



Review of Relay Services

Sense is the leading national charity that supports and campaigns for children and adults who are deafblind. We provide expert advice and information as well as specialist services to deafblind people, their families, carers and the professionals who work with them. In addition, we support people who have sensory impairments with additional disabilities.

Deafblindness covers anyone with a degree of both sight and hearing loss. This covers a very diverse set of needs and deafblind people may use video relay services, captioned telephony, voice carry over (VCO), hearing carry over (HCO), text relay accessed via text or even text relay accessed via braille.

Sense welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation and Ofcom's decision to review the provision of relay services in the UK. Text relay has proved the difference that can be made by relay services but advancements in technology have meant that it could do a lot more and for many people in the UK equality is still a long way off.

Phones and the phone system are a fundamental part of everyday life. They are used for work, socialising, banking, shopping, the emergency services and essential support organisations such as Childline and the Samaritans. They are often the first method of communication for medical advice, legal advice, hiring tradesmen and seeking education courses. The phone has become an essential tool in today's society and this is why Sense is committed to ensuring that deafblind people get access that is equivalent to everyone else.

Sense is a member organisation and as such consulted our members on some of the key points in order to be able to represent them fully in this response.

General comments

Making a phone call is an easy process when a relay service is not involved and it is important that this should be as straightforward when a relay service is brought in. Users should not have to worry about how the service is delivered but should be able to just select the type of service they require and the number they want to ring.

It is important to remember that anyone who will be using relay services could also have a degree of sight loss so any hardware or software introduced to allow users to access relay services needs to be accessible (or accessible options

need to be available). For NGTR the size and contrast of the text should be customisable and the program needs to work with screen readers (to enable the use of braille displays). Split screen interfaces can be a problem for people with tunnel vision or people using a braille interface so text should be viewable in a single window. For video relay services the picture needs to be customisable to fit into the visual frame of the user. Sense urges Ofcom to remind relay service providers of their duties under the Equalities Act and the Disability Discrimination Act to make reasonable adjustment. Stakeholder groups should be consulted on the accessibility requirements of deafblind people and Ofcom should urge relay service providers to perform user testing with people with dual sensory loss.

Ofcom should also consider whether General Condition 15.8 which mandates that communication providers must publicise accessibility services brought into affect by the General Conditions is sufficient to ensure that end users are made aware of accessible options for accessing the relay services. If it is not sufficient then it must be made so.

Section 4 – Text Relay

Question 1: Do you agree that NGTR would provide greater equivalence than the existing approved TR service? Do you agree that we have considered an appropriate range of improvements?

Sense agrees that NGTR will provide greater equivalence than the existing Text Relay service.

Allowing access via the internet will greatly improve the number of ways that the service can be accessed. Textphone users have had very little mobile access to the phone system in the past and IP access to text relay services will allow software to be written for mobile phones to access the phone network in text and in braille.

When users are accessing the service through a single medium such as text or braille the accuracy of the information is paramount. The phone system can be used for banking or medical or legal conversations. Mistakes can change the meaning and where the subject is medical or legal this could have dangerous consequences.

This is especially true for braille users because grade 2 braille contractions (codes and abbreviations which shorten the word length and increase the potential reading speed) get scrambled by spelling errors.

“I didn’t know what someone was talking about when they kept going on about audio subscription for films. Eventually I realised it shouldn’t read subscription but description. Once I’d worked that out, the conversation made sense but up to that point it had been nonsense.” –Deafblind respondent

Ofcom's proposal for NGTR includes the ability to interrupt. For a deafblind braille user this is unworkable. A braille user who is typing will have their fingers on the keyboard keys and will not know that the other person has tried to interrupt them. From the other person's point of view the deafblind user will seem to be ignoring the interruption and talking over them. When things like this happen the blame is rarely seen to rest with the system but on the person you are using the system to call and this could increase discrimination against relay service users and increase reluctance to call them.

