

Signing the right path

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM SIGNALISE SURVEY INTO INTERPRETING PROVISION FOR ACCESS TO HEALTH SERVICES ON MERSEYSIDE

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Signalise

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Summary of findings from Signalise* survey into interpreting provision for access to health services on Merseyside

*Signalise Co-op Limited is the new name for SignCo.io.

Summary

Signalise undertook research to understand issues with interpreting provision for Deaf BSL user's access to health services on Merseyside. The research was undertaken carried out under the organisation's previous name, SignCo.io. Surveys were completed by interpreters, members of the Deaf community and health professionals with experience of the current system.

The survey findings reveal a number of serious problems with interpreting provision. A number of these were linked specifically to spoken language agencies. BSL specialist agencies, although not free from criticism, were widely reported to provide a better quality of service to the Deaf community and to better understand the needs of interpreters.

Prominent issues that were highlighted include:

- Lack of availability and poor quality
- Lack of understanding about Deaf people's communication needs
- Lack of choice
- Lack of local knowledge
- Failure to meet interpreting industry terms and conditions
- Difficulties obtaining payment for work done

Respondents were asked to describe a perfect interpreting service.

Key characteristics that emerged include:

- Choice and control for Deaf people and interpreters
- Education and professional development
- Understanding the Deaf community and their needs

- Respect for interpreters' terms and conditions
- User-led
- Easy to use
- Fair and transparent

There was wide support for the idea of an agency that the Deaf community, interpreters and health professionals could own, run and work for.

Background

Signalise is a new multi-stakeholder co-operative run by its members to provide interpreting to services who need to book interpreters. Signalise will be a platform co-op allowing all users to request, book and confirm interpreting via the platform in a way that is innovative and benefits all users. We aim to have a membership of Deaf people, BSL/English interpreters and other interested parties such as healthcare providers and commissioners who need to purchase services.

Signalise will start in Merseyside for health bookings. It is clear that there are many problems with current contracts in this area. According to the 2009/10 IPSOS MORI GP Survey there were 3,842 Deaf sign language users in Merseyside.¹ Within this region there are only around 50 British Sign Language(BSL)/English Interpreters.²

3,842 Deaf sign language users in Merseyside...

...only around 50 British Sign Language (BSL)/English Interpreters

Deaf people deserve better access to healthcare and the consequences of poor or lacking communication support can be serious. It is estimated to cost the NHS £30 million per year in the poor diagnosis and ineffective treatment of Deaf people.³

The current system for interpreting provision within health services doesn't work and leaves Deaf people without choice or control. This was not always the case. Ten years ago, Deaf people were benefiting from vast improvements in access thanks to the recognition of BSL as a language and the introduction of the Equality Act. In those days, Deaf Centres often held contracts with local authorities, hospitals and GPs and employed large teams of interpreters. Mentoring and development support were provided for interpreters which included input from Deaf people.

This changed in the late 2000's through the introduction of the NHS procurement hub and a centralised list of approved providers. Under this system, spoken language agencies can bid for large contracts for the delivery of interpreting provision in any language, including

¹ <https://www.nwppn.nhs.uk/index.php/resources/97-mental-health-deafness>

² Calculated by Merseyside interpreters involved in Signalise

³ <https://www.signhealth.org.uk/health-information/sick-of-it-report/sick-of-it-in-english/>

BSL. Local Merseyside Interpreters campaigned against the awarding of contracts to agencies who demonstrated a lack of knowledge and respect of the Deaf community and interpreting.

By co-creating an innovative digital platform with all three user groups: Deaf people, interpreters and health staff, Signalise aims to revolutionise the way that access is provided and to change contract culture. For the first time, we will be co-designing a system that works. With everyone, for everyone. Not for shareholders or global companies, but one that puts local people in charge, and keeps profits locally.

Signalise Survey

Signalise undertook research into experiences with both spoken language agencies and specialist BSL agencies providing interpreting in healthcare settings on Merseyside. The aim was to find out what the issues are with current service provision and to explore ideas for what an interpreting service would look like that meets the needs of Deaf people, interpreters and healthcare providers.

