

## **Introduction**

The 2011 Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority's review of Sensory Rehabilitation Services in Northern Ireland identified inconsistencies in the provision of sign language interpretation and other Communication Support Services for people who are deaf and hard of hearing.

In 2016 the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) carried out a review of the provision of Communication Support Services. A key recommendation from this review was that Communication Support Services should be provided through a single regional shared service model to be supplied by the Business Services Organisation (BSO). HSCB Board members formally approved the implementation of this recommendation at its Board meeting on 11 May 2017.

## **Current Communication Support/Sign Language Interpreting Service Provision**

At present the communication support/Sign Language Interpreting Service provides face to face communication/sign language interpreting support only. Currently three service providers, commissioned to provide services across NI, support deaf, deafblind and hard of hearing people across the catchment areas of all five Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT) areas.

## **Hard of Hearing Service Provision**

It is estimated there are 300,000 people living with a hearing loss within NI; approximately 70,000 of these people require the use of a hearing aid (Action for Hearing Loss, 2019). Speech to Text Reporting (STTR) and notetaking communication support can be provided through existing external provider organisations. However, there are only two STTS professionals providing support within the province. There are currently no statistics available indicating levels of uptake/provision across Health and Social Care services.

## **DeafBlind Service Provision**

Following a review of the needs of deafblind people living in NI in 2014 SENSE reported that there were significant variances in the numbers and needs of people identified as experiencing a co-existing hearing and visual loss across each of the Trusts. Numbers

ranged from 141 people per 100,000 in the WHSCT to 21 per 100,000 within the NHSCT. The numbers of people identified increased with age; this reflects similar increases reported in comparative regional and international studies.

In recent years the HSCB has supported the development of the skills and expertise of HSC staff through provision of training to work with people who are deafblind. Specialist Deafblind Communication Support is only provided through external provider organisations. The NHSCT reported that they had provided 28 deafblind assignments/bookings in 2018/19; no other statistics exist regarding level of uptake or provision of specialist services for people who are deafblind across the HSC service.

### **Current Sign Language Interpreter Provision**

At the time of this paper it is estimated there are approximately 5,000 British Sign Language (BSL) users and approximately 2,000-3,000 Irish Sign Language (ISL) service users living in NI. In 2018/19 sign language interpreters provided 3,573 face to face interpreting assignments. Of these 3,124 were face to face BSL interpreting assignments and 449 were face to face ISL interpreting assignments. Most bookings occur Monday to Friday between the hours of 9.00am and 6.00pm. However, over this period, there were approximately 200 bookings outside these working hours and approximately 40 bookings on Saturdays and Sundays.

A minimum of 2-3 weeks advance notice is normally required to book an interpreter for a routine appointment. Complex appointments, requiring 2 interpreters, may require 4-8 weeks' notice. For urgent/emergency requests it can be more challenging to access a sign language interpreter with further difficulties when one is required out of hours (i.e. before 9.00am and after 5.00pm Monday to Friday and at the weekends and public/bank holidays).

Current providers of communication support do not consistently record statistics on unmet need i.e. when they have been unable to access a sign language interpreter particularly when the request is for an out of hours or emergency booking. None of the current providers have a paid on call sign language interpreting service provision and appear to rely on the goodwill and availability of sign language interpreters. Details of service providers being unable to access an interpreter for the year 2018/19 are as follows:-

- the NHSCT were unable to access a sign language interpreter for 66 requests.
- the WHSCT for 2 requests.
- the Belfast and South East HSCT area on 12 occasions (report only covered first 3 months of the year)

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### **Costs of Interpreting**

Sign language Interpreters charge a minimum booking fee of 2 hours for all appointments. The hourly rate for an interpreter is usually £35-£40 per hour; they also receive travelling expenses and, if travelling significant distances, is paid travel time. If an assignment is cancelled within 7 days of an appointment the sign language interpreter is paid the full booking fee. If cancelled between 7 days and 2 weeks they receive 50% of the booking fee and if the assignment is cancelled more than 14 days before the appointment they receive no booking fee payment. Additional fees associated with provider charges are not included within these costs.

