



# Charter for British Sign Language



**BSL Charter**  
BritishDeafAssociation



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January 2014

# Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the following people:

Stephen Rooney, former Head of Campaigns, British Deaf Association

Stephen started the whole process of the BDA's "Charter for British Sign Language" and worked constantly behind the scenes for the recognition of BSL.

Paul Redfern, formerly Head of Community Development, British Deaf Association

Paul developed the original Charter and carried it to its conclusion.

BDA staff

Many members of staff at the BDA contributed to the development of the Charter guidelines in various ways, including Jeff McWhinney, Simon Wilkinson-Blake, Avril Hepner, Richard Jones and others.

BSL Charter Update Steering Group 2008 -2011:

A working group of staff from Bristol, Devon, Cardiff and Lewisham councils and the voluntary sector volunteered to work with the BDA to re-write the Charter:

Avril Hepner - BDA

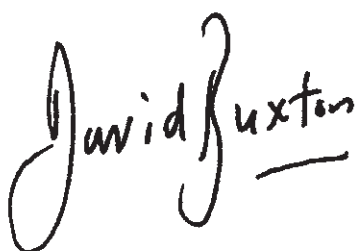
Carolyn Nabarro, Iain Sutherland and Anne James - Bristol City Council

Jo Hooper – Devon County Council

Kristy Cooper - Living Options Devon, Deaf Project

Monika Borkowska – Cardiff Council

Catrina Davies – London Borough of Lewisham

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Buxton". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal line underneath the name.

David Buxton  
**BDA Chief Executive**

## Foreword by Sir Trevor Phillips

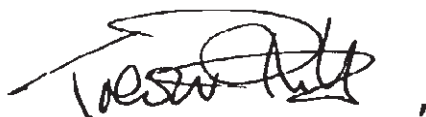


Language is the basic tool of human communication, and without it most of our lives would be reduced to the primitive isolated state Thomas Hobbes described as solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short. However, language is also a great symbol of another precious human quality: diversity. Not only do languages bind us together – they can also express and celebrate our variety.

British Sign Language (BSL) is a vibrant, full and living language. Its vocabulary, structure and grammar are distinct from that of English, although like the spoken word, it has its own regional variations and dialects. It was not taught in UK schools until the mid 1970's and was mistakenly perceived to be merely a 'signed' representation of the spoken word. In 2003 BSL was finally recognised as a language in its own right in the UK.

For many Deaf people, BSL is central to their personal and political identity. And of course, many thousands of relatives, friends and colleagues of Deaf people also use the language. I am delighted to provide this foreword to the revised Charter for British Sign Language. The essence of the charter is that Deaf people deserve equal access to services which will, in the long-term, lead to better life outcomes.

But organisations will also benefit by adopting the Charter. Not only does it add a new dimension to communication with customers, service users and staff; it also makes good organisational sense to become accessible to the many thousands of BSL users throughout the UK.



Trevor Phillips  
Chair  
**Equality and Human Rights Commission**

# Statement by Dr Terry Riley

## The purpose of the BSL Charter

The purpose of the British Sign Language (BSL) Charter is to promote better access to public services for Deaf communities and to help public agencies meet their legislative duties under the Equality Act 2010.

The UK Government ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2009. It is therefore important that local authorities, public services and agencies follow and implement the CRPD. One way this can be achieved is by adopting the BSL Charter.

The British Deaf Association, in partnership with Deaf organisations and local authority officers, has written the BSL Charter and toolkit to achieve better life outcomes for Deaf people and their communities.

Deaf people want to have equal access to services and access to BSL/English interpreters whenever they are needed. The Deaf community is a linguistic community with a rich history, identity, language and culture. We believe equal opportunities can be achieved by working with the Deaf community, rather than by taking decisions and designing services decided on their behalf.

We want the Charter to help local and public authorities to:

- Remove direct and indirect discrimination against Deaf people
- Empower local Deaf communities
- Resolve conflicts between service providers and Deaf people
- Increase awareness of Deaf issues and BSL issues
- Provide better educational options for Deaf children.

The Charter highlights good practice and will build your capacity to eliminate unlawful discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and build good relations with the Deaf community.

