



Ten years of television access services

Provision of subtitling, signing and audio description
from 2004 to 2014

Report

Publication date:

30 April 2014

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Introduction

- 1.1 2014 marks the tenth year since Ofcom's Code on Television Access Services (subtitling, signing and audio description) came into effect. The Code, which came into force on 1 January 2005, implemented relevant provisions of the Communications Act 2003. We have taken this opportunity to review the changes to the provision of access services over the last ten years.

Statutory requirements

- 1.2 Until the Communications Act 2003 ("the Act") came into force, access service obligations were limited to public service channels (BBC1, BBC2, Channel 3, Channel 4 and Channel 5) and digital terrestrial television (DTT) channels. The new legislation broadened obligations to include cable and satellite channels.
- 1.3 Under Sections 303 to 305 of the Act, Ofcom is required to draw up and maintain a code that sets specific targets for the provision of access services by commercial channels from the tenth anniversary of their relevant date. Broadly speaking, this means the date the Act entered into force for channels in existence at the time, and for newer channels, the date they began broadcasting.
- 1.4 There are parallel obligations on BBC channels to comply with this Code in the agreement between the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sports, and the BBC.
- 1.5 The legislation allows Ofcom to set interim targets and, in the case of subtitling, requires channels required to provide access services to subtitle a minimum of 60% of their programming after five years.

Code on Television Access Services

- 1.6 Ofcom's Code on Television Access Services¹ sets out the criteria for determining which channels should provide access services, and what targets they should meet.
- 1.7 Channels are selected on the basis of the benefits they would deliver to the audience, subject to being able to afford to provide access services. For these purposes, channels with an audience share (all UK households, all times) of 0.05% are required to provide access services, unless there are technical reasons why this would not be practicable, and subject to their ability to afford the assessed cost by paying up to 1% of their relevant turnover.
- 1.8 The targets that most channels must meet are set out in the table below. They date from the anniversary of the 'relevant date' for each channel, which in most cases is the date the legislation entered into force at the end of 2003. Some public service channels are required to meet higher targets for subtitling – 90% in the case of Channel 3 (ITV, STV and UTV) and channel 4, and 100% in the case of most BBC channels (excluding BBC Parliament, by reason of its low audience share).

¹ <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/broadcasting/broadcast-codes/tv-access-services/>

- 1.9 In setting targets for audio description, Ofcom used its powers to accelerate implementation of the maximum statutory target (10%) so that it was reached on the fifth anniversary or the relevant date, rather than the tenth.

Figure 1: Targets applicable to non-public service channels

Anniversary of relevant date	Subtitling	Audio Description	Signing
First	10%	2%	1%
Second	10%	4%	1%
Third	35%	6%	2%
Fourth	35%	8%	2%
Fifth	60%	10%	3%
Sixth	60%	10%	3%
Seventh	70%	10%	4%
Eighth	70%	10%	4%
Ninth	70%	10%	4%
Tenth	80%	10%	5%

- 1.10 As the legislation broadened obligations to cover channels broadcast by cable and satellite, the Code requires broadcasters to use reasonable endeavours to ensure that subtitling, signing and audio description can be accessed by the greatest number of viewers, whether they receive television by DTT, cable or satellite.
- 1.11 Since 2005, Ofcom has published regular reports on the extent to which broadcasters are meeting their targets, thus providing transparency for access service users.² The data we collect allows us to check compliance with the code, and to take remedial action where appropriate. Each year the reports have shown that most broadcasters exceeded their targets and that the majority did so comfortably.

Increase in access service provision since 2005

- 1.12 The Code entered into force on 1 January 2005, just over one year after the Act entered force. Since then, relevant channels have been required to meet the rising targets set out in the Code. As a result, there has been a substantial improvement in the amount of programming accessible to people with hearing and / or visual impairments, as the analysis below shows.

Methodology

- 1.13 In order to demonstrate total access services provision in each year since 2005 data was used from all of the channels who were required to provide access services by Ofcom in that year. The total hours of programmes carrying an access service (i.e. subtitling) were then divided by the total transmission hours for each channel to give an overall percentage for each year of programme hours that carried that access service. Hours which were not included in this analysis are those which are exempt, and include advertising or teleshopping hours. Further detail of exemptions can be found within the Code³.

² These reports can be found at: <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/market-data-research/market-data/tv-sector-data/tv-access-services-reports/?a=0>.

