

# A Guide to Working with British Sign Language/English Interpreters

This is a step-by-step guide to when you can work with British Sign Language/English Interpreters, including how to book them and how to work with them during an event or meeting. It has been developed by Robin Craig (EDIS Communications and Administration Officer) based on his experiences of working with British Sign Language interpreters for meetings, events, and long-term projects involving Deaf participants. Feedback and sensitivity reader services were provided by British Sign Language/English Translator Alexandra Shaw.

This guide is designed for people who are considering using British Sign Language/English Interpreters as part of their work to make events and meetings more accessible. It is not designed to give guidance on employing someone who communicates primarily through British Sign Language or using British Sign Language in non-work settings. This guide is principally aimed at people who don't use British Sign Language.

We actively welcome feedback on this guide. Please email Robin at [r.craig@wellcome.org](mailto:r.craig@wellcome.org) if you have any thoughts or comments.

## What is British Sign Language?

[The British Deaf Association](#) defines sign language as “a visual-gestural language with a distinctive grammar using handshapes, facial expressions, gestures and body language to convey meaning.”

It is a spatial language rather than a verbal language. It is predominantly used by Deaf people.

British Sign Language (BSL) was legally recognised as a language of England, Wales and Scotland with the passing of The British Sign Language Act 2022. BSL is the sign language most used in the UK. It has its own grammar and sentence structure and is not a signed equivalent of English.

Sign Supported English (SSE) refers to when someone is signing and speaking English at the same time, and SSE generally follows the grammatical rules of English.

According to [the British Deaf Association](#), there is estimated to be 151,000 deaf adults and children in the UK who use BSL, and for 87,000 of them, BSL is their preferred means of communication.



## When to use BSL/English Interpreters

BSL/English interpreters are used to interpret English into BSL or vice versa. There are many times you may want to use an interpreter through your work, including:

- When hosting meetings that someone Deaf will be attending.
- When hosting public-facing events where someone may require BSL interpretation.
- When hosting events or meetings that will be recorded for future dissemination.
- When making written materials, such as articles or funding calls, more accessible to Deaf people. (For this, consider using a British Sign Language/English Translator instead of an Interpreter, as they are specifically qualified in this area.)

This list is not exhaustive, and there may be other times that using an interpreter is necessary. When organising events or meetings, it is generally best practise to ask attendees whether they have any access needs that you should be aware of, including if they will require a BSL/English interpreter. This can be asked through the registration form or via an email prior to the event. Attendees should have an opportunity to declare any access needs to you privately.

Since 2022, EDIS has been trialling using BSL/English interpreters for every public-facing event as standard, regardless of whether they have been requested by attendees. This means that Deaf people do not have to specifically request interpretation and will have the same level of access as non-deaf attendees by default. It also means that all recordings of events feature BSL interpretation.



Booking interpreters for every public-facing event or meeting may not be feasible for you. In this case, it is preferable to give attendees the chance to request an interpreter prior to the event and book interpreters based on need. If you have booked interpreters, ensure that any marketing materials makes this clear.

## How to Book BSL/English Interpreters

### Forward Planning

Interpreters are generally booked up well in advance, particularly during the summer months where some interpreters take a break. Ideally, you should reach out to interpreters as far in advance of your event as possible. This is particularly important if you are booking multiple interpreters for an event, if you require interpreters to be present in person, or if your event is a day or more long.

For the 2023 EDIS Symposium, we began reaching out to interpreters 5 months in advance of the event and confirmed all interpreters 3 months prior to the event. Smaller and shorter events can require less advance notice, but the earlier interpreters are booked, the better.

### How many Interpreters?

This [guide on how many interpreters to book by Clarion UK](#) recommends that for any meeting over 1.5 hours, more than 1 interpreter is needed. For public-facing events such as conferences where there is no chance to stop and clarify what a speaker has said, using 2 interpreters is the usual minimum standard. However, please note that every meeting and event will have its own specific requirements, and this isn't prescriptive.

BSL/English interpretation is energy-intensive, and interpreters will need to stop and rest regularly. If the interpreter cannot rest, the accuracy of their interpretation will drop. Research conducted by Clarion UK has found that a period of 20-25 minutes is the optimum span for interpreters to focus before fatigue begins to affect their messaging.

If your event or meeting involves complex or specialist material, such as scientific language, interpreters will have to take more frequent breaks. If you are unsure of how many interpreters will be needed, you can ask interpreters for a recommendation when you reach out to book them.