### ***Cancellations***

There were a total of 269 cancelled appointments across all HSC areas in 2018/19. Approximately 200 of these cancelled appointments incurred a charge at full booking fee rate. Cancellations occur for a variety of reasons, i.e. service users failing to attend, cancellation by the booking practitioner, etc.

### ***Cancellations due to interpreter unavailability***

In 2018/19 there were 90 cancellations of service user appointments due to no interpreter being available.

### **Sign Language Interpreter Workforce**

At the time of writing this briefing paper there are 36 BSL interpreters and 4 ISL interpreters providing sign language interpreting support to service users living and accessing HSC services across NI. The vast majority (87.5 %) of these interpreters live within 20 miles of Belfast City or live near to Derry City.

Six of the 36 BSL interpreters provided **40.01 %** of sign language interpreting in 2018/19; ten provided **55%** of all ISL interpreting for HSC. Also in 2018/9, of interpreters who undertook sign language interpreting assignments:-

- 50% did the equivalent of less than one assignment a week
- 17.5% undertook less than 10 assignments over the year

Many interpreters work outside of HSC service provision eg Department of Education, Department of Justice, Department of Communities/Access to work etc. Whilst there are 40

sign language interpreters working across NI it is not fully understood how many whole time equivalent sign language interpreters work within HSC settings.

### **Current Challenges Within Existing Service Provision**

Over recent months the HSCB have been working to take forward and redesign service provision in keeping with the recommendations as detailed within the Review of Communication Support in 2016. The key recommendation approved by HSCB members is to develop and procure a regional standardised model of service provision, which will offer consistency, standardisation, and accessibility of service delivery and represents value for money. The regional standardised model should include:-

- All face-to-face and remote interpreting services should be funded centrally and be accessible to all HSC organisations as well as independent contractors such as GPs, General Dental Practitioners, Community Pharmacists and Opticians;
- A Service Model profiled to achieve a balance of face to face interpreting and, where appropriate non face-to-face interpreting, to manage demand, offer value for money and increase accessibility. This should include development of clear guidance to ensure the appropriate use of the various forms of interpreting by HSC professionals;
- Undertake a controlled pilot in the use of remote communication support;
- A regional advisory group should be established to oversee the development and delivery of interpreting services including governance and accountability issues. This group should include service user representation;
- Interpreters should be deployed as efficiently as possible through effective resource management and innovative use of technology;
- A central system should be used to ensure consistency of coding and to encourage appropriate referrals, including out of hours requests;
- Consistent and relevant data sets should be developed to ensure effective performance management, including information on referral source, assignment type and service response;
- Regional quality standards for communication support service should be developed as part of the contract, including the management of complaints;
- A Communication Support Code of Conduct should be developed in association with governing bodies.

### **Progress to Date**

The HSCB has been working closely with the Business Service Organisation (BSO) to take forward plans to redesign existing service provision into one Regional Communication Support Service provided through the BSO. This work is overseen by the Regional Communication Support Services Steering Group. Membership includes deaf, hard of hearing service users, community and voluntary organisations, HSCTs, the BSO and the HSCB.

The BSO currently provides the Regional Foreign Language Interpreting Service. It is planned to apply their existing service provision knowledge where appropriate to the communication support/interpreter service provision for deaf, deafblind and hard of hearing people. This service will work alongside the Foreign Language Interpreting Service.

Development of the new model of service has involved engagement with a wide range of stakeholders e.g. sign language interpreters, community and voluntary groups, statutory HSC staff and BSO staff including legal services. In addition the HSCB has linked with other services across the UK and Ireland to find out and learn from others how their services operate and what works well.

