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BRITISH SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETING IN SCOTLAND: A LANDSCAPE REVIEW

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Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Purpose

The Landscape Review was commissioned by the Scottish Government to provide detailed information about British Sign Language/English interpreting in Scotland to inform policy decisions around the implementation of the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 and the BSL National Plan 2017-2023.

The Landscape Review research contributes towards three actions from the BSL National Plan 2017-2023:

- Action 7 Review a range of current and on-going Scottish and UK evidence about the BSL/English interpreting landscape (for example the UK Market Review of BSL and communication provision, and the Scottish Government funded review of the Scottish Association of Sign Language Interpreters (SASLI)).
- Action 8 Analyse the learning from actions we are taking forward in health, education and justice (referred to in this plan) to strengthen Scotland's interpreting profession.
- Action 9 Consider what further work is needed to ensure that a strong and skilled pool of BSL/English interpreters are working efficiently across Scotland.

Research

The Government commissioned the research team at Queen Margaret University Edinburgh, primarily to investigate:

- relevant documentation/reports/literature.
- current progression routes to registration and post registration career options.
- where interpreters live and work.
- how interpreters source their work.
- barriers to interpreters' professional practice.

Undertaking this research presented the opportunity to bring together the different perspectives on BSL interpreting in Scotland in a unique study that generates a holistic picture of the current landscape. To achieve this the research team collected data to represent the perspectives of the BSL community, public bodies, interpreters and interpreting stakeholders. This information was collected through online surveys, interviews, email correspondence and existing consultation responses.

Findings

The research identifies particular challenges faced by the different stakeholders involved and identifies areas where action is required.

The Scottish Government has previously invested in the interpreting profession. However, the outcomes of this work have not always been visible within the profession or maximised value for money.

Going forward, it is essential that Government spending is focussed, with clearly communicated outcomes that are sustainable. Sustainability of the profession is key to ensuring that both deaf and hearing consumers receive a quality interpreting service. This will require greater collaboration between stakeholders and within the interpreting profession.

One theme within the interpreters' responses appears to be an underlying insecurity in their work. This manifests itself in concern over losing work to other interpreters, the 'moving goalposts' of interpreter registration and the perception of poor professional standards. The changing procurement environment is contributing to this insecurity.

There are areas where concern is shared quite broadly across the different perspectives, and others that are exclusive to one group or another.

Areas of Commonality

Areas of commonality across all perspectives revolve around the three intersecting themes of availability, consistency and sustainability.

Availability

There is widespread concern around the inequity of BSL/English interpreting provision around Scotland. Some areas are poorly served by interpreters and in others there are no locally-based interpreters at all. This leads to a lack of provision, lack of choice and increased anxiety amongst both the BSL community and the public bodies that serve them. Even in areas such as the Central Belt, where interpreter provision is greater, there is still a challenge in sourcing interpreters with appropriate skills for certain types of work. Use of agencies does not always extend reach to a greater number of interpreters as might be expected.

Consistency

Concerns around standards and professionalism come from both inside and outside the interpreting profession. Research indicates the need for:

- greater consistency between different routes to registration.
- robust, transparent and impartial registration policies and procedures that are accessible to the BSL community.
- greater consistency in interpreting fees, structured in to reflect skills and experience.

- greater consistency of standards for BSL translation work.

Sustainability

Although increasing the number of interpreters would be beneficial, the existing workforce, and public money, could be used more effectively. Current procurement arrangements within the public sector are proving increasingly problematic and disadvantage interpreters, public bodies and the BSL community alike. Often these arrangements involve lengthy 'booking chains' where information has to be passed among several people between a booking being requested and confirmed. These chains can be caused by complex internal systems used by public bodies and/or contracting and sub-contracting arrangements. At the moment:

- booking processes are excessively time consuming to the public sector.
- booking via agencies is not always beneficial.
- lengthy booking chains are leading to increased breakdown in communication and necessary information being withheld.
- the cost to the public sector is increasing dramatically.
- tendering processes favour corporate bidders rather than small specialist agencies who have better connections with local BSL communities.
- the same pool of interpreters is available for work, regardless of who holds the contracts.
- most interpreters prefer to source work direct from clients rather than via agencies.

The BSL/English interpreting profession needs to be structured in a way that is more supportive of trainee and novice interpreters, but also recognises the value and expertise of more experienced practitioners with specialist skills, to retain them within the profession.