"Interrupting... is not appropriate at all and would make the call more or less impossible even with dedicated Braille communication software." - expert braille user

Turning the ability to interrupt on and off could be done via a simple interface and should not needlessly increase complexity. If the text portion of NGTR is accessed via software then this could be set by the user from a simple on-screen setting. Alternatively a phone number could be provided which allows people to toggle the ability to interrupt. The system should be set up for the greatest degree of accessibility by default.

The proposed amendments to General Condition 15 include a requirement for transcription to be as fast as possible:

"As far as reasonably practicable, the service must allow for conversation speeds equivalent to voice conversation speeds for all end-users;"

Whilst this is important for captioned telephony not everyone can read at the speeds of a voice conversation. This is especially true for braille users because they can only access one braille character at a time. If the transcription speed does approach that of a spoken conversation then unless speed restrictors are introduced it may mean that the hearing party will have to wait for the text or braille user to catch up. This will be annoying for the hearing user and may prejudice their decision to take relay calls in the future. A speed restrictor is very straightforward technically and one of the most likely protocols to be used for setting up relay services calls, the Session Initiation Protocol (SIP), already includes the ability to restrict speed.

Adding the ability for a user to control the speed could be done via an onscreen setting or by providing a phone number with an automated menu system. This could also provide a piece of sample text which allows users to test the new speed.

The introduction of subsidised captioned telephony to the UK is also a huge step forward. Whilst captioned telephony users could use text relay they prefer the speed of captioned telephony which enables them to participate on the phone at close to the speed of standard voice phone users.

Captioned telephony users receive the information by two media streams side by side (voice and text) so accuracy becomes less important because information

which is missed from one media stream is likely to be covered by the other. If the drive for accuracy means that the speed is lost then captioned telephony may lose its value.

“I gave up using [text relay] years ago, I became frustrated with my caller disconnecting (too slow for them) or not even accepting the call.” – former text relay user

“Hearing people receiving captioned telephone relay calls love it and hate calls from Text Relay.” – captioned telephony user

If it is felt that an insistence on accuracy may adversely affect the speed of captioned telephony to a point where it no longer has an advantage over text relay then service providers should be allowed to use a different transcription method that favours speed when the user has indicated they require a captioned telephony service. This can be done via an onscreen setting or by providing a phone number with an automated menu system. Once set, this setting could be remembered for that phone line. The default setting must be the most accessible one however and if it is felt that this separation is unworkable then accuracy of text must take precedence.

Although an interface or menu system has been suggested for the customisation options above these could all be set at the point where the user joins NGTR. If this is done by installing software then it can be part of the installation procedure. If the user connects via hardware it could be done when a user purchases a phone line.

Sense welcome Ofcom’s proposal to support legacy terminal equipment in the NGTR system. Braille terminal equipment costs thousands of pounds. Many braille users will want to be able to access NGTR but if their current equipment cannot support it then they may need to use legacy access methods until they can upgrade.

Question 2: Do you agree with the proposal to implement NGTR through the amendment to GC15? Do you agree that the criteria we propose satisfactorily embody improvements we suggest for NGTR?

Sense partially agree with the proposal to implement NGTR through the amendment to GC15. One of the problems with this route however is that it does not provide enough protection for the quality of service. A straightforward General Conditions route provides a disincentive for communications providers to improve the service and this has been demonstrated by a gradual deterioration of the text relay service over recent years. To avoid this in future Ofcom should either consider a mechanism which gives end users a direct choice of relay service provider or the KPIs used to measure the quality of service should be tightened up and reassessed by Ofcom on a regular basis to ensure that they are providing real protection for end users.

As discussed in the answer to question one, accuracy is very important to text relay users and a minimum level of accuracy must be maintained. This should be done by using the KPIs already in place for text relay. These performance indicators were designed to maintain the quality of the existing service and so must be the starting point for the new service as well in order to make sure that the system does not become less usable. The current text relay system aims for verbatim transcription and this must also be the aim for NGTR.

One of the entry requirements proposed for the new GC15.5 should be that service providers must satisfy Ofcom that they have taken sufficient steps to ensure that their service is accessible to all potential users of the system.