Surveys were developed to find out the view of these three groups. The Deaf people's survey was fully translated into BSL with video clips embedded in the type form survey for every sentence, description and questions apart from yes/no answers. The survey was sent out by email to the Signalise contact list and to NHS Clinical Commissioning Groups in Merseyside to disseminate. The survey was publicised through 2 workshops at the Visual Language Professionals (VLP) conference in September 2019, each attended by around

12 Deaf people responded

2/3 live in Merseyside.

100% use BSL/English interpreters.

40-50 interpreters, also through interpreter consultation events held in November 2019 (attended by 25 people) and January 2020 (attended by 20). A consultation event was also held for Deaf people.

There was a total of 50 survey respondents. Of the 33 interpreters who responded, 26 work in Merseyside including 23 qualified (RSLI) and three trainee (TSLI) interpreters. 34% of the RSLIs have been interpreting for more than 15 years, and 21% for 10-15 years. 88% of respondents had experience of health bookings. Half had experience of local contracts and just under a third (30%) had experience of national contracts. 23 take health bookings.

Of the 12 Deaf people who responded, two thirds live in Merseyside. 100% use BSL/English interpreters.

Of the five health professionals who responded, only two work within relevant services on Merseyside. This represents a limitation of the study. The anecdotal experiences given provide a useful starting point for exploring what healthcare professionals want from interpreting services. The lack of response to the survey call out is itself reflective of how far under the radar the question of Deaf people's access to health services remains.

Findings

Experiences with the current system.

The survey findings reveal a number of serious problems with the current system of interpreter provision for access to healthcare in Merseyside.

- **Lack of availability and poor quality.** More than a third of Deaf respondents (37%) reported not being able to get an interpreter when they need one and one quarter reported never being satisfied with the interpreting they receive from health services. The issue of not being able to book interpreters at short notice was highlighted as a problem that poses a considerable difficulty in emergency situations and acts as a significant barrier to accessing healthcare.

“In patients are not getting interpreters as [spoken language agency] are telling the ward it will take them 2 weeks to get an interpreter. So ward staff give up and don’t expect anyone and don’t try to chase it up as they don’t want patients in the ward that long and they just manage with friends and family.”

(interpreter)

“The problem with maternity is that you need interpreters at short notice when a patient goes into labour”

(health professional)

Anecdotal evidence from Deaf respondents was mixed.

“My GP is generally very good at ensuring an interpreter is provided for appointments, however [service] recently cancelled my therapy due to having no access to BSL interpreters via their service :-/”

(Deaf person)

This difficulty is exacerbated by a lack of awareness within health services.

“It’s hard to know how to book one and which company our trust uses... We have no direct number etc for a face to face interpreter”

(health professional)

- **Lack of understanding about Deaf people's communication needs.** Three quarters of Deaf respondents said they are not confident that agencies understand their needs.

"Don't understand deaf think anyone will do" (Deaf person)

"generally no trouble with interpreters, just the agencies providing them or services I am trying to access" (Deaf person)

Interpreters raised numerous problems concerning a lack of understanding within spoken language agencies of BSL interpreting and interpreters' needs.

"No knowledge of sign language" (interpreter)

"Don't understand the needs of the community. Don't understand the needs of us as interpreters... Treat us unprofessional" (interpreter)

"They have very limited awareness of... the field of BSL Interpreting generally" (interpreter)

"Difficult, lack of understanding for clients needs." (interpreter)

Failure by spoken language agencies to understand and respect interpreting qualification levels was raised as a serious concern.

"Lack of knowledge/care re what TSLI can/can't/shouldn't do". (interpreter)

"The bigger ones ... often have no clue about our qualifications / experience". (interpreter)

“They don’t have a clue what we do nor what we need nor what level of competence is required for specific bookings. They will send anyone who can flap their hands to bookings where only a RSLI should go” **(interpreter)**

“want to fill booking with anyone” **(interpreter)**

“Know that they send unqualified, unregistered individuals to jobs.”
(interpreter)

“Send / book the wrong communication professional for the job.”
(interpreter)

Failure to provide or understand the importance of adequate advance information was mentioned a number of times. The need to inform both the Deaf client and the interpreter who they will be working with was highlighted in particular. When asked whether they get to find out the name of the interpreters booked in advance, half of Deaf respondents replied sometimes, one third reported not being told and only one Deaf person responded positively.