Initially the HSCB/BSO set out to develop a service model that provided services through a sub-contracting arrangement with sign language interpreters/communication support professionals. It has since become clear that this would not resolve some of the challenges and difficulties that exist within current service provision. These challenges and difficulties are as follows:-

- Interpreters work across a number of organisations/services; this makes it very difficult to assure their availability to undertake assignments.
- Communication support can be difficult to access in a timely way e.g. 2-3 weeks' advance notice is normally required to access an interpreter for a routine appointment. On occasions, if 2 interpreters are needed, 6-8 weeks' notice can be required for an assignment.
- It is very challenging to access communication support in emergency/urgent situations. This is evidenced in the level of unavailability of interpreters and there have been a number of incidents and complaints around lack of access in these situations.
- Current booking practices for sign language interpreters can be restrictive due to the booking fee covering a 2-hour period. Although appointments can last this length of time, or longer, many can last for a much shorter period. This 2-hour requirement

could therefore restrict that interpreter from taking on additional interpreting service provision despite being available to do so when appointments are shorter.

- As sign language interpreters work across several organisations it is very difficult to co-ordinate their work or assignments to local areas, to a group of appointments or to geographical locations to reduce their time travelling.
- Interpreters as independent contractors/providers work across many organisations and HSC providers. This provides no opportunity for effective overview of their work through managerial and professional support.
- As independent providers they have no guaranteed income, no paid leave or sickness.
- They have challenges around maintaining their continuous professional practice requirements i.e. accessing training. There are continual obligations to be up-to-date on key areas that develop and change e.g. safeguarding processes, record keeping and data protection. Working as an independent practitioner it can be challenging to be aware of these changes and to access the training for same.
- They do not have access to opportunities that a large organisation such as the BSO can provide on a professional/career pathway.
- Some sign language interpreters have developed expertise in specific areas e.g. Mental Health, Safeguarding. For some sign language interpreters there are limited opportunities to develop their skills and expertise in these areas. This restricts health and social care practitioners' access to interpreters skilled in these areas.
- Less experienced sign language interpreters appear to find it difficult to be offered assignments; this inhibits their development and can cause financial challenges to them.
- It is challenging for sign language interpreters to maintain their skills and expertise if they are undertaking a limited number of assignments.
- Many interpreters are registered with the NRCPD/RBSLI; indeed it is an accepted industry standard for them to do so. These bodies provide a framework for good practice and governance for sign language interpreters to work to. However as these are non-regulated bodies it is not mandatory for sign language interpreters to do so.
- These bodies are limited to the level to which they can provide local support and overview of the quality and safety of services provided.

### **The Future Communication Support Service**

The redesigned service aims to:-

1. Provide a service which will support safe, effective and clear communication between health and social care staff and service users, their carer's and families.
2. Ensure the health and social care system will meet its legislative requirements.
3. Ensure the delivery of a standard of service which meets Health and Social Care's duty of care obligations.
4. Empower service users, carers and families to make well informed decisions reduce risk and avoid harm.

### **What will it provide**

The service initially will provide the following communication support/interpreting services:-

- British Sign Language (BSL)
- Irish Sign Language (ISL)
- Deafblind interpreting
- Speech to Text/Verbatim Speech to Text Reporters (STTR)/ Electronic Notetaking
- Translation

### **How will it be provided**

BSL and ISL interpreting services will be delivered by BSL and ISL interpreters directly recruited and employed by the BSO.

Communication support to service users requiring Deafblind interpreting, Speech to Text, Verbatim Speech to Text Reporters (STTR) and translation will be provided through a procured external provider(s).

### **What will the new service do**

The new service will address the key challenges by:-

- ensuring access to interpreters which could be directly booked.
- accessing interpreters in emergency/out-of-hours situations.
- addressing sign language interpreter concerns on guaranteed income, annual leave, sick leave etc.