We recognise that each local authority will have different priorities for the areas they serve. We therefore expect each local authority to consider the number of pledges that it can sign up to. For some, this will be a minimum of one pledge towards achieving equality for Deaf people in their areas while other local authorities will sign up for all the five pledges.

A self-assessment tool-kit is available for local authorities that have signed up to at least one of the five pledges. The tool-kit helps you to monitor your compliance with the public sector Equality Duty (Equality Act 2010 section 149).

## **The Charter's origins**

### **Recognition of British Sign Language**

Deaf people in Britain campaigned for many years for the recognition of BSL. Deaf campaigners consider this to be a human rights issue.

This campaign was for the right to positively identify with one's language(s), and for others to respect this identification. It asked for BSL to be recognised as a native indigenous language and for Deaf people to have the right to learn it, to develop in formal school settings by being taught through it, and to have the right to use it in official contexts (schools, hospitals, police services, naming of children, religion).

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 recognised that Deaf people, as part of the community of disabled people, have the right to use BSL/English interpreters and to receive equal access to services. However, Deaf people felt that the Act did not recognise Deaf people as a linguistic minority and continued to campaign for a British Sign Language Act, similar to the Welsh Language Act 1993.

On 18th March 2003, the British Government recognised BSL as a language in its own right and as an indigenous language used in the UK. In March 2004, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland announced the formal recognition of BSL and ISL (Irish Sign Language) as languages in their own right in Northern Ireland. Other European Union member states that have led the way in recognising their own national indigenous sign languages on a constitutional level include: Finland (1995), the Slovak Republic (1995), Portugal (1997), the Czech Republic (1998 and 2008), Austria (2005) and Spain (2007).

### **The BSL Charter**

The BSL Charter was launched in Bristol on the same day as the Government recognised BSL as a language in its own right; 18th March 2003. The Charter focuses on bilingual education, access, consultation and improving the teaching of BSL. It is aimed at local authorities and public authorities, aiming to improve services to Deaf adults, young people and children in a systematic way. The Charter was updated in 2011, in line with the new equalities legislation and Deaf people's expectations.



Dr Terry Riley  
**Chair of the BDA**

March 2011

# Introduction to the BDA's Charter for British Sign Language (BSL)

The BDA is asking local authorities and public services across the UK to sign up to our Charter for British Sign Language (BSL). The Charter sets out a number of key pledges to improve access and rights for Deaf people who use sign language.

Each pledge requires a commitment, to overcome the disadvantages that Deaf people using BSL face, in order to achieve the stated objective. The benefits that will ensue from achieving the stated objective are also listed.

The five pledges are:

1. Ensure access for Deaf people to information and services
2. Promote learning and high quality teaching of British Sign Language
3. Support Deaf children and families
4. Ensure staff working with Deaf people can communicate effectively in British Sign Language
5. Consult with our local Deaf community on a regular basis.



# BSL Charter Pledge 1

## **The Pledge:**

### **Ensure access for Deaf people to information and services**

#### **Rationale**

Deaf people face many barriers when trying to access information or services, either through lack of awareness or language barriers. Many Deaf people are often unable to access written information.

#### **Statement of commitment**

As a local authority / public service, we are committed to:

- Ensuring staff receive BSL Awareness/Deaf Equality training, including information about how to communicate with Deaf people
- Using qualified and registered BSL/English interpreters
- Adapting public information to be more BSL accessible, for example on DVD or websites, and using technology such as SMS messaging, textphones, faxes and videophones/webcams
- Ensuring all public information is accessible to Deaf BSL users
- Ensuring buildings are accessible with clear signage.

#### **The objective**

The local authority / public service recognises and values all its customers, including those who use BSL. It aims for its Deaf customers to have the same quality of provision, information, standards and right to be consulted as everyone else.

#### **Benefits**

- Council or public services are accessible to a wider section of the local community, including those lacking good English
- Customer care is improved
- Deaf people can access services independently
- Compliance with the Equality Act 2010
- Effective communication between the service and Deaf BSL users is maximised.

# BSL Charter Pledge 2

## **The Pledge:**

### **Promote learning and high quality teaching of British Sign Language**

#### **Rationale**

There is a need for more BSL courses and for more people to learn BSL.

