

DCMS: Consultation Paper reviewing the Statutory Requirements for the Provision of Subtitling, Sign Language and Audio Description Services on Digital Terrestrial Television.

**Comments from
SignPost
the UK's leading provider
of British Sign Language translation
for television**

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1. Introduction

SignPost is Tyne Tees Television's BSL translation service for digital terrestrial television. TTTV is part of the Granada Media group.

Our service has grown out of TTTV's commitment for over 20 years to expanding access to television for Deaf people, who have been traditionally amongst the most excluded groups in society.

We employ Deaf people to supply both programmes and on-screen translation services for the Deaf community. In the 1990s we were the first TV company regularly to use Deaf people as 'interpreters' as well as presenters.

We now use only Deaf BSL users for pre-recorded programmes because, as with all languages, they can do the best translations into their mother language.

We currently translate up to 20 hours of programmes every week for ITV, ITV2, Channel 4, FilmFour, Channel 5, the UKTV channels and ONdigital. Our output is growing, and there is no shortage of high quality Deaf translators to impede further growth.

TTTV is grant-aided by government through ONE NorthEast to help train a new generation of Deaf on-screen translator-interpreters. Grant aid through Government Office North East from the European Social Fund is currently under consideration.

Our response to the DCMS Consultation Document on sign language is based on our long, current and continuing experience as the UK's major provider of BSL translation for television. We do not address the equally important issues of subtitling and audio description, which are not part of the service we provide.

2. Targets for signing and the possibility of further review

We share the Government's belief that access to high quality BSL can help create genuine social and economic inclusion for Deaf people in Britain.

The overriding civil rights argument for increasing social inclusion is backed up by the spirit and letter of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

We believe that the ITC's planned rising target for signing – moving to 5% by November 2008 – is necessary, desirable, achievable in terms of quality signing and achievable in terms of cost - particularly with low-cost open signing.

Any move to revise targets downwards or freeze them would be damaging to the recent access enjoyed by Deaf people. They should not see any reduction in their very limited access to television in their first language.

There should be a further review in 2006 to examine the possibility of increasing signing beyond the proposed 5% target.

3. Service quality and the supply of BSL translator-interpreters ("signers").

The DCMS consultation paper says "there are only 24 active television signers in the UK." This is a serious under-estimate.

SignPost alone currently employs 20 Deaf on-screen translators, both full-time and part-time.

In summer 2000 we advertised a further seven trainee positions and received 40 applications, many of the highest calibre. We could easily have recruited double the number for whom we have funding.

It would be wrong for anyone to assert that there are not enough BSL and English skills in the Deaf community to meet the legislated requirements.

But there is a strong case for tailored training of already well-qualified first language BSL users so that BSL can be made even more widely available in future.

The DCMS paper raises the question of the need for increased training of translators. Tyne Tees Television has already launched its own training

scheme in Autumn 2000 – with financial support from the regional development agency ONE NorthEast.

4. Cost issues

SignPost believes that the cost of closed signing should not be allowed to minimise access to - or the continuing growth of - open signing.

The use of open signing makes Deaf people more visible, with the effect that it aids their social inclusion. It generates a broader interest in sign language.

The relative costs involved in translating programmes into British Sign Language are very low compared with the costs of original programming.

5. Differing target levels for signing

Broadcaster choice is something which all citizens have a right to expect in a democratic society – and that includes first language BSL users.

SignPost already translates a wide range of programmes for different broadcasters (**See Appendix 1**).

We know from regular feedback that the Deaf audience is enjoying this expansion of choice. Its priorities will no doubt evolve as Deaf people are given a wider exposure to all sorts of programmes.

The danger of broadcasters being able to aggregate targets is that this would minimise choice. There is no cost imperative for doing so – translation is charged by time, not by programme.

We believe it would be wrong for niche channels with small audiences to argue for a reduction in their sign language output. This would run against the spirit of ITC regulation and DDA legislation, and further minimise choice.

We do not think future channels should be exempt from targets, or have lower targets, for the reasons stated above.

In Spring 2000 we commissioned research the Deaf Studies Trust at Bristol University in which over 200 Deaf respondents were asked to rate the importance of sign language translation for different programme types.

The findings give a snapshot indication of the range of interest in programmes watched by Deaf people.

Importance of on-screen signing for different programme types*.

Programme	Not important	N
National news	15%	210
Local news	15%	208
Educational programmes	17%	210
Documentaries	26%	210
Current affairs	32%	209
Weather	35%	210
Special interest	36%	209
Comedy	38%	209
Drama	40%	209
Recent films	47%	210
Soap operas	57%	210
Sport	63%	210

(*Note: Respondents were asked which programmes it was “not important” to sign. A low percentage score indicates high interest in seeing BSL translation.)

We can make the complete research report available to the DCMS for the purposes of this consultation, but would rather not submit it for public scrutiny, as it contains commercially sensitive information.

6. Services on cable and satellite

We welcome the increase in access on DTT and would like to see similar requirements extended to cable and satellite.

One argument rightly used by DTT providers at present is that their costs are higher in a very competitive market because regulation requires them to provide BSL translation.

While it demands primary legislation, it would be absolutely in line with

government policy on social inclusion to bring the satellite and cable channels into line with DDT providers on this issue.

Social inclusion that is restricted to only one platform is effectively selective exclusion.

7. Future consultation

We note that this Consultation Paper was also available on the DCMS web site and in braille and large print. **SignPost** would be happy to translate any future consultation papers - on this or other issues - into BSL for video or web site.