

British Sign Language Factsheet

Terminology:

D/deaf	Used to describe people with all degrees of deafness.
Hard of Hearing	Mild to severe hearing loss. Usually used to describe people who've lost hearing gradually.
Deafened	Used to describe people who become severely or profoundly deaf after learning to speak.
Deaf-blind	Used to describe people who have limited vision and hearing or who are totally deaf and blind.

Interesting facts:

- One of the earliest written references to a sign language is from the fifth century BC, in Plato's Cratylus, where Socrates made mention of moving hands to communicate.
- However for the UK, 1576 was the earliest record of British Sign Language, where a deaf couple had a church wedding conducted in sign language.
- 10 million deaf and Hard of Hearing people in the UK (about 1 in 6 of the UK population as a whole).
- 150,000 British Sign Language users; 24,000 DeafBlind people; 400,000 people rely on lip-reading
- Majority of Deaf people's first language is BSL, not English.

What is BSL?*

British Sign Language (BSL) is the preferred language of over 87,000 Deaf people in the UK for whom English may be a second or third language (A total of 151,000 individuals in the UK who can use BSL - this figure does not include professional BSL users, Interpreters, Translators, etc unless they use BSL at home).

Sign languages are fully functional and expressive languages; at the same time they differ profoundly from spoken languages. BSL is a visual-gestural language with a distinctive grammar using handshapes, facial expressions, gestures and body language to convey meaning.

The earliest recorded instance of gestural communication among Deaf people occurs in the Talmud. In his book, "Britain's Deaf Heritage", Peter Jackson speculates that the presence of

sign languages among Australian aborigines, Kalahari Bush People and North American Plains Indians suggests that the use of sign language goes back to prehistoric times.

BSL has been in use for hundreds of years. The first printed account in the UK of its usage was recorded in John Bulwer's "Chirologia – The National Language of the Hand" in 1644. Before that, in 1595 Richard Carew first recorded an observation of Sign Language in use between two Deaf people, Edward Bone and John Kempe, in his Survey of Cornwall. Earlier still, in the Parish book of St Martins', Leicester, an account can be found of a wedding conducted partly in Sign Language on 5 February 1576. References to Sign Language are also found in the Bible and in Greek and Roman writings.

Is Sign Language Universal?*

Contrary to popular belief, Sign Language is not international. Sign languages evolve wherever there are Deaf people, and they show all the variation you would expect from different spoken languages.

They are not derived from the spoken language of a country. Thus, although in Great Britain, Ireland and the United States the main spoken language is English, all three have entirely separate sign languages. As with spoken languages, a sign language can evolve from a parent sign language and therefore show affinities. For instance, due to historical and political links, Australian Sign Language and modern BSL share a common ancestor, and there are similarities between the two. American Sign Language (ASL) bears a resemblance to French Sign Language (LSF) because Laurent Clerc introduced the "methodical sign system" developed by the Abbe de l'Epee in eighteenth century France into American Deaf education. There are also the regional dialects and "accents" which are present in every language.

There is a collection of internationally accepted signs – International Sign (IS) – which is sometimes used in the course of international meetings of Deaf people.

In 1988 the European Parliament passed a Resolution on Sign Languages, proposing that every member country recognise its own national Sign Language as the official language of Deaf people in that country. The Deaf community, through the British Deaf Association and other Deaf organisations and groups, is still campaigning for a legal status for BSL in the UK, in spite that the UK Government recognised BSL as a language of its own rights on 18th March 2003.

Medical model of disability:

Sees a deaf or disabled person as dependent and needing to be "fixed" or "cured" so they are the same as everyone else - Justifies the way in which disabled people have been systematically excluded from society.

Social model of disability:

A positive and inclusive approach to disability - recognises that barriers are created by both the individual and society and seeks to address those to achieve equality for all.

Communication:

Try and find out the Deaf person's preferred method of communication – every person has different preferences; Communication is a two way process; it involves both the deaf and hearing person. Deaf people have different needs for access to communication, services, employment, education, information – one solution will not do for everyone.

Registered Sign Language Interpreter (RSLI):

They are qualified interpreters, having done all the necessary training needed and RSLI's are able to work in most domains – police, medical, work, conferences etc. Identifiable by their yellow ID card.

Trainee Sign Language Interpreter (TSLI):

Trainees are usually working towards becoming qualified and can work in some areas however it is important to remember they are still training. Identifiable by their purple ID card.

Why is having a registered interpreter important?

Appropriately trained and qualified; Enhanced DBS (previously CRB) checks; Insured (PII); Subject to an independent complaints procedure; Work to a professional code of conduct.