British Sign Language online interpreting service

Analysis of engagement responses

Contents

Executive Summary

Engagement with British Sign Language (BSL) users on Video Relay Services (VRS) took place between March and April 2025 to help inform the new tender for the Contact Scotland BSL service. The engagement sought views in-person, and online across 25 questions for BSL users and 30 for organisations on their experience of using Video Relay Services and similar technology and what they would like to see from a free service in Scotland.

In total we received feedback from 336 people (293 via British Deaf Association (BDA) Scotland in-person and online engagement events and 43 responses to the online survey for individuals and 44 organisational responses to the online survey for organisations.

Usage of Video Relay Service

- Of the BSL users who responded that they use a VRS service, weekly is the most common frequency and they report using it for medical and customer service calls mostly.
- The devices most often used to access the service are smartphones followed by tablets and users mainly use apps to register rather than making direct anonymous calls to the service.

Key features and preferences

- Better quality interpreters, higher video/audio quality and more interpreter availability, were ranked the most important additional features
- The most important features in interpreters were fluency and accuracy in BSL, including awareness of regional variations and professionalism (e.g., punctuality, appearance, attitude, patience, behaviour).
- 24/7 access was important to most respondents.
- Customer service was important to most respondents but to a lesser extent important to users compared to organisations.
- DeafBlind responses from the in-person events focused around having access to the right assistive tools, training and support to use a VRS service. One DeafBlind respondent suggested DeafBlind awareness training and a system flag to alert service staff that a person calling is DeafBlind would help.

Organisational responses

- The organisations noted that the biggest challenges businesses face in communicating with BSL users were difficulty in accessing interpreters quickly (35%), lack of awareness or training (26%), cost of accessibility services (23%) and lack of customer demand (8%).
- Most organisations confirmed that the frequency they hold Video Relay Services calls with BSL users is variable/ demand led.
- Organisations reported that staff would benefit from material and information on how VRS and similar services operate, and a short and easily digestible introductory guide would be most beneficial to encourage employees to use VRS in their organisations.

Background

Scottish Government fund the Contact Scotland BSL online interpreting Video Relay Service. The service enables Deaf and Deafblind British Sign Language (BSL) users to telephone, via video relay interpreters, numbers (including public, private, third sector, retail etc.), 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

We are tendering for a new free national service for BSL users in Scotland in 2025. To make sure this new service works best for BSL users and increases usage, we wanted feedback from the BSL community on how they currently use Video Relay Services and what they would like to see from a future service.

Contact Scotland BSL is the name of the free service that is paid for by the Scottish Government. Respondents were not asked about the current Contact Scotland BSL service and were encouraged to think about other Video Relay Services, apps or technology they use to get a fuller picture.

In February and March 2025, British Deaf Association (BDA) Scotland hosted in-person engagement events in 14 deaf clubs across Scotland and held two Zoom events to gather feedback from the community. To publicise the events the BDA shared posters for the events at the clubs, via their email distribution list and on the BDA Scotland Facebook page. This engagement took place in BSL.

Gov.scot hosted an online MS Forms survey with similar questions for BSL users. The Scottish Government worked with BDA Scotland to ensure the questions were suitable in BSL. The questions were translated to BSL and shared on the Scottish Government YouTube Channel and the BSL Scotland Act 2015 webpage with the option to email responses in BSL.

The online BSL user survey asked 25 questions including nine open-ended questions that had a text box to expand on previous answers; the remainder were closed multiple-choice or rated questions. The online BSL user survey also included five extra questions to gather the demographics of respondents including age and sex.

The online survey for organisations asked 30 questions include 9 open-ended questions that had a text box to expand on previous answers; the remainder were closed multiple-choice or rated questions. The online survey for organisations also including five extra organisations to gather the demographics of organisational respondents including organisation size, public sector body type, and whether they are private, public, or third sector.

This analysis includes notes collated from the engagement events organised by the BDA. The sessions were broadly structured around the online survey, however, also provided an open forum for attendees to discuss the issues being considered more widely. Throughout this report, we highlight either where the discussion at these sessions aligned with the themes arising from the online survey responses, or where unique perspectives were raised.