“Some of the questions didn’t give an answer I would use e.g. name of interpreter” **(Deaf person)**

“Interpreter needs a women for women appointments and always don’t know who will arrive” **(Deaf person)**

“Improving but still don’t understand about prep continuity of bookings”
(interpreter)

“limited information about the booking” **(interpreter)**

“there have been a few issues regarding - finding out who the client is which is vital for us as it may be a conflict of interest. We also do not ascertain the nature of the assignment, in the past I was sent to a GP when I got there it turns out it was for counselling. Also the Deaf person it left

wondering if an interpreter has been booked and If so - who is it.”

(interpreter)

- **Lack of choice.** Half of Deaf respondents reported they have no choice of interpreter. Nearly three quarters (73%) of interpreters said they need more choice and control over how they work.

“Would be nice if I could see the terp (name, badge, photo) before going to an appointment and have the ability to refuse an interpreter without having to make lots of calls to find out who and then ask change.”

(Deaf person)

- **Lack of local knowledge.** Both Deaf respondents and interpreters referred to the importance of local information. In their reported experience this can be lacking from spoken language agencies.

“More often than not the interpreter is competent but sometimes difficult to understand because they come from outside district”

(Deaf person)

“No local knowledge is available meaning not only are they unaware of the geographical issues but more importantly they have no knowledge of issues relating to deaf people, how important those issues are and do not prioritise booking requests, assigning interpreters or applying common sense to bookings”

(interpreter)

- **Failure to meet interpreting industry terms and conditions.** Spoken language agencies were widely cited by respondents as failing to meet interpreting industry terms and conditions.

“Those I have seen advertising bookings in Merseyside do not appear to offer fees and terms that match industry standards”

(interpreter)

"Awful, they don't give you appropriate T&C's" (interpreter)

"Don't adhere to terms and conditions" (interpreter)

One exception to this was a positive account of such agencies being more likely to agree to NUBSLI (National Union of British Sign Language Interpreters) terms and conditions.

"Ironically, the spoken language agencies that I have dealt with have been more honouring of the NUBSLI terms and conditions. However, this is probably just so they can be successful in tenders that are requiring a 'one stop shop' interpreting contracts for large sectors (e.g. health, DWP) and so are happy to provide this for BSL interpreters as a 'loss leader'"

(interpreter)

- **Difficulties obtaining payment for work done.** This was raised as an issue for both specialist BSL as well as spoken language agencies.

"One agency you have to constantly chase for payment having to wait up to 8 months for payment, while others a fairly prompt." (interpreter)

"They very rarely pay on time, but will do when I give them a reminder, I consistently get paid a week or so late." (interpreter)

"often I don't get paid on time if at all, so you have to chase payment" (interpreter)

"pay very late" (interpreter)

"Poor payment terms... Always trying to barter to lower fees or standards." (interpreter)

Comparison between experiences of specialist BSL and generic spoken language agencies

Interpreters were asked about their experiences of spoken language agencies. Half of those who answered the question reported negative experiences while another six had never worked for one, some of these on principle. Only three interpreters reported positive experiences.

Strong feelings were expressed about the dangers of failings by spoken language agencies.

“The community are left without a service because sometimes they don’t book an interpreter like the NHS staff request, they are told an interpreter has been booked when in fact they haven’t and the Deaf person is let down. These types of agencies use unqualified interpreters, which is a huge risk to the Deaf community”

(interpreter)

“They show a disregard for the interpreting and deaf communities so on principal I have never accepted a booking from a spoken language agency”

(interpreter)

By contrast, BSL specialist agencies were widely reported both to provide a better quality of service to the Deaf community and to better understand the needs of interpreters. More than half of interpreters who responded to the survey reported positive experiences working with BSL specialist agencies. Four had varied experiences and six gave negative feedback.

