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Welsh Government Consultation Response: BSL (British Sign Language) Bill : Interpreters in Wales.

1. The number of BSL interpreters in Wales - are there enough to satisfy demand at present?

For accurate and up-to-date data on the number and demographics of BSL interpreters and translators in Wales, the Welsh Government should consult the Association of Sign Language Interpreters (ASLI), which holds relevant professional information and workforce statistics.

At present, there are not enough qualified BSL interpreters in Wales to meet demand in all aspects of Deaf people's lives.. However, simply increasing the number of interpreters is not a sustainable solution. Previous initiatives, such as BSL Futures, demonstrated that without proper legacy or succession planning, shortages soon re-emerge.

A sustainable approach requires the creation of a clear and supported career pathway — from trainee through to qualified interpreter, mentor, supervisor, senior practitioner, assessor, teacher/trainer, and researcher. This pathway should be actively promoted through Careers Wales, schools, colleges, and universities to encourage long-term workforce growth.

To ensure a robust pipeline, Wales must also invest in a skilled Deaf teaching workforce and ensure that BSL classes are widely available and recognised as a professional skill, not merely a hobby. BSL and interpreting should be recognised as legitimate career choices within the fields of linguistics and communication.

Free BSL classes should be prioritised for families of Deaf people, and financial support (such as Student Finance eligibility) should be made available for BSL learners progressing to Level 6 and interpreter diploma qualifications, which are currently cost-prohibitive.

The focus of this question should be: **“Is there sufficient supply to meet demand in public services?”** This distinction is important because interpreter demand extends well beyond the public sector — encompassing the arts, legal settings, education, employment (via the Access to Work scheme*), and virtual interpreting services (VRI/VRS). This diversification of work opportunities reduces the pool of interpreters available for public service assignments, particularly within health and social care, where demand is often urgent, unpredictable, and last-minute. For financial and professional stability, interpreters prioritise advance bookings and are unlikely to reserve diary space solely for short-notice work.

Interpreters may choose to work with Deaf professionals through employment support schemes, (Access To Work) as this provides regular and predictable work. This further reduces availability for short-notice assignments within the public sector. The Access to

Work scheme remains unfit for purpose, creating barriers for Deaf professionals and placing additional strain on interpreter availability. See below in ‘barriers’ section.

A balanced approach is essential — flooding the market with newly qualified interpreters risks underemployment and lower quality, while too few interpreters creates accessibility gaps. Freelancers need regular, predictable work to sustain income; but still want to be flexible enough to be there for the community at short notice, it is a hard balance to strike at the moment.

An additional question that should be considered relates to the **demand for BSL Translators**. BSL Translators are qualified Deaf professionals who translate written English content into BSL. Public services will increasingly need to communicate key information, such as health advice and public messaging — directly to the Deaf community in BSL. This will require a skilled and sustainable pool of BSL Translators.

It is recommended that the Welsh Government consult ASLI for accurate data on the current number of freelance BSL Translators in Wales. Succession planning is also essential to ensure future capacity. Translators should have access to structured training opportunities in Wales and could be trained alongside interpreter cohorts through a well-designed, coordinated programme.

2. What impact would the Bill have on interpreter demand?

The Bill is likely to increase demand significantly across all sectors. Interpreters’ diaries would fill months in advance, reducing flexibility for short-notice or emergency work in health, social care, and justice settings — areas that directly affect lives.

Without careful workforce planning and advance booking systems, there is a risk of interpreter burnout and service gaps. Sustainable workforce growth, supported by proper planning and funding, is essential to meet increased demand without compromising quality or wellbeing. Consultation with interpreters within the public sector is essential. Interpreter input can provide valuable insight into what is practical and sustainable within the profession for example, regarding terms and conditions, workload expectations, and service delivery models. Interpreters can also offer unique perspectives that help shape policies which are both realistic and effective in meeting the needs of Deaf service users.

Again there will be greater demand placed upon Translators to provide public notices and information in BSL in addition to their current workload.

3. What are the main obstacles facing the interpreting profession?

The interpreting profession currently faces several structural challenges:

- Lack of diversity – The workforce is predominantly white and female, with limited representation from other backgrounds.
- Ageing profession – Many interpreters are expected to retire within 15–20 years, with insufficient new entrants to replace them.
- Limited succession planning – Few structured pathways or incentives exist for career development.

- Perceived as a “helping” profession rather than a linguistics-based, cognitively demanding career.
- Financial barriers – Training and qualification costs are high, with limited funding support. Freelance work that requires last minute bookings is not sustainable, advance bookings are preferred.
- Quality concerns – Fast-tracked or poorly supported training leads to inconsistent quality and skill levels.
- Lack of Deaf leadership – Deaf professionals must be paid and empowered to lead on training, assessment, and curriculum development.

Additionally, public service booking systems are inconsistent and often fail to confirm interpreters properly. Misunderstandings between “requesting” and “booking” interpreters lead to cancelled or missed appointments particularly in health settings.