³ <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/broadcasting/broadcast-codes/tv-access-services/>

- 1.14 2005 saw a significant increase in the number of channels required to provide access services, from about 20 in 2004, to 73. Since then, the number of channels required to provide access services since 2005 has varied each year as audience shares and revenues also varied (Figure 2), and this has had an effect on the amount of access services available in any given year. However, the number of channels required to provide access services has rarely fallen below 70, and has consistently accounted for over 90% of viewing in the UK.
- 1.15 The computations below reflect this, and also take account of the fact that some channels have been exempted from providing:
- a) audio description because it is not feasible to fit it in within the dialogue (e.g. news and music channels); and
 - b) signing, because Ofcom put in place new arrangements for signing on television that came into force in January 2009. Further details of these changes can be found in paragraphs 1.23 to 1.25.
- 1.16 The assessment also reflects the fact that many channels have chosen to exceed their targets for access services, in many cases substantially.

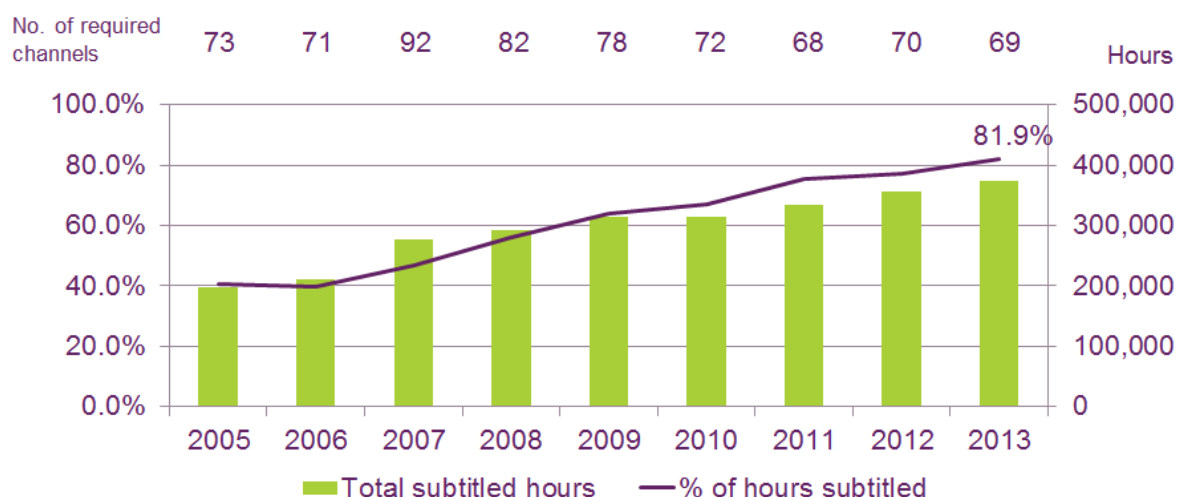
Figure 2: number of channels required to provide access services

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
All	73	71	92	82	78	72	68	70	69	76
With subtitling	73	71	92	82	78	72	68	70	69	76
With AD	58	62	77	75	72	66	62	65	63	70
With signing	73	71	92	82	16	16	17	16	16	16

Source: Ofcom

Subtitling

- 1.17 Over the last decade, the percentage of total output that was subtitled (across channels required to provide it) had doubled from 40.5% in 2005, to 81.9%, in 2013. As a result, the hours of television with subtitling increased by 89%, to reach almost 375,000 hours.

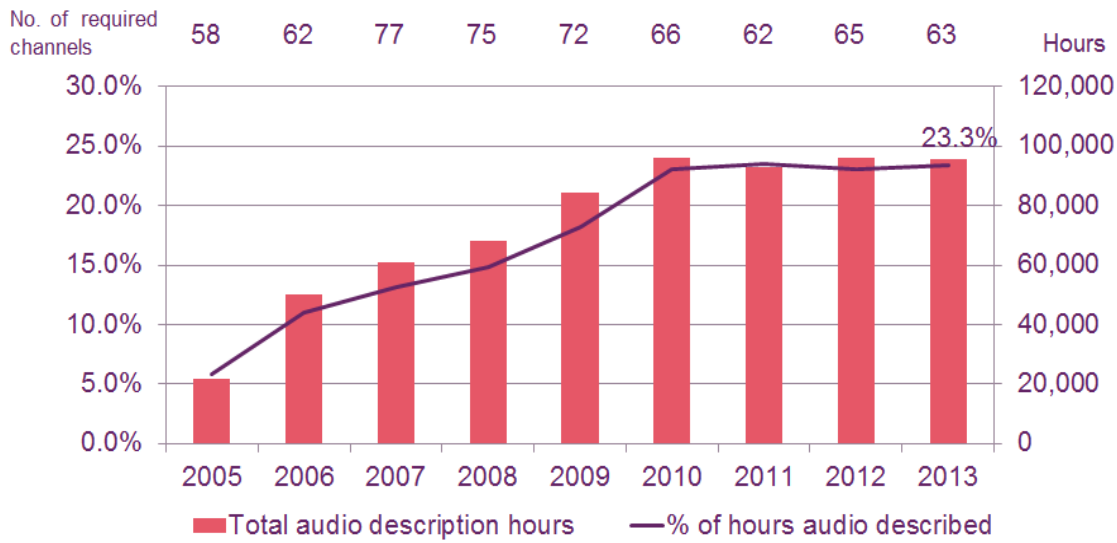
Figure 3: Subtitling provision 2005 - 2013