### Finding an Interpreter

It is important to ensure that any interpreter or translator you book is registered, as this is proof that they have appropriate qualifications, insurance, and there is a complaints process in place if needed. You can ask interpreters and translators which body they are registered with and then check:

- [The National Register of Communication Professionals Working with Deaf and Deafblind People](#) (NRCPD).
- [Regulatory Body for Sign Language Interpreters & Translators](#) (RBSLI).
- [The Scottish Register of Language Professionals with the Deaf Community](#) (SRLPDC).

Fully qualified interpreters and translators on a register are known as Registered Sign Language Interpreters (RSLI) and Translators (RSLT). Those who are not yet fully qualified are known as Trainee Sign Language Interpreters (TSLI) and Translators (TSLT). Depending on the nature of the meeting or event, you may wish to use RSLI or RSLT only as they will typically have more experience.

There are multiple directories you can use to find a BSL/English interpreter or translator. We encourage you to consider the diversity of the interpreters and translators you book, including booking interpreters and translators of colour. Some will have specialisms, such as legal or medical BSL interpretation. Some directories and agencies you can use include:

- [Interpreters of Colour Network](#)
- [London BSL Interpreters](#)
- [Action Deafness](#)



### **What to Include when Contacting an Interpreter**

When reaching out to an interpreter, include the following information:

- Time and date of the event you want them to interpret.
- How long the event will run for.
- A brief summary of the event, including if any specialist topics or language will be used.
- If you have booked any other interpreters for the event and, if so, what their names are.
- Whether the interpreter is expected to join virtually or in-person.
- If they are expected to attend in person, let them know if you will cover their travel costs.

You can also include your budget for the interpreting services or ask what the interpreter's rate is.

## Considerations Prior to an Event

In the run-up to your event, there are some points to consider:

- If you know that specialist language, organisation names or acronyms will be used during the event, send over a brief glossary to your interpreter(s).
- If presentations, videos or slides will be part of your event, send them to your interpreter(s) at least a week beforehand.
- If you are using multiple interpreters, create an introductory email chain with all of them in ahead of the event. They will need to coordinate timings and which order they will interpret in.
- If anyone has request BSL interpretation, ask them if they would like to be put in contact with the interpreters before the event in case they have a preferred style or grammatical structure.
- If your event is being recorded, make sure the interpreter(s) know that that this will be happening and how the recording will be used. This may affect their fee and should be included in any contract you enter into with them.
- Let them know where and when to meet you on the day of the event if they are attending in person, or how to log onto the meeting if they are attending online. Allow for time beforehand to meet with the interpreter(s) to ensure that everything is in place as needed.
- Brief the event speakers to speak one at a time and at a natural pace.
- Advise if there is any specific dress code or other important information about attire.

## During the Event

If you have briefed your interpreter(s) using the guide above, they will usually need little supervision during the event itself. Ensure they have time to take breaks with the rest of the attendees, refreshments, and a space to take a break if needed.

If they are contracted to interpret a meeting or panel sessions during a conference, it is not their role to interpret for individuals during networking or the social elements of an event. It is also not their role to translate written material for attendees unless agreed in advance.

If it is an online event, ensure that the interpreter is always visible whilst recognising that Deaf people have their own preferred viewing methods.

Make sure gallery view is enabled, and then you can spotlight the interpreter (see [Zoom \[guide\]](#) or [Teams \[guide\]](#), or spotlighted on whichever software you are using). Depending on the platform, you can also enable the multi-pin function so that Deaf viewers can choose their own view.

This ensures the interpreter's video stream is always visible, which is valuable both for those using the interpreter(s) and if the event is being recorded. Also remember that if interpreter(s) swap, then you need to ensure they are visible.

If you are allowing questions, and a Deaf person wishes to use BSL, make sure that you can spotlight (or otherwise highlight) their camera to ensure visibility. Remember that the BSL to English interpretation will be coming via the interpreter, so ensure that the interpreter can turn their microphone on.



## Resources

- [Make your meetings deaf aware – Royal National Institute for Deaf People](#)
- [Making your services and workplace deaf-friendly – National Deaf Children's Society](#)
- [How to support deaf people in the workplace – Inclusive Employers](#)
- [The Cultural Model of Deafness – Inclusion London](#)
- [BSL Interpreter Awareness Guide – National Union of British Sign Language Interpreters](#)
- [British Deaf Association](#)