of interpreters are qualifying via a vocational route, which involves evidence collection to prove competency at the appropriate level. Those undergoing training can be registered in training categories known as Junior Trainee and Trainee Interpreters depending on their language competency. These interpreters are registered to work, whilst they continue towards their full professional status.



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At the present time there are nearly 1000 interpreters who are either full members of the register or who are at Trainee or Junior Trainee level. There is currently a consultation taking place to gauge support for replacing the two tier trainee categories with a single 'training' category. Registration is not a legal requirement for those working as interpreters so there may be unknown numbers of interpreters working in the community and in education who are not registered.

Registration is separate from the supportive members' association: the Association of Sign Language Interpreters (ASLI) www.asli.org.uk. ASLI provides interpreters with a support network including online discussion forums and the opportunity to meet regionally; it has a growing mentoring scheme providing trained mentors for any interpreter at any stage of their career; the Association has a strong representative role with national organisations and government (and further afield like at WASLI!). ASLI also has a conference every other year. 2012 will be ASLI's 25th Anniversary.

Recent developments in interpreting sector

Recently there has been more emphasis on training and development for interpreters who are qualified and experienced. A CPD (Continuing Professional Development) scheme to encourage all interpreters to be actively engaged in developing as professionals has been established by ASLI and members are now required to submit a record of CPD undertaken during the year. This meets our aim of "developing the interpreter and developing the profession".

Another recent development has been a surge of interest in remote video relay interpreting, using computers and videophones to enable Deaf people to access interpreters via video calls. There are small, growing numbers of Deaf people, especially professionals, using these systems to access interpreting services. There is not yet a strong countrywide infrastructure for this but we anticipate that this will increase greatly in the next few years.

Registration for Deaf Interpreters

One of the major steps forward in the last few years has been the development of registration opportunities for Deaf interpreters. Initially from September 2010 it has meant Deaf interpreters who can



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provide qualifications in interpreting between two signed languages are accepted onto the register. In subsequent years, this will be extended to those Deaf interpreters who work between written and signed languages and possibly also those who work on language modification. This is an exciting development for the interpreting profession in the UK. ASLI are continuing to support Deaf interpreters and actively seeking to engage more Deaf people as members of the professional association.

Economic Climate

Financial cuts and austerity measures are affecting many countries at the present time, and the UK is no exception. Most interpreters working in England Wales and Northern Ireland are self-employed (ASLI's recent 2011 Fees and Salaries survey reported that 77% of ASLI members are freelance <http://www.asli.org.uk/fees-salaries-report-p122.aspx>) and many interpreters are concerned about their future income. There is concern that with emphasis on cost cutting the engagement of trained, registered interpreters will be sidelined in favour of those people who lack interpreter training and who may be cheaper to engage. In addition to this universities are closing Deaf Studies courses – The most significant being the closure of University of Bristol's Deaf Studies undergraduate degree which has trained many excellent interpreters. The UK interpreting profession places high value on standards and this is reflected in the expectations of the Deaf community. There is a fear that the hard work that has been undertaken to ensure high quality access to services for Deaf people at all levels in society will be compromised by cost-cutting. ASLI is working with agencies that are more often becoming the suppliers of interpreters to customers to educate the agencies to try to ensure the highest possible standards of interpreting are maintained.