The Scottish Government designed an online survey to capture the views of listed authorities and other organisations. The survey was shared by email by Scottish Government, BDA and other stakeholders and published on the scot.gov website. These online surveys were analysed internally by the Scottish Government's analytical team within the Equalities Directorate, and this analysis, alongside a report by BDA Scotland on their community engagement, were used to inform this summary report.

Respondent profile

In total we received feedback from 336 people, most of these were through attendance at BDA Scotland's in-person and online engagement events (293) and 43 responses to the online survey and 44 organisations.

Respondent profile	**Number of respondents**	**% of total sample***
Individuals	336	
- BDA in-person BSL event	278	83%
- BDA online BSL event	15	4.5%
- Online English survey	43	13%
Organisations	44	13%
- Public sector healthcare	15	4.5%
- Public sector government	10	3%
- Public sector education	6	2%
- Public sector social services	3	0.9%
- Public sector court services	1	0.3%
- Public sector emergency services	1	0.3%
- Private sector	0	0%
- Third sector	10	3%

*Percentages are rounded up or down to nearest full number or decimal point

Usage of Video Relay Service

Frequency of use	**Number of respondents BDA events**	**Number of respondents online survey**	**% of total sample**
Total responses	**273**	**43**	94%
Daily	10	5	4.5%
Weekly	60	20	24%
Monthly	40	3	13%
Rarely	28	7	10%
Never	108	8	35%
No response	27		8%

Online user survey responses

We received 43 responses to the online user survey. The respondents were predominately women (26 out of 43, 60%), in the 35 to 54 age range (23 out of 35, 43% combined) that were answering as a deaf/deafblind BSL user (30 out of 43, 71%). The headlines from the online user survey are included below:

Usage of Video Relay Service

- Frequency: **weekly** 47% (20 out of 43)
- 35% combined said **rarely** (7 out of 43) **or never** (8 out of 43).
- **Medical appointments** 18%, **customer service** 16% followed by personal 13% are the top type of calls used for VRS.
- A **smartphone** (42%) followed by **tablet** (24%) are the devices most often used to access VR.
- Of those that answered this question (35 out of 43) the majority use **apps (log-in and password) to register** (89%) rather than making direct anonymous calls. The reason given for the preference include

Why do you use apps to register?	Themes	Frequency
Total responses: 35*	Ease / speed	20
	More secure	3
	Retrieve call history	2
	Call back service	2
	Contacted directly with unique number	1
	Did not know there was an alternative to apps	2
	Can access different services	1

*Where response numbers appear higher or lower than total in right column, respondents will have selected multiple responses.

Why Anonymous call to register?	Theme	Frequency
Total responses: 4	Don’t trust app security	2
	Can’t use apps	1
	Didn’t know about apps	1

Key features and preferences

- **Good quality interpreters** (31%) followed by clear picture (15%) and ease of use (15%) are most important to users about VRS.
- Of those that responded (35 of 43) **all said the video quality** is important for clear communication when using a video relay service.

- 77% (27 of 35) would be confident downloading Video Relay Service apps or using their websites. For those who said they were not confident (8 out of 35 2.8%), the reasons given include: lack of tech knowledge / confidence (3), concerns with confidentiality (2), not possible on work devices (2), struggles with English (1)
- Of those that responded (35 of 43, 78%) **all said 24/7 access** to the service is important to them.
- 80% (28 of 35) said **customer service was important** when accessing this service.
- 46% (16 of 35) said access to interpreters from Scotland or interpreters with knowledge of local Scottish signs and dialects was very important the remaining respondents were neutral (15 out of 35, 43%) or thought it was not important (4 out of 35, 11%).
- **More interpreter availability, better quality interpreters and higher video/audio quality were ranked the most important additional features or improvements**. Below these in order of importance was the service being fully accessible to deafblind BSL users, being able to type numbers/messages in a box, improved speech-to-text accuracy and customer service encouraging and implementing user feedback.
- Other features or improvement suggested included **a queue position and callback facility**.
- The qualities that the highest volume of respondents selected as important in an interpreter (97.7%) were:
    - **Fluency and accuracy in British Sign Language**, including awareness of regional variations
    - **Professionalism** (e.g., punctuality, appearance, attitude, patience, behaviour)
    - Clarity in interpretation (e.g., clear signing, good facial expressions and body language)
    - Good communication with both BSL users and hearing people

