



# Charter for British Sign Language

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# Statement by Dr Terry Riley

The purpose of the British Sign Language (BSL) Charter is to promote better access to public services for Deaf communities and to help public agencies meet their legislative duties under the Equality Act 2010.

The UK Government ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2009. Local authorities, public services and agencies should support this by adhering to the CRPD. One way of supporting this is to adopt the BSL Charter.

Deaf people want to have equal access to services and access to BSL/English interpreters whenever they are needed. The Deaf community is a linguistic community with a rich history, identity, language and culture. The BSL Charter highlights good practice and will build capacity to eliminate unlawful discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and develop good relations with the Deaf community.

## Recognition of British Sign Language

Deaf people in Britain campaigned for many years for the recognition of BSL considering this to be a human rights issue.

This campaign was for the right to positively identify with one's language(s), and for others to respect this identification. It asked for BSL to be recognised as a native indigenous language and for Deaf people to have the right to learn it, to develop in formal school settings by being taught through it and to have the right to use it in official contexts (schools, hospitals, police services, naming of children, religion).

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 recognised that Deaf people, as part of the community of disabled people, have the right to use BSL/English interpreters and to receive equal access to services. However, Deaf people continue to feel that the Act does not recognise Deaf people as a linguistic minority and still campaign for a British Sign Language Act, similar to the Welsh Language Act 1993.

On 18th March 2003, the British Government recognised BSL as a language in its own right and as an indigenous language used in the UK. In March 2004, the Secretary of State for

Northern Ireland announced the formal recognition of BSL and ISL (Irish Sign Language) as languages in their own right in Northern Ireland.

**The BSL Charter** was launched in Bristol on the same day as the Government recognised BSL as a language in its own right; 18th March 2003.

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# Introduction to the BDA's Charter for British Sign Language (BSL)

The BDA is asking local and national services across the UK, in the public, private and voluntary sectors, to sign up to our Charter for British Sign Language (BSL). The Charter sets out a number of key pledges to improve access and rights for Deaf people who use sign language.

Each pledge requires a commitment to overcome the disadvantages that Deaf people using BSL face. The benefits that will ensue from achieving the stated objective are indicated.

### **The five pledges:**

- 1.** Consult formally and informally with the local Deaf community on a regular basis
- 2.** Ensure access for Deaf people to information and services
- 3.** Support Deaf children and families
- 4.** Ensure staff working with Deaf people can communicate effectively using British Sign Language
- 5.** Promote learning and high quality teaching of British Sign Language.

## **Consult formally and informally with the local Deaf community on a regular basis**

### **Rationale**

Deaf people should have the right to be consulted on services or changes to services that affect them. (See 1.1 – 3.1 of the Local Government Association Equality Framework; “Knowing your Communities”).

### **The objective**

Deaf people who use BSL are able to have input into consultations either separately or alongside other forums and user groups, thus enabling the Deaf community to be a resource that can be used to improve the design of services for Deaf people and the wider community. Organisations that have a contractual obligation to provide public services should ensure that this is included as part of their business activity.

### **Benefits**

- Access to services have better focus and it reduces the likelihood of poor access for Deaf people which often leads to wastage of resources.
- Deaf people are more involved in any decision-making processes with knock-on benefits such as improvements in access to services for Deaf people.
- In turn, Deaf people are empowered by improved access to services, freeing them to contribute more to the local community.

## Ensure access for Deaf people to information and services

### Rationale

Deaf people face many barriers when trying to access information or services, either through lack of awareness or language barriers. Many Deaf people are often unable to access written information. Information linked to their health in England under NHS England is covered by the Accessible Information Standard – known officially as SCCI1605. Compliance with information standards of this type is a mandatory requirement for NHS Trusts and GP practices. This is set out in section 250 of the Health and Social Care Act. Information from other public services is covered by the Public Sector Equality Duty (Chapter 14, Part 11, Chapter 1, Section 149: Equality Act 2010). This also applies to the Justice system with regard to the Code of Practice for Victims of Crime (2015) and the Witness Charter (2013). Deaf people are classified as vulnerable and eligible for 'special measures'.

### The objective

The organisation recognises and values all its customers, including those who use BSL. It aims for its Deaf customers to have the same quality of provision, information, standards and right to be informed on a par with others in the wider community. Services should ensure that all contracts involving provision of information or services have clauses stipulating equality of access including access through BSL.

### Benefits

- Services are accessible to a wider section of the local community, including those lacking good English.
- Customer care is improved with stress on staff and customers reduced.
- Deaf people can access services independently.
- Effective communication between the service and Deaf BSL users is maximised.
- Services become compliant with the Equality Act 2010 and SCCI1605.

## Support Deaf children and families

### Rationale

Deaf children and their families require good communication from when the diagnosis of deafness is made and throughout their formative years. The BDA believes that the majority of Deaf children will realise their potential through a bilingual / bicultural approach to learning using both BSL and English. 40% of Deaf children and young people have additional needs requiring intensive communication support. (See Part 3 of the Children and Families Act 2014). Organisations that provide information or services need to be mindful that they should not exclude children who are difficult to reach. In particular, services that have a responsibility for safeguarding issues\* must meet legal requirements.

### The objective

Services that work with children and young people recognise the importance of Deaf children and young people being able to access information and support on a par with their hearing peers. Some services will be able to provide a bilingual / bicultural approach enabling full access for all children and young people meeting the aims of the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) reforms.

### Benefits

- Deaf children and young people have choices in how they can communicate and contribute to their local communities.
- The family life of deaf children is enhanced by the improved communication between the child and their parents/carers and siblings.
- More Deaf children and young people will achieve academically on a par with their hearing peers leading to more Deaf young people progressing to further and higher education and accessing job opportunities.
- Services such as police, health and social services will be able to deal with safeguarding issues by offering access for deaf children who need support or want to report issues.