#### **Statement of commitment**

As a local authority / public service, we are committed to:

- Ensuring that we employ BSL teachers who are native / fluent in BSL and actively engaged with the Deaf community with a comprehensive knowledge of Deaf culture. They should possess relevant qualifications, have undertaken recognised teacher training and are committed to their own Continuing Professional Development (CPD).

#### **The objective**

The local authority/public service recognises that it is essential to support the local infrastructure of teaching and assessment of BSL. It tackles this in conjunction with local economic development agencies and funding bodies. This is to ensure that parents/guardians of Deaf children and young people have access to lessons in BSL along with local authority or public service employees. Everyone learning BSL will profit from good quality teaching leading to a knock-on benefit for other people learning the language.

#### **Benefits**

- There are more BSL courses on offer leading to a range of opportunities for people wishing to learn BSL
- Family members/guardians/carers of Deaf children and young people have an opportunity to learn BSL which will improve bonding and communication with their own Deaf children and young people
- The isolation of people in the Deaf community is reduced, and relations between Deaf and hearing people are improved.

# BSL Charter Pledge 3

## **The Pledge: Support Deaf children and families**

### **Rationale**

Deaf children and their families require good communication from when the diagnosis of deafness is made. The BDA believes that the majority of Deaf children will realise their potential through a bilingual / bicultural approach to learning using BSL and English. 40%<sup>1</sup> of Deaf children and young people have additional needs requiring intensive communication support.

### **Statement of commitment**

As a local authority / public service, we are committed to:

- Providing opportunities for parents / guardians to learn BSL with their children
- Ensuring teachers, teaching assistants, communication support workers and other staff working closely with Deaf children have, or are working towards, advanced BSL signing skills
- Providing opportunities for Deaf children to meet with Deaf peers and role models
- Ensuring Deaf young people are offered the opportunity to improve and accredit their BSL learning
- Raising awareness of BSL and Deaf culture within children's services and education
- Ensuring parents who are Deaf are fully involved in our strategies for improving parenting skills.

### **The objective**

Children's services and education providers recognise the importance of Deaf children and young people being able to achieve on a par with their hearing peers by offering options to parents including a bilingual / bicultural approach.

### **Benefits**

- Deaf children and young people have a language through which they can communicate with and contribute to their local communities
- More Deaf children and young people will achieve academically on a par with their hearing peers leading to more Deaf young people progressing to further and higher education and accessing job opportunities
- The family life of Deaf children is enhanced by the improved communication between the child and their parents/carers and siblings.

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<sup>1</sup>Figure obtained from the booklet, *Deaf Children with Additional Needs* (National Deaf Children's Society, 2011).

# BSL Charter Pledge 4

## **The Pledge:**

### **Ensure staff working with Deaf people can communicate effectively in British Sign Language**

#### **Rationale**

All staff working in public services or local authorities that interact with the public should be able to communicate with all sections of the local community including that of Deaf people.

#### **Statement of commitment**

As a local authority / public service, we are committed to:

- Identifying relevant posts where BSL skills are needed
- Ensuring staff that have daily or involved contact with Deaf people have, or are working towards, advanced BSL signing skills
- Providing opportunities for staff to retain and develop their BSL skills
- Recruiting Deaf staff and ensuring their professional development.

#### **The objective**

Staff providing frontline services can feel confident in being able to communicate with Deaf people and respond appropriately. Members of staff at all customer service points will have basic BSL skills. Specialist workers can be confident that their own skills are extensive enough to enable them to deliver a high level service to a wide range of Deaf people without needing BSL/English interpreters.

#### **Benefits**

- There is good customer care
- There is a reduced need for BSL/English interpreters in specialist services for Deaf people
- Quality staff development for Deaf and hearing staff members is in place.

# BSL Charter Pledge 5

## **The Pledge:**

### **Consult with our local Deaf community on a regular basis**

#### **Rationale**

Deaf people should have the right to be consulted on services or changes to services that affect them.

#### **Statement of commitment**

As a local authority / public service, we are committed to:

- Consulting with local Deaf communities on a regular basis to ensure that services are responsive to local needs
- Supporting Deaf people and their representatives so that they can engage fully in the consultation process.

#### **The objective**

Deaf people who use BSL are able to have input into consultations alongside other forums and user groups thus enabling the Deaf community to be a resource that can be used to improve the design of services for Deaf people.