Question 3: Do you agree that a period of up to 18 months for implementation of NGTR, following an Ofcom statement, is appropriate?

Sense recognises that changes of this type require time to implement and in order to create a service that is robust and fulfils all of the requirements there needs to be a suitable time period set in place. Potential users of NGTR will be eager to try out the new service however and Sense urge Ofcom not to make this time period any longer than it needs to be.

The current provision of a text relay service must remain in place until NGTR can take over. Users who rely on a relay service must not be left without one for any length of time and some of our members requested assurance from Ofcom that this will not happen.

Section 5 – Video Relay

Question 4: Do you consider that the requirement to ensure equivalent services for disabled end-users would require a mandated VR service in some form for BSL users? Please indicate the basis of your response.

Yes. British Sign Language is a language distinct from English with a separate vocabulary and grammar. Profoundly deaf BSL users can not use a voice phone and if forced to use a text phone would be doing so in their second language. It is unreasonable to expect BSL users to pay the full cost of video relay calls and a sufficiently subsidised service will not arise naturally in a free market.

Question 5: Do you agree that a restricted service would be more proportionate in providing equivalence for BSL users than an unrestricted service?

Sense feels that fully functional equivalence for BSL users would require an unrestricted video relay service however we understand that at the cost predicted

in the consultation document this may not be proportionate. A restricted video relay service will still make a huge difference in the lives of BSL users and Sense welcomes this important step towards full equivalence.

The consultation document (5.33) indicated that there were some doubts about some of the figures used to estimate the per user per minute cost of £3.15. Sense feels that the actual cost per minute is much lower. Better estimates must be used when recalculating the cost of a restricted or unrestricted service.

It is hoped that the second round of consultation will attempt to get a more accurate prediction of running costs so that relay service users are not unfairly penalised. This must also be an ongoing process once the relay service is put in place so that the UK can move towards a less restricted or indeed an unrestricted service.

Question 6: Please provide your views on Methods 1 – 5 for a restricted VR service discussed above. Are there any other methods that are not mentioned that we should consider? In making your response, please provide any information on implementation costs for these solutions which you believe is relevant.

Method 3: Monthly allocation of minutes

Sense believe that the 30 minute allocation suggested in the consultation document is overly restrictive due to questionable data from the US. If the monthly allocation of minutes is used then the second round of consultation should attempt to provide a better estimate for what is proportionate.

Method 5: Call booking system

Sense considers a call booking system to be the restriction that is least equivalent and feels it is largely unworkable. If the restriction mechanism is expected to restrict the number of calls then this implies that there is a good chance users will not be able to get the appointments that they want and short term bookings will be unlikely. When a hearing user wants to make a phonecall they don't have to book it in advance. BSL users should not have to book in advance either and if hearing users want to call a Video Relay Service user then being told that they need to book in advance or use text relay may put them off. This will disadvantage BSL users in the workplace.

If a BSL user tries to call a hearing user who isn't there then they will have lost the timeslot and will need to make another appointment. Also, it is not always possible to predict the length of a phone call before you've made it. This will likely mean either that interpreters will be booked for time that they are not being used

for, BSL users get cut off when their call overruns or an interpreter is not able to uphold a booking that has been made because a previous call has overrun. A booking system would still require an allocation of minutes to discourage users from block booking and making appointments they might not use.

Question 7: Do you agree that a monthly allocation of minutes combined with a weekday/business hours service would be the most appropriate means to restricting the service?

Sense disagrees.

A mechanism which provides users with a direct choice of relay service provider will support both improved efficiency and improved quality of relay services through open competition. This could be provided through a mixture of the General Conditions route and Universal Service Orders but only if users are given a direct choice of relay service provider. Sense believes this is possible without adding much complexity to the system. Sense considers this to be the best solution.

The author of this document can be contacted using the following details:

Email:

Telephone:

Textphone:

Post: Sense
 101 Pentonville Road
 London
 N1 9LG