“In my experience BSL specialist agencies are thorough when taking bookings and assigning the correct BSL professional to the event due to their in-depth knowledge of the deaf community and it’s requirements”

(interpreter)

“Good, they understand the needs of the Deaf community and the interpreter”
(interpreter)

“I have been working for specialist agencies for 10 years. Rates are usually lower but they work harder at keeping Deaf customers informed of the booking / interpreter... They always pay on time and not long delays like other agencies”
(interpreter)

“They are predominately who I have worked for over the years. They provide specialist bespoke service. That takes into consideration Deaf persons preference and also offers a channel of communication that being text message or email”
(interpreter)

“They usually understand the needs of the deaf and interpreting communities. Their profit is usually used to support deaf services and they usually pay industry standard fees and pay on time although this is not always the case.”
(interpreter)

“Working with specialist deaf agencies on the whole is a better experience than working with SLA. Specialist agencies understand and respect our terms and conditions which sustain the profession, understand our needs as professional interpreters and understand the needs of the community we serve.”
(interpreter)

One interpreter reported a decline in standards among BSL specialist agencies.

“It was good, but now some of them are not paying the going rate and have poor terms and conditions”
(interpreter)

A perfect interpreting service

Survey respondents were asked to describe a perfect interpreting service.

Both Deaf people and interpreters highlighted the importance of:

■ Choice and control for Deaf people and interpreters

“Choice for deaf community over who they book and for interpreters over who and where they work” (interpreter)

“choice for Deaf service users” (interpreter)

“They should provide Deaf people with the right to choose from their list of preferred interpreters (if this is their wish) and should do their best to accommodate this” (interpreter)

“It would be a service where deaf people had the right to choose their support that best meets their needs” (interpreter)

“Allows deaf people to request their preferred interpreter” (interpreter)

“Deaf people select a time they need an interpreter. Then get offered a list of what level are available and approx costs.” (interpreter)

■ Education and professional development

“One that strives to educate organisations on how to use interpreters efficiently and supports deaf people in accessing services” (Deaf person)

“Development, training and mentoring – “profits were invested back into the deaf and interpreting communities to maintain and raise standards” (interpreter)

“We need to draw on the experience of seasoned interpreters for support and advice for guidance shadowing and buddying up would be an invaluable service” (interpreter)

“Offer support and training” (interpreter)

“Shadowing opportunities” (interpreter)

“CPD training locally” (interpreter)

“Supporting trainees and newly qualified interpreters to undertake work that is appropriate for them whilst developing their skills” (interpreter)

“training and CPD opportunities... support network” (interpreter)

“where profits were invested back into the deaf and interpreting communities to maintain and raise standards” (interpreter)

“Supported development of interpreters” (interpreter)

The top two characteristics of a perfect service described by interpreters were:

- **Understanding the Deaf community and their needs**

“Have a well rounded understanding of the deaf community and needs of deaf people and access requirements.” (interpreter)

“fully understood interpreting issues” (interpreter)

“An agency that has understanding of what Deaf people require for communication. An agency that listens to the community and meets the needs of every individual. An agency that wants to make sure that the community receives the correct service” (interpreter)

“One that would know the deaf people they are serving and genuinely care they are getting a high standard”
(interpreter)

“Deaf people being a big part and influence of how it is ran,... and trusting the agency”
(interpreter)

“Knowledge of the deaf community is paramount, understanding it’s needs and why they are important are key... that understands what is needed for particular assignments such as prep, additional travel time, handover etc”
(interpreter)

“who are cognisant of customer preferences, skill set and experience. One that uses its profits to benefit the community and understands the needs of deaf people”
(interpreter)

“Have a well rounded understanding of the deaf community and needs of deaf people and access requirements”
(interpreter)

“Knows the community well. Knows the linguistic needs of individuals and which interpreters are capable of undertaking challenging assignments”
(interpreter)

■ **Respect for interpreters’ terms and conditions**

“To have good terms and conditions with good rates of pay to reflect the assignment”
(interpreter)

“They would have to follow NUBSLI fee guidelines, paying on time”
(interpreter)

“where the NUBSLI guidelines and terms and conditions were respected on honoured”
(interpreter)

“paid in a timely manner”
(interpreter)

“Pay on time for the fee I ask for” (interpreter)

“One that matched industry standards for T+C’s and fees” (interpreter)

“One that paid on time and understood the vulnerability of freelance interpreters’ financial position” (interpreter)

“interpreters were paid in a timely manner and at the industry standard rate” (interpreter)

“Does not haggle with interpreters fees. Respects T&Cs” (interpreter)

Other aspects of a perfect interpreting service commonly mentioned by respondents include:

- **Being user-led. The importance of involvement of the Deaf community and listening to interpreters was raised by a number of respondents.**

“A service where the deaf community and interpreters have a say what’s important to them” (interpreter)

“It’s led by both sides who know the most about the Deaf community and Interpreting for that community” (interpreter)

“One that is run by and for our community” (interpreter)

“deaf/interpreter led” (interpreter)

“A service where the deaf community and interpreters have a say what’s important to them” (interpreter)

“The Deaf person is ultimately the centre of it all... For It to be possibly Deaf led organisation” (interpreter)

"Listened to interpreters views as the provider of the service being sold!"
(interpreter)

- **easy to use.** The need for easy to use systems was raised by both interpreters and health professionals.