#### **Benefits**

- Deaf people feel more included in the democratic process
- Deaf people are more involved in the decision-making process with knock-on benefits such as improvements in services for Deaf people
- In turn, Deaf people are empowered by improved services, freeing them to contribute more to the local community.

## What is BSL?

British Sign Language (BSL) is the first or preferred language of many Deaf people in the UK. It is a language of space and movement using the hands, body, face and head.

BSL is the sign language of the Deaf community in the UK (in Northern Ireland, Irish Sign Language (ISL) is also used). BSL is a real, full and living language that is part of a rich cultural heritage. It is one of the UK's indigenous languages; others include English, Welsh, Scottish Gaelic, Irish Gaelic and Cornish. Many hearing people also sign BSL; it has more users than other indigenous languages such as Welsh or Gaelic.

It is a language that has evolved in the UK's Deaf community over hundreds of years. There is considerable research evidence that shows Deaf children who are exposed to BSL early can develop linguistically at the same rate and to the same linguistic levels as hearing children with spoken language. This kind of early access to language ensures lifelong learning leading to improved life opportunities.

BSL is not just a language; it is also a gateway to learning, a path towards a sense of Deaf identity, and the means whereby Deaf people survive and flourish in a hearing world.

## Reviewing the BSL Charter

A conference attended by 38 local authorities and Deaf people from each of the local authority areas and funded by the Equality and Human Rights Commission was held in Bristol on 18th March 2009<sup>2</sup>.

Subsequently the BDA hosted a working group of staff from Bristol City Council, Living Options (Devon), Devon County Council, Cardiff Council and the London Borough of Lewisham to review and re-write the Charter in light of the lessons learned from the conference.

This Charter is an updated version of the original Charter launched in 2003. It has been revised in line with the experiences of staff attempting to implement the 2003 Charter. The pledges have been updated in line with Deaf people's expectations in 2011 and with the new legislative responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010.

The enclosed new self-assessment tool-kit is also now available for local authorities and public services that have signed up to at least one pledge. The tool-kit is designed to support organisations in planning and implementing their pledges at a time of financial constraints facing the public sector.

The BDA can give support to local authorities and public services wishing to implement their pledges with the following:

- Consultancy
- BSL training
- BSL awareness/equality training
- Contacting local Deaf communities through our Area Councils
- Promotions using our website
- Community-related campaigning.

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<sup>2</sup>The conference report is available on the Deaf equality pages at [www.bristol.gov.uk/equality](http://www.bristol.gov.uk/equality).

# The British Deaf Association – BDA

## Vision

Our vision is Deaf people fully participating and contributing as equal and valued citizens in wider society.

## Mission

Our Mission is to ensure a world in which the language, culture, community, diversity and heritage of Deaf people in the UK is respected and fully protected, ensuring that Deaf people can participate and contribute as equal and valued citizens in the wider society. This will be achieved through:

- Improving the quality of life by empowering Deaf individuals and groups;
- Enhancing freedom, equality and diversity;
- Protecting and promoting BSL.

## Values

The BDA is a Deaf people's organisation representing a diverse, vibrant and ever-changing community of Deaf people. Our activities, promotions, and partnerships with other organisations aim to empower our community towards full participation and contribution as equal and valued citizens in the wider society. We also aim to act as guardians of BSL.

- 1. Protecting our Deaf culture and Identity** – we value Deaf peoples' sense of Deaf culture and identity derived from belonging to a cultural and linguistic group, sharing similar beliefs and experiences with a sense of belonging.
- 2. Asserting our linguistic rights** – we value the use of BSL as a human right. As such, BSL must be preserved, protected and promoted because we also value the right of Deaf people to use their first or preferred language.
- 3. Fostering our community** – we value Deaf people with diverse perspectives, experiences and abilities. We are committed to equality and the elimination of all forms of discrimination with a special focus on those affecting Deaf people and their language.
- 4. Achieving equality in legal, civil and human rights** – we value universal human rights such as the right to receive education and access to information in sign language, and freedom from political restrictions on our opportunities to become full citizens.
- 5. Developing our alliance** – we value those who support us and are our allies because they share our vision and mission, and support our BSL community.

*Campaigning for Equal Rights for Deaf people!*









To contact the  
British Deaf Association,  
please look at our website:  
**[www.bda.org.uk](http://www.bda.org.uk)**

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