



Tips for Justice Professionals

Top ten tips for working with Deaf sign language users
and sign language interpreters



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Working with Deaf sign language users

There are approximately 87,000 Deaf sign language users across the UK, with an estimated 5,000 in Northern Ireland. Every d/Deaf person is different, but the following tips are a good place to start:

- 1) **Learn as much as you can about being Deaf** – Knowledge of your client and Deaf culture will help foster greater understanding of how they interact with the world, and react in certain situations. Charities such as the BDA provide Deaf-led BSL/ISL equality training, which can provide crucial insight into the Deaf world.
- 2) **Adopt Deaf-friendly practices** – Do you provide means of contact that are accessible to Deaf sign language users? Do you know where to signpost to find relevant information in sign language? Make sure you're well practiced in speaking clearly and steadily, with clear lip patterns, for d/Deaf people who lip read.
- 3) **Find out how your client communicates** – Not every Deaf person communicates using British Sign Language (BSL). In Northern Ireland, approximately a third of the Deaf community use Irish Sign Language (ISL). Other Deaf people may use Sign Supported English (SSE), or other communication systems. Both BSL and ISL are languages in their own right, separate to English and to each other.
- 4) **Adapt** – Once establishing the individual needs of your client, adapt to their communication needs. For example, it may be that they do not have strong understanding of written English – in this case, make sure that they have time with an interpreter to go through written documents, and you set aside time to explain what they mean.
- 5) **Know your protocols** – Do you know how to book an interpreter? Do you know your own internal processes for completing this? Do you have facilities for providing remote interpretation (via video relay interpreting systems) in urgent cases?
- 6) **Clarify jargon** – Be prepared to explain legal jargon and complicated terms with examples and scenarios. Many concepts do not translate directly into British or Irish Sign Language, so it may be useful to have examples ready. Check with your client to see whether they need further information or clarification.
- 7) **Check your communication professionals** – Always book qualified interpreters with reasonable related experience. Don't be afraid to ask interpreters whether they have relevant experience and are comfortable with the jargon you are using.
- 8) **Use the same interpreters** – If your client is comfortable with this, try to book the same interpreters or communication professionals for consecutive meetings. Familiarity with the case and the technical language being used will enable meetings to run more efficiently.

- 9) **Give yourself time** – While time can often be a limited resource in this area of work, it is one of the most useful assets in ensuring you can carry out these steps to ensure Deaf clients have full access to justice. Investing this time will ensure that you yourself feel confident and comfortable, and can provide Deaf people with equitable access.
- 10) **Don't panic** – There are organisations you can turn to if you need any further advice or guidance. You can contact BDA NI at bda@bda.org.uk

Working with sign language interpreters

For people who do not regularly work with sign language interpreters, it can be useful to get a steer on etiquette and good practice, to ensure that all parties have smooth and clear communication.

- 1) **Book qualified and registered interpreters** – Interpreters will carry identification on them, and BSL interpreters usually show a registered badge on a lanyard or a clip. If you cannot see their registration card, you can ask them for this. Please see the guide overleaf for booking interpreters.
- 2) **Look at and speak directly to the person who is Deaf** – Don't address the person through the interpreter, or in the third person. You are having a conversation with the person who is Deaf, and the interpreter is a professional who will be simultaneously interpreting what you are saying.
- 3) **Sit next to the interpreter** – Don't sit opposite the interpreter. This will allow the Deaf person to see both you and the interpreter, without having to move around.
- 4) **Speak normally** – Speak in your normal tone, at a normal pace, and in your ordinary speaking style. It is often worth explaining and illustrating jargon with examples, as some may not directly translate into BSL or ISL.
- 5) **Give time** – Make sure you leave time for the Deaf person to absorb any information, clarify any queries, and respond to any questions. Interpreters interpret in real time, but you may notice a short delay after you start speaking before they start signing. This is because BSL and ISL have a different grammatical order to English.
- 6) **Don't make assumptions** – Deaf culture is its own unique culture, with unique touchpoints and references. We may think that certain cultural concepts are universal, but they may not be universal within the Deaf community. For example, it is assumed a lot of people understand the connotations of a 'no comment' interview and why you would choose to respond in this way. However, this may need explaining more explicitly to avoid any misunderstandings.

How to book sign language interpreters

What is British Sign Language?

British Sign Language (BSL) is the first or preferred language of around 87,000 Deaf people in the UK, and 3,500 Deaf people in Northern Ireland. The language consists of movements from the hands, face, head and body.

BSL Interpreters

The National Registers (NRCPD) – nrcpd.org.uk

How do I check that they are fully qualified?

Fully qualified (yellow)



Trainee (blue)



What is Irish Sign Language?

Irish Sign Language (ISL) is the first or preferred language of around 5,000 Deaf people on the island of Ireland, and 1,500 Deaf people in Northern Ireland. ISL is more closely related to French Sign Language (LSF) than it is to BSL.

ISL Interpreters

Sign Language Interpreting Service (SLIS) – www.slis.ie

Check when booking an interpreter and request identification