Source: Ofcom/broadcasters. Note: % of hours is calculated as a proportion of total, non-exempt hours broadcast by channels that have a requirement to provide that service.

Audio description

- 1.18 Over the last decade, the percentage of total output that was audio described (across channels required to provide it) has tripled, from 5.9% in 2005, to 23.3% in 2013. As a result, the hours of television with audio description increased by 337%, to reach almost 96,000 hours.
- 1.19 Two separate factors have affected the provision of audio description:
- first, Ofcom used its powers to accelerate implementation of the maximum statutory target (10%) so that it was reached on the fifth anniversary or the relevant date, rather than the tenth; and
 - second, many channels have chosen to exceed their targets. In particular, several major broadcasters (BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Sky) committed in 2010 to audio describing 20% of their programming. Others have also exceeded the statutory maximum target of 10%.

Figure 4: Audio description provision 2005- 2013

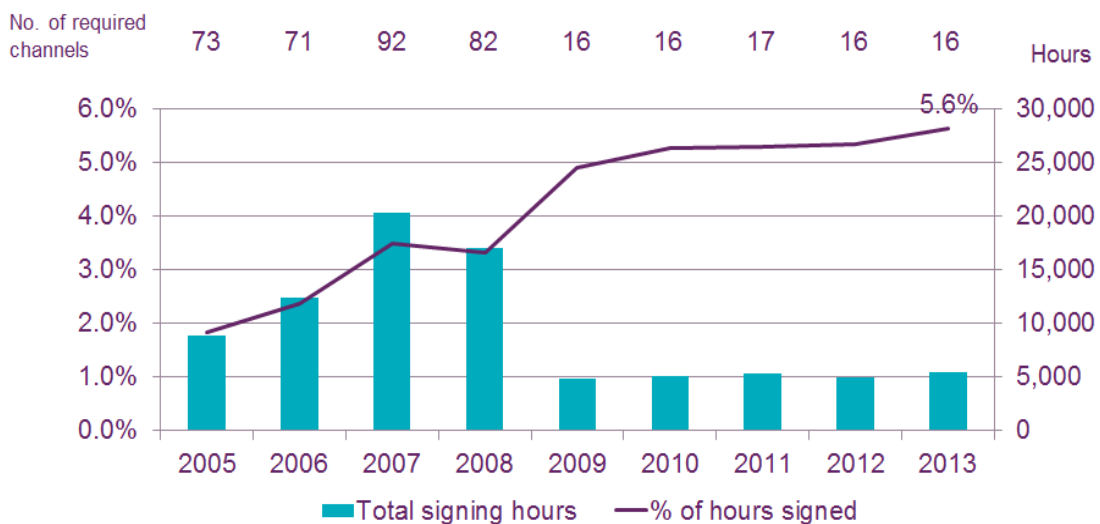


Source: Ofcom/broadcasters. Note: % of hours is calculated as a proportion of total, non-exempt hours broadcast by channels that have a requirement to provide that service.

Signing

1.20 Over the last decade, the percentage of total output (on channels required to provide signing) that was signed almost tripled, from 1.8% in 2005, to 5.6% in 2013. However, the number of channels providing signing dropped sharply from 2009 when Ofcom allowed channels with low audiences the alternative of contributing to other arrangements to promote sign-presented programmes (see paragraphs 1.23 to 1.25 for further details). As a result, the amount of signing on television fell by 38% in the same year.

