



Top Tips for Engaging with Deaf People to Achieve Health Equity

This document aims to help people in the health and care sector engage more effectively with Deaf people.

The context – Why engaging with Deaf people is important

- Deaf people face significant health disparities, including higher rates of all-cause and cardiovascular mortality with higher rates of obesity, heart disease, diabetes, and late-stage cancer diagnoses. A [study](#) assessing the current health of the Deaf community in the UK compared with the general population found high rates of obesity in the Deaf sample, especially in those over 65 years and 48% were in a high risk for serious illness. High blood pressure readings were obtained in 37% of Deaf people compared to 21% in the general population.
- Non-compliance with the legally mandated NHS [Accessible Information Standard](#) (AIS) is widespread and communication barriers contribute to poorer clinical outcomes and reduced patient satisfaction. We believe that better engagement and finding out what Deaf people experience as barriers to services will help make services more accessible and reduce health inequity. We hope you find the following tips helpful.

Definitions

- **British Sign Language (BSL)** BSL is an official language recognised under BSL Act 2022. It is a visual language that uses hand shapes, facial expressions, lip patterns and body movements to communicate. BSL has its own grammar and syntax as a language. It is not a signed version of English.
- **The Deaf Community** with a capital 'D' refers to people who identify culturally and linguistically with the Deaf community using the social model rather than a medical model of disability. Deaf people use sign language to communicate, known as BSL in the UK. This session will focus on Sign Language users, although many of the tips we share have wider application for Deaf people in general.



The Tips

1. First Steps

- To ensure your service, innovation, or research is accessible you may want to hold an engagement activity with Deaf people to learn how best to meet their needs. You can obtain advice on how to find Deaf people by linking with voluntary sector organisations who support them (see useful resources).

2. It is never too early to think about communication needs

- If you are planning an event or appointment, creating or adapting a service then involve some Deaf people on the planning team. Ask a Deaf person what they want - not all Deaf people have the same communication needs. Do you need speech to text, hands on deafblind interpretation or support from a communication professional?
- BSL interpreters will translate between spoken English and BSL. BSL/English interpreters are used by deaf people who use BSL as their first or preferred language, and by hearing people who are unable to communicate in BSL.
- It is important to remember that the interpreter is there to communicate for both parties and is not only booked “for the deaf person”. The hearing person is just as reliant on the interpreter being present. This is why we use the term ‘BSL/English interpreter’.
- Deaf people are not a homogenous group and have different needs. There are a range of different communication professionals to meet these different needs. More information on different communication professionals is contained in the Useful Resources Section in Appendix A.

3. Working with BSL Interpreters – Plan early and budget

- BSL interpreters are in great demand. There is about 1 interpreter to 60 BSL users so book a date around interpreter availability, rather than assume one will be available when you need them. Set a realistic budget. For each hour, you will need at least one interpreter. For a small group you will need two interpreters. Think about delays, the interpreter might only be booked for a short window of time. BSL interpreters must be NRCPD registered ([National Registers of Communication Professionals working with Deaf people](#)).

4. Avoid exclusion by omission

- Highlight that you have booked a BSL interpreter in your promotional material. Often accessibility needs are asked about very late in the booking process. Knowing a BSL interpreter is booked reduces Deaf people's anxiety. Most Deaf people don't want a family member interpreting for them. We need to empower Deaf people and their right to confidentiality e.g. if they wish to attend an event or appointment without telling their family.

5. Create a process/procedure for booking communication support

- Avoid the person who books interpreters being on holiday/off sick etc. scenario. Everyone should either know or have sight of the process. Please don't have a telephone number as the only contact option. Emails are useful but only if checked daily.

6. Face to face engagement is best

- Think about where it is best to meet, timing, length of the session and venue accessibility. Is the venue easy to find without asking anyone? Walk through the room before the event. Where are people going to sit in relation to the interpreter? Is it too bright? Too dark? Have you promoted the event in the Deaf networks?

7. If it needs to be online then...

- Use a platform where you can pin the BSL interpreter. Don't have too many people attending and enable people to visually raise their hand rather than using the hand emoji. This prevents the interpreters screen from moving. For medical appointments use a secure Video system your organisation subscribes to. You need to consider the broadband width as it can make it difficult to see the interpreter or Deaf person signing if it keeps freezing. Be mindful that if you share a screen it will make the interpreter smaller and you need to pin/spotlight the interpreter.

8. Providing Feedback – You said we did

- Think about how you will provide feedback about any changes as a result of engaging with Deaf people. Ensure you complete the loop and let people know of any changes or improvements made as a result of engaging with Deaf people.

9. Cultural differences

- Members of the Deaf community have varying literacy, especially health literacy. Deaf people may know the BSL sign but not the English 'word'. Having a conversation via pen and paper doesn't work for big, complex conversations. Lip reading skills are variable. Providing the Deaf person with a copy of the presentation without communication support doesn't work and is very isolating. They can't engage in the debate or may miss a question and answer section. Remember Deaf people cannot overhear conversations so miss out on incidental learning. Always ask people what their specific communication needs are.
- Be patient and listen to the story. Deaf people often communicate via stories and these stories are rich!
- Visual guides can help keep Deaf people focused on the topic, e.g. A4 pieces of paper with the timescales on. Be aware that some English words or phrases don't translate very well. For example, use the term NHS rather than healthcare.
- **BSL is a very expressive language.** Communication can come across as blunt, even rude compared to a hearing person but this is normal language expression for a Deaf person. Deaf people point and are loud.

10. Awareness of the Accessible Information Standard

- Familiarise yourself with [The Accessible Information Standard](#) which sets out how providers and commissioners of NHS and publicly funded adult social care services should meet their legal responsibility to ensure disabled people and people with impairments or sensory loss can access and understand information about NHS and adult social care services, and receive the communication support they need to use those services.
- You may be apprehensive about working with Deaf People and or Interpreters if you haven't done it before. Don't let this stop you from doing your best to be inclusive. You may get it wrong at first, but signalling your intention to be as inclusive as possible will be welcomed and seeking feedback on whether you have achieved this is important and will help you learn for the future.

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A companion document to this is available [here](#) and other resources to support patient and public involvement is available via our [Resources Hub](#).

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