

## High Level Summary of Meeting with BSL Users – 02/09/2014

On Tuesday 2 September 2014, Ofcom held the first of two sessions inviting Deaf British Sign Language (BSL) users to express their views on the review of the signing arrangements applying to low audience channels.<sup>1</sup>

Currently, channels required to provide access services – and having an average audience share between 0.05% and 1% - must meet their signing obligations by:

- either showing 30 minutes per month of sign-presented programming, or
- by contributing a fixed annual contribution not smaller than £20,000 to an “alternative signing arrangement” approved by Ofcom.

At present, the vast majority of relevant channels contribute to the British Sign Language Broadcasting Trust (BSLBT), which in turn commissions sign-presented programming to be shown four times a week on Film4 and on the Community Channel.

In a consultation published on July 22, Ofcom sought views on possible increases in the signing requirements for these channels, both in terms of the monthly amount of sign-presented programming that they would need to show, and in terms of the contribution to alternative arrangements.<sup>2</sup> At the first of the two sessions, we asked attendees their views on the questions asked in the consultation. Four main themes emerged, which are relevant to this review.

### **Demand for greater provision of sign-presented programming**

The attendees unanimously spoke in favour of requiring relevant channels to show a greater amount of sign-presented programming; the view generally was that 30 minutes per month is not enough. One attendee noted the importance of sign-presented television programmes for BSL teachers, as audiovisual material is useful for didactical purposes; however, the amount of content available to BSL teachers and students is too limited.

Attendees explained that deaf BSL users often do not benefit from subtitling, as BSL not English is their first language. Since 2009 – when the current signing arrangements came into force – the provision of signing on low audience channels has remained the same, while the provision of subtitling has increased significantly. Attendees pointed out that this means that while Deaf users who do not use BSL have experienced an increase in access to television content, Deaf BSL users have not.

While the attendees appreciate that the BSLBT invests in many different genres, they would like to see even greater variety in the sign-presented programmes. A representative of a Deaf group suggested that Ofcom set criteria in order to ensure that certain genres are covered, news in particular. In this connection, Several attendees noted that the provision of sign interpretation is often unsatisfactory, in part because of poor quality sign-interpretation, in part because sign-interpretation fails to bridge the cultural divide between the hearing and Deaf communities.

One attendee suggested that the proposed increase in sign presentation provision should be greater, even at the cost of a longer adjustment period. It was suggested, for instance, that

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<sup>1</sup> A list of participants is annexed to this summary.

<sup>2</sup> More details on the analysis leading to our proposals and on the proposals themselves can be found in our consultation document at the following link  
<http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/consultations/review-signing-arrangements-tv/>.

channels should be required to show up to 120 minutes (2 hours) of sign-presented programming per month, following a ten-year transitional period.

### **Inadequacy of the current resources**

It was the view of all the participants that the contributions currently devoted to the production of sign-presented programming by qualifying channels are too little. Several attendees noted how the value of the contributions has decreased in real terms since 2007 – when it was set by Ofcom – warranting a backdated adjustment to its original real-terms value.

According to some participants, the resources currently available make it impossible to make enough good-quality sign-presented programming. In order for Deaf film-makers to produce programmes of reasonable quality, they need access to larger funds.

Several attendees, independent producers and the former chief executive of BSLBT, argued that production costs have increased over the past seven years at a rate which is even higher than inflation as measured by CPI. Therefore, Ofcom's proposed adjustment of the contribution to alternative signing arrangements would not reinstate the original value of the contribution. Several attendees, in fact, showed perplexity with respect to the use of a general inflation measure to account for changes in the cost of producing sign-presented programmes.

Some even argued that the basis on which the contribution is set needs to be changed. In 2007<sup>3</sup>, Ofcom used information available on the cost of providing sign-interpretation on 2% of qualifying content to set the contribution level (£20,000) to alternative signing arrangements.

### **What should be the basis for the contribution to alternative arrangements?**

Attendees felt that it is inappropriate to compare the cost of producing sign interpretation and the costs of making sign-presented programmes. Given that Deaf programming is characterised by a series of elements which are not limited to the language itself, which enhance the quality of the programmes but also drive up the costs, a contribution level based on sign interpretation underestimates the cost of producing sign-presented programming.

Attendees also dismissed the idea of using cost data from the BBC and ITV to set the contribution level, as these are two large broadcasters, with different audiences and different cost structures from the typical small-scale producer of sign-presented programming which the BSLBT commissions.

In the attendees' view, a more appropriate basis for the contribution level is the actual cost of producing a 30-minute sign-presented programme meant for broadcast on one of the BSL Zones. Ofcom noted that the costs of making programmes varied widely, for example, as between studio-based programmes and those shot on location.

Ofcom concluded by undertaking to circulate a high level summary of comments from those present, and by asking for written submissions as well where possible.

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<sup>3</sup> For more details on the methodology used in 2007, see: Ofcom, *Signing on television* (Statement), December 2007 (<http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/consultations/signing/statement/statement.pdf>)

## Annex – List of Participants

Peter Bourton	Head of TV Content Policy, Ofcom
Dr Terry Riley OBE	Chairman, British Deaf Association
Ringkoo Barpaga	Performer/film-maker
Penny Beschizza	BSL Teachers' Association
Brian Duffy	Actor/film-maker
Dr Paddy Ladd	Academic and writer
Alan Murray	Greater London Deaf Association
Louis Neethling	Independent producer and filmmaker
Linda Richards	St John's Deaf Community Centre
Charlie Swinbourne	Limping Chicken

### Also attending

Jack Genovese	Content Policy Associate
Naomi Cherubin	BSL interpreter
Marie Webb Stevens	BSL interpreter
Ruth Griffiths	CEO, British Sign Language Broadcasting Trust