- providing opportunities, through the BSO organisation, for sign language interpreters to develop their career and provide support and training which will meet their professional requirements and pastoral care.
- developing a service which utilises the benefits offered by support and structure gained through the development of a team managing the availability of interpreters.
- Manage effective allocation of interpreters to mitigate costs, increase utilisation and deliver capacity for expected growth post-transition.
- Ensure good governance and accountability.

### **Management of the Service**

The service will be managed by the BSO as part of the Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Interpreting Service (NIHSCIS). Communication Support Staff employed directly with the service will report directly to the NIHSCIS manager and be accountable to the Head of Shared Services. All Communication Support staff will be required to work within BSO policies and procedures.

A senior communication support professional/interpreter post holder will have protected time to allow them to take responsibility for professional issues relating to interpreter practice e.g. quality and safety, supervision etc.

In addition there will be a waiting list and a bank list of Sign language Interpreters established to support any future staff resource/service development requirements.

For service contingency requirements the service will be able to access an external procured interpreting service.

Sign language interpreting staff will work normal working hours, ie from Monday to Friday 9.00am-5.00pm, and will be required to participate in an on call service to provide communication support out of hours/in an emergency.

### **Other Communication Support**

Communication support for deafblind, notetaking, Verbatim Speech to Text Reporters (STTR), Speech to Text will be provided through externally procured service provision.

### **Contingency Cover Arrangements for Sign Language Interpreting**

In the event that challenges in staffing resource arise the service can:-

- Access staff through a sign language interpreting 'waiting' list. It is planned through a recruitment process to establish a 'waiting list' of sign language interpreters.
- Access staff through a sign language interpreting 'bank' list. It is planned through a recruitment process to establish a 'bank' of sign language interpreters. These staff will have no fixed working hours but can be offered fixed periods of working if service demands require this.
- Access to an external procured sign language interpreting service.

### **Remote Interpreting**

Existing service provision does not provide a remote interpreting service option for sign language users. Within the new model of service provision it is the intention to procure a Remote Sign Language Interpreting Service to be provided through an external service provider.

A Remote Sign Language Interpreting Service can complement and enhance existing face to face sign language interpreting communication support service provision. Videoconferencing technology, equipment and high speed broadband internet connections are used to provide this service. Remote Interpreting services can provide both a Video Relay System (VRS) and a Video Remote Interpreting System (VRI).

The HSCB will take forward a market research exercise over the next month. The market research exercise will provide information from across the UK on the current service provision and requirements for same. This information will help inform the BSO and HSCB on the type and detail of the service required for NI.

### **Communication**

A communication sub-group has been developed to take forward the communication strategy associated with the project. The group has a membership which is representative of all the HSC organisations and service users. It will focus on several areas:-

- Providing awareness training to deaf, deafblind and hard of hearing people on the new service and how to access it.
- Providing awareness training to practitioners working across all HSC organisations/services on the new service and how to book a sign language interpreter/communication support professional.

In addition this work will include informing service users who access the service on how they can provide feedback around the service or raise a concern/make a complaint. Furthermore a separate regional group has been established to take forward awareness training for staff working with people who are deaf, deafblind or hard of hearing.

### **Next Steps**

The initial priority is to share details of the service model being taken forward, and progress to date, with all relevant stakeholders. Thereafter there are a number of key steps to be taken as summarised below:-

- Develop and put in place the relevant policies and procedures to support the new service.
- Redesign/utilise existing software and technology to support service provision.
- Commence the recruitment process to recruit sign language interpreting staff to BSO.
- Further develop the communication strategy and provide training and awareness to service users and practitioners.
- Enhance feedback processes to inform quality and safety of service provision.
- Undertake a training needs analysis of interpreter/communication support staff.
- Develop an induction and training plan for BSO staff involved with the provision of the communication support service.
- Continue to take forward procurement process for the Remote Interpreting Service.
- Pilot Remote Interpreting service prior to rolling out service.
- Develop regional standards for service provision.
- Continue to support the Steering Group/Advisory Group in its work