Additional barriers are that The Access to Work scheme is currently not fit for purpose. Ongoing payment delays and administrative issues have led many interpreters to withdraw from employment-related interpreting. This has created tension between Deaf employees and interpreters, as Access to Work frequently fails to make timely payments, consult appropriately with interpreters, or provide financial reliability. As a result, some interpreters have experienced financial loss or debt. Conversely, interpreting for Deaf employees can provide regular and stable work for interpreters. However, this reduces their capacity to take on last-minute or ad hoc public service assignments. It is appreciated that Access To Work is not a devolved issue, however it does have an impact upon interpreter availability and stress load.

5. What can be done to attract more people into the profession?

Attraction to the profession requires:

- A clear, well-publicised career structure showing progression routes and professional recognition.
- Targeted recruitment in schools and universities, especially for students interested in languages, performance, communication, ethics or social engagement.
- Improved financial support, including bursaries or student loans.
- Promotion of diversity and visibility of interpreters from varied backgrounds.
- Accurate portrayal of the profession as intellectually stimulating, rewarding, and linguistically rich.

Raising awareness of the job’s benefits and stability, when properly supported, will make it a more viable career option. As most interpreters work on a freelance basis, funding may be required to promote the profession and support workforce development. However, it should be recognised that such promotional and outreach activities take time away from interpreters’ everyday work, which may further impact service availability in the short term.

5. Is there sufficient training available and what are the pathways?

There are limited interpreter training options in Wales, with most advanced courses based in England. Developing a Wales-based interpreter diploma or university programme would improve accessibility and retention. However many students may well be based elsewhere in

the UK to attend Wales based courses. We would want to attract home grown interpreters or those who wish to stay in Wales. BSL Futures saw many leave Wales to work elsewhere.

Training must be Deaf-led, culturally authentic, and supported by skilled mentors and supervisors. Investment in the Deaf teaching workforce is fundamental to ensuring language and cultural quality in interpreter education. Mentorship should be an integral part of qualification pathways.

To establish a sustainable and continuous pipeline of qualified BSL interpreters, the first and most critical step is to strengthen and expand the Deaf BSL teaching workforce. High-quality BSL teaching must be accessible, well-resourced, and led by Deaf professionals who are appropriately remunerated and provided with job security.

BSL should be offered and recognised as a mainstream language subject — similar to Welsh — with provision available during normal working hours, not only as an evening or hobby class.

Deaf BSL teachers should be employed across a range of contexts, including:

- Fully funded family BSL programmes for families of Deaf children;
- General public BSL classes;
- Workplace and public sector training (including Deaf awareness and equality training); and
- Interpreter training and education programmes.
- Qualify Deaf Teachers to work with in Education settings for all ages.

Without sustained investment in Deaf-led BSL teaching, it will not be possible to produce a consistent, high-quality cohort of interpreters in Wales.

6. What should the Bill include to improve Deaf people's access to interpreters?

The Bill should include an “active offer” principle for BSL access.

The Bill and its associated strategy and guidance should not focus solely on access to interpreters and translators. There appears to be an assumption that increasing the number of interpreters will resolve the challenges faced by the Deaf community; however, this addresses only one part of a much wider and more complex picture. Interpreter access is indeed vital in certain contexts, for example, in healthcare and social care, but true equality begins much earlier, with access to BSL from birth for Deaf children and their families. Also a much wider understanding is needed of how systems and organisations need to adhere to their anticipatory duty to provide accessible information to the Deaf community in BSL.

More clarity is needed about what promoting and facilitating means. I understand this needs to be fleshed out in the National Strategy and guidance. It would be wise to consult with interpreters (ASLI) on any strategies to gather feasibility of the said guidance.

Summary:

Rapidly increasing interpreter numbers through fast-track routes is not a sustainable solution; it is merely a short-term fix. The focus must instead be on long-term career planning and the development of a strong Deaf BSL teaching workforce. Deaf teachers, whose first language and lived experience are rooted in BSL and Deaf culture, should be supported, valued, and properly resourced to expand the workforce and ensure quality and authenticity in training.

In general Public Services should:

- Provide clear, simple ways for Deaf people to request interpreters (including online BSL options for emergency scenarios or simple queries).
- Publicise booking routes through Deaf networks, not just institutional websites.
- Flag BSL users in NHS systems to ensure interpreter provision is built into appointment scheduling.
- Offer flexible appointment dates/times to secure interpreter availability before confirming bookings.
- Older Deaf people must be supported to use new digital systems to request interpreters, ensuring accessibility across generations.
- Consult directly with interpreters within the public sector to identify practical solutions to issues of demand and supply, to consider terms and conditions, and support effective workforce and service planning.

Addressing interpreter shortages in Wales requires more than recruitment. A strategic, long-term investment in Deaf education, interpreter training, BSL teaching workforce planning, and public service interpreter booking system reform is essential. Interpreting must be recognised and supported as a professional, linguistic, and cultural career, underpinned by fair pay, sustainable workloads, and Deaf leadership.