There is a need for more appropriately trained and qualified BSL tutors across Scotland. Having a nationwide network of tutors would help ensure that BSL was taught more widely, encouraging people in all areas to learn the language and potentially to go on to interpreter training. This in turn could help towards ensuring a wider coverage by interpreters in the future.

Areas of Discrepancy

Different perceptions sometimes exist between the public sector and the other stakeholders involved.

Employment

Because of problems with interpreter availability, some public sector bodies are starting to employ their own interpreters. Other stakeholders and interpreters consider this problematic, especially when novice interpreters are recruited and not given the support and guidance they need.

The Landscape Review provides solutions to the challenges of booking interpreters and ensuring availability of interpreters.

Perceptions and Expectations

Expectations of interpreters and interpreting are not necessarily shared by public bodies and the BSL community.

Public bodies understandably view online interpreting as a more accessible and cost-effective provision. However, they may not realise that the BSL community do not favour online interpreting provision and that for many, online communication is problematic. There is evidence that it is being used in inappropriate situations, where significant, emotive and sensitive issues are being discussed.

A common complaint in the BSL community is that interpreters do not arrive for appointments. Data indicate that this is often caused by communication breakdown due to lengthy 'booking chains'. These miscommunications can impact on perceptions of interpreter professionalism by both deaf and non-deaf clients.

Expectations differ over interpreters' fees. Consumers may not appreciate the investment interpreters make in their own training, professional development and registration. However, interpreters need to recognise that the fees they charge should reflect the standard of their work.

Recommendations

The BSL (Scotland) Act 2015 has increased the demand for BSL/English interpreting across Scotland. This is a positive development. However, current arrangements are not serving the BSL community effectively across the country, nor are they value for money for the public sector or sustainable for the interpreting profession. The situation in Scotland does however present a real opportunity to address the status quo and deliver more effective provision of interpreting. This report proposes ways to purposefully shape the future landscape to ensure it works for the benefit of the BSL community and the public sector that serves them.

The recommendations resulting from the Landscape Review research are as follows:

1. A review of the use existing public sector framework agreements and procurement arrangements is required to ensure the maintenance of standards and best value for public money.
2. Consideration of the central employment of a small team of interpreters to help cover areas where there is currently little, or no, interpreting provision. A model such as that used by the Scottish Legal Aid Board (for duty solicitors) could be adopted.

3. Reducing the length of the 'booking chain' for public bodies. This should include investigating the creation of a central information and booking system to be used across the public sector. Such a system would need to be very carefully designed to ensure it meets the needs of interpreters, service users and the public sector. It would be essential for any system to be fully supported and used across the public sector and with the engagement of all interpreting practitioners.
4. National guidance on the appropriate use of online interpreting services that is based on research evidence and incorporates the views of the BSL community.
5. Guidance on the implementation of GDPR in relation to interpreting bookings, particularly in the health sector, to ensure that interpreters have sufficient information to make informed judgements about accepting bookings and preparing for them.
6. Creation of a formal system for the support of trainee/newly qualified interpreters that would involve mentoring and supervision by more experienced and suitably trained practitioners. This would additionally require appropriate training and support mechanisms be put in place for the mentors/supervisors.
7. Greater recognition of the specialist skills of more experienced interpreting practitioners, which should be recognised through differential rates of pay where appropriate, helping to create a career structure for interpreters.
8. Homogenisation of the colours of registration cards for the two registration bodies operational in Scotland (NRCPD and SASLI/SRLPDC) in order to reduce confusion to consumers.
9. All registration bodies operating in Scotland need to operate with similar levels of transparency and impartiality and be underpinned by robust policies and procedures.
10. Greater collaboration between academic and vocational training providers to ensure that students in both routes benefit from both theoretical and practical experience prior to registration.
11. Development of a sustainable training pathway and qualification for BSL tutors to increase the number of BSL tutors across Scotland, and particularly to encourage more to teach advanced levels of BSL. The ideal delivery would facilitate participation from BSL users living in more remote areas of Scotland.
12. A national programme of training for BSL pupils of high school age on how to work with interpreters, particularly in relation to further study and job interviews.
13. Interpreters to be represented and involved in all future consultations and planning relating to the implementation of the BSL (Scotland) Act 2015.

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