Figure 5: Signing provision 2005 – 2013



Source: Ofcom/broadcasters. Note: % of hours is calculated as a proportion of total, non-exempt hours broadcast by channels that have a requirement to provide that service.

Other changes in access services arrangements since 2005

Universal availability of access services

- 1.21 Until 2005, access service obligations were not applied to cable and satellite channels, although subtitling was available on some. The new Act enabled Ofcom to extend access service obligations to all relevant channels, whether broadcast on DTT, cable or satellite. In particular, this provided easier access to audio description (AD), a service which helps visually-impaired people by narrating what is happening on screen, during pauses in the dialogue. Until 2005, AD could only be received by the very limited numbers of people owning experimental AD-enabled DTT receivers. Shortly afterwards, AD became available on channels delivered by satellite, and subsequently cable. Within a few years, audio description became a standard feature of most DTT receivers, making universal availability of AD a reality.

Electronic programme guides

- 1.22 As digital television services (on DTT, cable and satellite) became more popular, many viewers were able to make use of electronic programme guides (EPGs). In the early days of EPGs, information on whether programmes included access services was often missing; where it was provided, it was described using a variety of different acronyms and abbreviations. Following a consultation in 2004, Ofcom required both broadcasters and EPG providers to use standard acronyms in programme descriptions on EPGs – ‘S’ for subtitling, ‘AD’ for audio description, and ‘SL’ for sign language. Many publishers of printed listings agreed to follow suit, making it easier for access service users to identify accessible programming.

Changes to the signing obligations

- 1.23 In 2006, Ofcom commissioned research into the use of access services by people with sensory impairments. We discovered that virtually no one was watching programmes with sign interpretation shown overnight by channels with low audiences as a means of meeting their obligations to sign a proportion of their output. As this provided no benefit to sign language users, Ofcom consulted representative groups and other stakeholders to see how the needs of sign language users could best be met.
- 1.24 The consensus amongst sign language users was that they would prefer to retain access to mainstream programming (on channels with larger audience) through sign-interpretation, but to have more programmes presented in sign language. As a result, Ofcom decided to replace the original obligations on channels with an audience share of less than 1% with a new requirement to show 30 minutes of sign-presented programming each month between 7am and 11pm. These obligations came into force in January 2009.
- 1.25 As an alternative, broadcasters may contribute to other schemes that help to promote the availability of sign-presented programming, provided Ofcom is satisfied that such schemes meet criteria it has set out.⁴ The Community Channel and a number of the broadcasters proposed to establish a fund to pay for sign-presented programmes to be shown in a sign zone on the Community Channel. Ofcom approved these arrangements, which resulted in the establishment of the British Sign Language

⁴ <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/broadcasting/broadcast-codes/tv-access-services/code-tv-access-services-2013/>

Broadcasting Trust ⁵, to which a large majority of low audience channels now contribute.

Audio description awareness and provision

- 1.26 The research Ofcom commissioned in 2006 also found that, although awareness of subtitling and sign language was widespread, relatively few visually-impaired people knew about audio description. Following discussions with Ofcom, broadcasters worked with the Royal National Institute of Blind People on two television campaigns to increase awareness of audio description, the first in 2008, and the second in 2012. A survey by Ofcom in 2013 showed that awareness of audio description amongst UK adults increased significantly as a result.
- 1.27 At the request of the then Secretary of State in 2005, Ofcom reviewed levels of provision for audio description in 2009, and submitted options to the Department of Culture, Media and Sports. On the basis of voluntary commitments by the BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Sky to increase provision of audio description from 10% to 20%, the Secretary of State decided not to make changes to the statutory target of 10%. As Ofcom's most recent report shows, many channels now exceed this target on a voluntary basis.⁶

Quality of live subtitling

- 1.28 In 2013, against the background of continuing complaints about the quality of subtitling, Ofcom consulted on proposals to measure the accuracy, latency and speed of live subtitling, based on samples selected by Ofcom.⁷ The project began in October 2013, when Ofcom identified samples in three genres of programming – news, chat shows and entertainment – transmitted by those broadcasters responsible for the vast majority of live subtitling – the BBC, ITV, Channel 3, Channel 4, Channel 5 and Sky. Further sampling exercises will be undertaken in May and October 2014 and May 2015, and the results will be published at intervals. The purpose of the project is to help identify opportunities for improving the quality of subtitling, and to provide feedback on progress.

⁵ www.bslbt.co.uk

⁶ <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/market-data-research/market-data/tv-sector-data/tv-access-services-reports/>

⁷ <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/consultations/subtitling/>