"An easy system to access the jobs and invoice"
(interpreter)

"easy ways to upload time sheets"
(interpreter)

"An organisation with an infrastructure that can facilitate requests and bookings"
(interpreter)

"someone to contact if needed 24 hours. Informative to both the interpreter and the Deaf person"
(interpreter)

"Simple invoicing and payment procedures. No paper time sheets! but potentially a digital option"
(interpreter)

"Full and easy access to book an interpreter text/FaceTime/email whichever method"
(interpreter)

Health professionals described a perfect system as one that is professional to deal with, has good communication, provides a choice of interpreters at a reasonable charge and has knowledge of local information. A number of interpreters mentioned the need to match interpreters to the job.

"The right person for the right job"
(interpreter)

"Be able to match a particular interpreters skill set to a job"
(interpreter)

"knowing the interpreter is the best suited person to the job"
(interpreter)

“Interpreters matched to jobs both for geographical reasons and skill/knowledge/suitability - not for competitive rates!” (interpreter)

“Match interpreters terms and conditions and pay on time” (interpreter)

“service that would best match interpreter and client” (interpreter)

The need for a service like Signalise

Respondents were asked if they would become a member if there was an agency that the Deaf community, interpreters and health professionals could work for and be part of i.e. own and make decisions in the running of the agency. The agency would bid for contracts with the profits reinvested into standards and the interpreting profession.

84% of interpreters responded that yes, they definitely see the need for a co-operative agency run on these principles while 15% asked for more information. No interpreters responded negatively to this question. There were a number of comments strongly in favour of this initiative.

“Hurry up and get this sorted asap ;-)” (interpreter)

“I think it is a really positive step in the right direction of how an agency should be ran. Deaf people and interpreters should both have involvement which is what sign co are doing” (interpreter)

“A cooperative seems like a great forward. I’m excited to see how it progresses” (interpreter)

“This is a fantastic idea” (interpreter)

However, two interpreters also voiced concerns:

"I am concerned that if this does become established that this will have a negative effect on local deaf centres and communities as commissioners may remove their contracts or not renew with the agencies that we know are good to us at the minute having a detrimental effect on the deaf community when they can't continue to provide services. I agree spoken language agencies shouldn't have contracts but I can't see a way that deaf specialist services can be protected from this?" **(interpreter)**

"I would be concerned that the service / coop would not work in favour of the interpreters providing the service when members vote, especially on political matters etc. if interpreters in favour of a motion are out voted by the sheer number of deaf people who are also members but do not work in the field or understand /experience what interpreters do in providing the service to them." **(interpreter)**

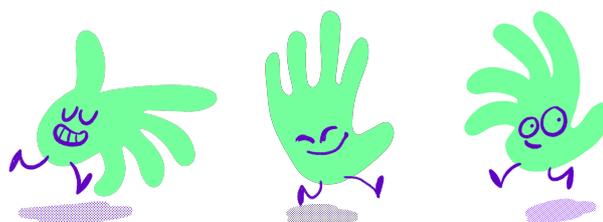
Half of all Deaf respondents answered that they were either definitely in favour of such an agency or would like more information. Just two responded negatively.

"I don't think a perfect service is possible. There will always be issues with contracts, clueless hearing people etc. Sometimes interpreters try take over and control deaf when book appointments so they get more work." **(Deaf person)**

Conclusion

The current system of interpreting provision for access to health service is failing both Deaf BSL users and interpreters. The risks and implications of inadequate access to healthcare are considerable. A new type of agency, run and controlled by the people who need, use and work for it could achieve significant improvements in meeting the needs of the Deaf community, supporting the interpreting profession and enabling health services to improve access.

Signalise



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