



BEST-PRACTICE GUIDE

working with BSL video interpreters in a council setting

This guide is to help council staff provide an effective, respectful and accessible service to British Sign Language (BSL) users when using video interpreting / Video Remote Interpreting (VRI). The interpreter is there to enable communication between the council and the BSL user. Speak and behave as though you are communicating directly with the resident—not with the interpreter. The British Sign Language Act 2022 formally recognised BSL as a language of England, Scotland and Wales and provides for guidance on best practice when communicating with BSL users.





When arranging the video interpreter

Complete the booking form in full including:

- The date and time
- Expected duration
- General subject of the appointment
- Whether it is a first appointment or follow-up
- Any specialist terminology likely to arise
- Whether multiple council staff will attend

Where possible, allow additional time because communication through an interpreter can take longer than an ordinary conversation.



Prepare the room and technology

Video interpreting is only effective if the BSL user can clearly see the interpreter and the people they are communicating with.

Before the appointment check:

- Camera working
- Microphone working
- Speakers/headset working
- Interpreter platform accessible
- Device positioned securely
- Adequate lighting
- Minimal background noise
- No strong light behind the speaker
- Interpreter's image is large enough to see clearly
- BSL user can see the staff member speaking
- Documents can be shared or displayed if required.

Avoid:

- Sitting directly in front of a bright window
- Dim rooms
- Flickering or coloured lighting
- Strong shadows across the face
- Cluttered backgrounds.

The interpreter needs to be able to see the person's face, hands and upper body clearly.



Start the meeting properly

Ensure you spend some time briefing the interpreter and discussing the purpose of the meeting. This time will allow the interpreter to ask any important questions as well.

Start by establishing that the communication method works and introducing yourself.

For Example:

“Hello. My name is Sarah and I'm from the Housing Team. We have a BSL interpreter joining us by video today. Can you see and understand each other clearly?”

CHECK:

- Can the resident see the interpreter?
- Can they see you?
- Can everyone hear?
- Is the video quality adequate?
- Does the resident need the camera/device repositioned?

If there is a problem, stop and fix it rather than carrying on. The interpreter can help with this if needed.

Speak directly to the BSL user

This is probably the most important rule.

Say: “What would you like us to help you with today?”

Not: “Can you ask them what they need?”

Even though the interpreter is interpreting, the conversation is between you and the BSL user. Maintain appropriate eye contact with the resident rather than staring at the interpreter's screen throughout.



Speak normally but make it interpreter-friendly

You generally don't need to:

- Shout
- Exaggerate your mouth movements
- Speak unusually slowly
- Use an artificially loud voice
- Simplify everything unnecessarily

You should always:

- Speak clearly
- Use normal sentences



Avoid long, complicated speeches such as:

“In relation to the correspondence that you previously received regarding the review of your housing circumstances and the subsequent assessment undertaken by our allocations team...”

Instead:

“I'd like to explain what happened with your housing application.”

Then explain it in manageable sections.

Don't talk over the interpreter

One person speaks at a time

Allow the interpreter to finish interpreting before continuing. This is particularly important when several council employees are present.



POOR PRACTICE

Staff member 1 speaks →
Staff member 2 interrupts →
Interpreter tries to interpret both →
Resident becomes confused.



BETTER PRACTICE

Staff member 1 speaks →
Interpreter interprets →
Staff member 1 finishes →
Staff member 2 speaks.

At the beginning of a group meeting, explain: "We'll ask everyone to speak one at a time so the interpreter can interpret everything accurately."





Use names

When several people are involved, identify who is speaking.

For example:

“I'm Mark, the Housing Officer.”

Then:

“Sarah, could you explain what happens next?”

This helps the BSL user understand who is speaking and reduces confusion when the interpreter is working remotely.

Be careful with documents

Never assume that handing someone a document makes the information accessible.

If you're discussing:

- A council decision
- Tenancy information
- A benefits calculation
- A legal notice
- A complaint outcome
- A policy
- A form
- A financial figure

Explain the important information verbally through the interpreter.

