

Representing Deaf (Native BSL) members

Steward's guide



Why do I need to know about representing Deaf (Native BSL) members?

UNISON has up to 200,000 disabled members. Some of these members are Deaf people whose native language is British Sign Language (BSL). They face significant barriers at work and we need to make sure that as trade union reps we can understand their concerns and help them to raise these with management.

What is BSL?

British Sign Language is a language that uses hand shapes and movements, facial expression and body language, instead of spoken word, to communicate. It has its own grammatical structure and rules. BSL is not a direct 'translation' of English. It is a language in its own right and is the preferred language of at least 50,000 people in the UK. For Deaf workers whose native language is BSL, English is a second, third or even fourth language.

Some countries have their own sign language, such as Irish Sign Language (ISL) and American Sign Language (ASL). Just because a country uses spoken English doesn't guarantee they use BSL.

What should I do if I am representing a Deaf native BSL speaker?

As with any member, when you are representing a Deaf worker who is a native BSL user the most important thing is that you treat them with respect and acknowledge that they are the experts in identifying their own needs.

However there are some things you can do to help remove the barriers Deaf members face when communicating with you such as:

- Check if a BSL interpreter is needed (see below) and re-arrange the meeting if needed
- Allow more time to meet with the member as interpreting takes additional time
- Ensure you have the member's attention before you start speaking
- Look at the member when they are speaking, and not at the interpreter
- Wait until the member finishes signing and the interpreter has finished interpreting before you start to respond
- Don't interrupt the member
- Ensure you are sitting directly opposite the member and they can look at you directly

- When you finish making a point, check the member has understood
- Ensure the meeting place is well lit so that gestures, facial expression and body language are not difficult to make out
- Meet in a quiet area so the interpreter is not distracted by background noise
- Don't assume the member can read English – their first language is BSL not English

How do I book a BSL interpreter?

If a member requires a BSL interpreter(s) to meet with the branch and get advice about a workplace issue, then this should ideally be provided by the employer. If this is not possible the branch should pay for an interpreter or approach the region for support if branch resources are low.

Similarly, where a BSL interpreter is required for a meeting with management then this should be arranged and paid for by the employer as part of their legal duty to make reasonable adjustments (Access to Work funding may be available).

If a BSL interpreter is needed for branch events or training then you should book this through the branch. UNISON nationally uses Interpreting Matters (office@interpretingmatters.co.uk). If branch funding is an issue the region can be approached for assistance.

What do I need to remember if a BSL interpreter is needed?

- A “signer” is someone who can use BSL. It does not mean they can interpret.

BSL interpreters should be registered with a national body such as NRCPD (www.nrcpd.org.uk) or RBSLI (www.rbsli.org).

- It is not appropriate to use trainee interpreters, family members or work colleagues who can use BSL but are not qualified interpreters.
- Sometimes more than one interpreter is needed depending on the length and complexity of a meeting – interpreters need breaks too!

What are the key workplace issues for Deaf members?

There is no reason why a Deaf worker cannot do the same job as a hearing person, given the right workplace adjustments. Under the Equality Act 2010 Deaf workers are entitled to reasonable adjustments at work. This could include some or all of the following:

- Providing a BSL interpreter
- Providing assistive technology that helps with communication
- Ensuring fire alarms are visible as well as audible (such as a flashing light)
- Speech to text in longer meetings to allow breaks from watching interpreters
- Provision of a car park space if available if public transport is not accessible
- A desk or position in the workplace where the worker can see colleagues and not have their back to them
- Allowing exemptions to hot desking to allow proximity to interpreter and visual fire alarm
- Allowing a period of disability leave, for example for audiology appointments

This is not an exhaustive list. Each member's needs will be different and it is important to give them time to identify the adjustments they need.

Who pays for reasonable adjustments?

Some adjustments don't cost anything for the employer to implement but others, such as BSL provision, are more costly. However government funding may be available through Access to Work. It is the member's responsibility to make the application.

Are there any health and safety issues?

Some employers use health and safety as an excuse not to employ Deaf workers or to dismiss them from their jobs. Stewards should explain to employers that in most circumstances there is no reason why a Deaf worker cannot do their job with the right adjustments in place and that employers have a duty to make reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010. Using health and safety as an excuse for discrimination against Deaf people could land them in an Employment Tribunal.

How does UNISON organise Deaf workers?

UNISON's National Disabled Members Self Organised group holds regular meetings for members who are Deaf native BSL users. Meetings take place in June and August which are open to all Deaf (native BSL) members by signing up at disabilityissues@unison.co.uk There is also a meeting for Deaf (native BSL) members at our national disabled members conference in the autumn.

A word on language

UNISON supports the social model of disability. This is a change from the traditional medical model as it doesn't see disabled people as a 'problem' to be 'cured' but instead focuses on the ways in which society is organised and how we create unnecessary barriers for disabled people. We therefore use language that empowers our disabled members.

Some Deaf members prefer to use a capital 'D' for 'Deaf' to focus on their identity as a linguistic and cultural community rather than on disability or impairment. However, language is continually evolving. So always take on board the language the Deaf member them self prefers is used.

Where can I find more information?

UNISON produces the following guides with more information:

Proving Disability and Reasonable Adjustments

Quick Guide to Access to Work

Quick Guide to the Social Model of Disability

The National Register of Communication Professionals working with Deaf and Deafblind People (NRCPD) holds a register of BSL interpreters at **www.nrcpd.org.uk**

The Regulatory Body for Sign Language Interpreters and Translators (RBSLI) maintains a public register of qualified sign language interpreters and translators at **www.rbsli.org**