\* The BDA is a member of the NSPCC working group on Safeguarding for deaf children

## **Ensure staff working with Deaf people can communicate effectively using British Sign Language**

### **Rationale**

All staff working in public services or local authorities that interact with the public should be able to communicate with all sections of the local community including Deaf people.

### **The objective**

Staff providing frontline services can feel confident in being able to communicate with Deaf people and respond appropriately. Members of staff at all customer service points will have basic BSL skills and know how to call upon other staff with higher level skills or BSL/English interpreters using remote access such as Skype, FaceTime or VRS where available. Specialist workers with Deaf people should aim to for their own skills to be extensive enough to enable them to deliver a high level service to a wide range of Deaf people without needing BSL/English interpreters in non-complex situations.

### **Benefits**

- There is good customer care.
- There is a reduced need for BSL/English interpreters in specialist services for Deaf people.
- Quality staff development for Deaf and hearing staff members contributes to good customer care.



## **Promote learning and high quality teaching of British Sign Language**

### **Rationale**

There is a need for more BSL courses in order that more people have the opportunity to learn BSL.

### **The objective**

The organisation recognises that it is essential to support the local infrastructure of teaching and assessment of BSL. It tackles this in conjunction with local economic development agencies and funding bodies. This is to ensure that anyone who wants to learn BSL, whether they are parents/guardians of deaf children, young people, local authority or public service employees, can do so. Everyone learning BSL should receive excellent quality teaching in BSL.

### **Benefits**

- There are more BSL courses on offer leading to a range of opportunities for people wishing to learn BSL.
- More people using BSL leads to greater opportunities for Deaf people to be integrated within the wider community and have improved access to public services.
- Family members/guardians/carers of Deaf children and young people have an opportunity to learn BSL which will improve bonding and communication with their own deaf children and young people.

# What is BSL?

**British Sign Language (BSL) is the first or preferred language of many Deaf people in the UK. It is a language of space and movement using the hands, body, face and head.**

BSL is the sign language of the Deaf community in the UK (in Northern Ireland, Irish Sign Language (ISL) is also used). BSL is a real, full and living language that is part of a rich cultural heritage. It is one of the UK's indigenous languages; others include English, Welsh, Scottish Gaelic, Irish Gaelic and Cornish. Many hearing people also use BSL; it has many users on a par with other indigenous languages such as Welsh or Gaelic.

It is a language that has evolved in the UK's Deaf community over hundreds of years. There is considerable research evidence that shows Deaf children who are exposed to BSL early can develop linguistically at the same rate and to the same linguistic levels as hearing children with spoken language. This kind of early access to language ensures the ability for learning throughout life, leading to improved life opportunities.

BSL is not just a language; it is also a gateway to learning, a path towards a sense of Deaf identity, and the means whereby Deaf people survive and flourish in a hearing world.

# The British Deaf Association – BDA

The BDA stands for **Deaf Equality, Access and Freedom of choice**

## Vision

Our vision is Deaf people fully participating and contributing as equal and valued citizens in wider society.

## Mission

Our Mission is to ensure a world in which the language, culture, community, diversity and heritage of Deaf people in the UK is respected and fully protected, ensuring that Deaf people can participate and contribute as equal and valued citizens in the wider society. This will be achieved through:

- Improving the quality of life by empowering Deaf individuals and groups;
- Enhancing freedom, equality and diversity;
- Protecting and promoting BSL.

## Values

The BDA is a Deaf people's organisation representing a diverse, vibrant and ever-changing community of Deaf people. Our activities, promotions, and partnerships with other organisations aim to empower our community towards full participation and contribution as equal and valued citizens in the wider society. We also aim to act as guardians of BSL.

- 1. Protecting our Deaf culture and Identity** – we value Deaf peoples' sense of Deaf culture and identity derived from belonging to a cultural and linguistic group, sharing similar beliefs and experiences with a sense of belonging.
- 2. Asserting our linguistic rights** – we value the use of BSL as a human right. As such, BSL must be preserved, protected and promoted because we also value the right of Deaf people to use their first or preferred language.
- 3. Fostering our community** – we value Deaf people with diverse perspectives, experiences and abilities. We are committed to equality and the elimination of all forms of discrimination with a special focus on those affecting Deaf people and their language.
- 4. Achieving equality in legal, civil and human rights** – we value universal human rights such as the right to receive education and access to information in sign language, and freedom from political restrictions on our opportunities to become full citizens.
- 5. Developing our alliance** – we value those who support us and are our allies because they share our vision and mission, and support our BSL community.

# About BDA

Founded in 1890, the British Deaf Association (BDA) is a national Deaf-led organisation that works directly with Deaf people that use British Sign Language (BSL). Our work concentrates on campaigning for equal rights on a national level and working at a local level empowering Deaf people to achieve access to their local public services. This is carried out through projects delivering individual and community advocacy. We also work to ensure BSL is included by public bodies by delivering a public commitment through signing the BSL Charter.

Our Board of Trustees are all Deaf (we use the capitalised 'D' to denote the fact that we have a separate language and culture and 80% of our staff are Deaf themselves).

Many Deaf people who use BSL lack access to education, health services, employment and other public services. Our work is designed to empower Deaf people and to improve access to general information and public services. We seek to achieve this by working with Deaf people at the local level through setting up forums to lobby public bodies and supporting Deaf people individually.

This is in line with the overall BDA objectives, which are: **D**eaf **E**quality, **A**ccess and **F**reedom of choice

For a list of signatories, FAQs, and other information, including what the BDA can do for your organisation, please look at our website: **[www.bda.org.uk](http://www.bda.org.uk)**

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