

Working with a Sign Language Interpreter

Role of Interpreter

A sign language interpreter facilitates communication either between users of a sign language such as British Sign Language (BSL) and users of a spoken language, or between users of two different sign languages. Interpreters will use their skill and knowledge of the two languages, and their understanding of any cultural differences between those for whom they are interpreting, to transfer a message from one language into the other.

Sign language interpreters may look very active with their hands, but in fact most of the hard work is going on in their heads. They have to listen carefully to, or watch the message, extract the meaning and then find an appropriate way to express the message in the second language.

Categories of Sign Language Interpreters

Registered Sign Language Interpreters will have demonstrated that they have achieved a nationally agreed standard in interpreting. They will carry a yellow photo ID card.

Trainee Sign Language Interpreters have met minimum competence requirements and are undertaking an approved, supervised programme of training that leads to NRCPD Registered status. The assignments they undertake should be within their professional competence. Trainee Sign Language Interpreters may not work in the legal domain – courts, police, legal processes etc, - or in mental health settings. They will carry a purple photo ID card.

How to book an Interpreter

Interpreters may be booked up for several weeks so it is important to book an interpreter well in advance. Sign language interpreters can be found by searching the registers on the NRCPD website www.nrcpd.org.uk or they may be booked through one of the specialist agencies.

Before the meeting

- Inform the interpreter of the type of assignment and details of the date, time, length and location
- Tell them how many deaf people will be using the service
- Make sure the interpreter has a contact name and telephone number
- Ensure that the interpreter receives copies of the agenda and any other relevant papers at least a week before so they can prepare for the assignment

Position of the Interpreter

- There should be plenty of light on the interpreter. They should not be placed in front of a window or with light coming from behind as this darkens the face
- The background behind the interpreter should be visually clear and calm. Vividly patterned wallpaper can be distracting or straining on the eye
- The ideal position for the interpreter will also depend on the type of assignment.
 - in a job interview it is helpful if the interviewer and the applicant face one another with the interpreter next to the hearing person
 - In a round table meeting the interpreter should be positioned opposite any deaf participants
 - At a conference, with a deaf presenter, the interpreter will need to be placed opposite the deaf person in order to see the signing clearly. For a hearing presenter, the interpreter is better placed as close as possible to the presenter and near to any visual aids so that the deaf people in the audience can view both quickly and easily

During the meeting

- Allow time for deaf people to look at visual material (e.g. slides, handouts). They can't watch the interpreter and read materials at the same time
- Only one message can be interpreted at a time. It is important that only one person speaks or signs at a time
- Interpreters should not work over 20 minutes without a break. For meetings or events of longer than two hours (or of a particularly intense nature) it is often necessary to book more than one interpreter
- Sometimes an interpreter may need to interrupt the person speaking or signing to ask for repetition or clarification to enable them to interpret what is being said