

Television Access Services Report 2021 (Channel 4) – BSL transcript

In September 2021, following an incident at Red Bee Media's broadcast centre, a number of broadcasters suffered significant disruption to their broadcast operations. This included Channel 4 experiencing a lengthy outage of its access services provision that began on 25 September 2021 and was not fully resolved until 19 November 2021.

As a result, we have brought forward publication of the data setting out the level of provision of subtitling, signing and audio description on Channel 4 channels in 2021 against their requirements. Having assessed the data, we have decided to launch a formal investigation, for the following reasons.

In spite of the outage, across most television platforms (e.g. Freeview, Sky and Virgin), Channel 4 was able to meet its 2021 subtitling requirements on its channels. This is because it typically overperformed against its legal quota outside of the outage period, by providing 100% of programming with subtitles. However, subtitling services were restored to Freesat four weeks later than on other platforms. 85.41% of programming on Channel 4 on the Freesat platform had subtitles, under the 90% requirement.

In this case, no subtitling was available on all Channel 4 broadcast services for a period of four weeks, with Freesat viewers affected for eight weeks. The scale of this outage was unprecedented and resulted in deep upset and frustration among viewers who rely on subtitles. Several hundred viewers contacted Ofcom to express their concern, particularly about what they considered to be a lack of information about what was being done to rectify the issue and how long this may take.

Our investigation will look into the under-provision and the surrounding circumstances. The outcome of our investigation will be published as soon as possible.

In relation to audio description and signing, Channel 4 did meet its annual quotas. However, given the extended nature of the outage and the significant impact on audiences, we are undertaking a review of the transmission arrangements and backup facilities that Channel 4 and the other affected broadcasters had in place at the time of the outage and what changes they have made as a result. We will use the findings to consider whether further regulatory action may be required to ensure a reliable access services provision remains in place for audiences no matter what incidents may occur to the broadcast infrastructure that is used to provide them.