Where useful, share the document on screen so the resident can see what you are discussing. Say: “I'm going to show you the letter on screen. The paragraph we're discussing is halfway down the first page.” Then allow time for the resident to look at it.





Check understanding don't just ask “Do you understand?”

A person may say yes because they believe they have understood the general conversation, even if they have missed an important detail.

Instead of: “**Do you understand?**” try: “**Could you tell me what you understand the next step to be?**” or: “**Just so I know I've explained this clearly, what will you do when you leave today?**”

Where possible, allow additional time because communication through an interpreter can take longer than an ordinary conversation.

This is particularly important for:

- Deadlines
- Appointments
- Financial decisions
- Safeguarding
- Legal rights
- Housing decisions
- Benefits
- Consent

Don't ask the interpreter to give advice

The interpreter's role is to interpret, not to:

- Advise the resident
- Make decisions
- Explain council policy independently
- Act as a support worker
- Mediate disagreements
- Summarise what the council has said
- Answer questions on the council's behalf

If the resident asks the interpreter something directly, the interpreter should interpret the question to you. You answer the question.

Confidentiality

Treat the video interpreting session as confidential.

Staff should:

- Use an approved council device/platform
- Follow council information-security requirements
- Ensure members of the public cannot overhear the conversation
- Avoid having unnecessary people in the room
- Follow the council's recording and data-retention policies.

Do not:

- Allow unauthorised people to watch the session
- Take screenshots
- Photograph the interpreter or resident
- Record the video call unless there is a specific, authorised reason
- Use personal devices or consumer video apps unless authorised by the council





Be aware of Deaf culture

Don't assume every Deaf person uses BSL

BSL is a language, not simply a signed version of English.

1- A BSL user may have different preferences regarding:

- Communication
- Written English
- How information is presented
- Eye contact
- Turn-taking
- Use of technology
- Terminology

2- Don't assume that because someone is Deaf they will automatically prefer:

- Email
- Written English
- Subtitles
- Lipreading
- Telephone communication

3- Some Deaf or hard-of-hearing people:

- Use BSL
- Use English
- Lipread
- Use speech-to-text
- Use hearing technology
- Use a combination of communication methods
- Have different communication preferences.

Ask what communication method works best for them and don't make assumptions. The government's BSL work emphasises making public information and services accessible to BSL users rather than treating accessibility as simply a matter of translating existing communications.

Video-specific problems

If the image freezes, stop speaking and say: “The video seems to have frozen. Let's pause for a moment.”

Don't continue talking while the interpreter cannot see you. If the interpreter cannot see the resident, reposition the camera. If the resident cannot see the interpreter, increase the interpreter window size or change the screen/device position.

If there is poor connection try:

- Checking Wi-Fi/network
- Closing unnecessary applications
- Moving closer to the access point
- Switching to an approved alternative connection
- Reconnecting the call

If the problem cannot be resolved, call Language Empire immediately on 0330 20 20 270 and they will look at an alternative solution for you.



What staff should never say

Avoid comments such as:

- “Can't you just read this?”
- “We'll just write it down.”
- “It's only a quick question.”
- “Can your family member interpret?”
- “The interpreter is taking too long.”
- “You speak very well, so do we really need an interpreter?”
- “You'll have to use the phone.”
- “Can you lipread me?”

These can undermine the person's independence and create barriers to accessing council services.



Family members and children

A family member or friend should not be used as an interpreter.

This is particularly inappropriate where the discussion involves:

- Safeguarding
- Health or social care
- Finances
- Housing
- Domestic abuse
- Complaints
- Legal matters
- Confidential personal information

Children should not be expected to interpret for adults. Use an appropriately qualified professional interpreter or appropriate commissioned interpreting service.

After the appointment

Before ending the call, summarise:

- What has been decided?
- What will the council do?
- What does the resident need to do?
- By when?
- Who is their contact?
- Then ask the resident to confirm their understanding

For example: “To summarise: I'll send you the housing form today. You need to return it by Friday 28 August. I'll contact you again after we've received it. Is that clear, and is there anything else you need from us?”

Provide accessible written information afterwards where appropriate.

Quick checklist for council staff