Service availability and accessibility

- 60% (21 of 35) did not report having encountered any issues with **availability of interpreters**. Of those who had encountered issues and provided more details the reasons were:

Issues with availability of interpreters?	Theme	Frequency
Responses: 14	Wait times	9
	Tech issues	2
	Interpreter cancelled	2
	No interpreter available	1
	Interpreter skills	1

- 60% (21 of 35) did not report having encountered any issues with the **quality of interpreters**. Of those who had encountered issues and provided more details the issues were unfamiliar with signs / lack of knowledge, quality of signing, poor attitude/personal skills of interpreters.

Have you ever encountered any issues with quality of the interpreters?	Theme	Frequency
Responses: 14	Unfamiliar with signs / lack of knowledge	5
	Quality of Signing	3
	Poor attitude/personal skills of interpreters	3

- 51% (18 of 35) did not report having encountered **any connection issues with the app or website hosting the service**. Of those who had encountered issues included:

Connection issues	Theme	Frequency
Responses: 17	Hardware – doesn't connect to camera	1
	Poor connection / slow connection	6
	Blank screen / poor picture quality	3
	Cutting out / lost connection	5
	Call back failed	1
	Disconnected when someone FaceTime/ calls	1

Customer service

- Respondents were asked "**How important is customer service for you when accessing this service? Please explain your answer in more detail, for example why you are neutral or it's not important to you?"** 35 out of 43 people answered this question.
- For those that did respond, it is clear that this question has been interpreted in different ways by respondents. Some took the question to mean how important VRS is to them, some understood customer service as the general attitude of staff and some understood customer service as a specific service outside of the BSL interpreting service.
- **Very Important:** 28 Respondents (80%) answered that customer service was very important to them. One respondent reiterated that customer service was important to them but gave no further details.
- 8 respondents understood this question to mean customer service as a general attitude or approach held by all staff working in the service. These respondents suggest that this is important for them to be respected and understood and that they deserve a professional service.
- 8 respondents understood customer service to mean a specific service, which they reported helped them when they had any issues, technical difficulties, raising complaints and general support. One respondent reflected that good

customer service helped them to save time when trying to deal with and issue. One response reflected a very negative experience with customer service.

- 6 respondents seemed to understand this question to be asking about the importance of the VRS itself and reported the importance of the service to ensuring their independence and aiding communication between hearing people and BSL users.
- 4 respondents did not provide reasons why they chose “very important”.
- **Neutral:** 7 respondents were neutral on the importance of customer service.
- 3 respondents understood this as asking about the general attitude of staff: One respondent suggested the general customer service approach was good and the other responded that it was nice but not necessary to have “pleasantries” with their interpreter before the start of the meeting. Another response suggested the importance of treating everyone the same when accessing the service.
- 4 respondents understood this question to ask about a separate customer service, which two had not used, and one respondent said that it was useful to have if they needed support with an issue. Finally, one respondent used this to highlight the requirement for more BSL interpreters rather than specific staff for customer service.

Additional features/improvements

Please give details of any other additional features or improvements you would like that are not listed above.	Theme	Frequency
Responses: 24	Resolve tech functionality issues	2
	Video message/voicemail /call back	2
	Individual phone numbers	2
	Choice of interpreters	2
	Queue position / wait time	2
	More access in hospitals	1
	Interpreter attitude	1
	Anonymity	1
	Responding to issues*	1
	Quick set up*	1
	Happy with Contact Scotland	1

*Respondent did not provide further information.

Three respondents interpreted this question differently and suggested more awareness raising around issues deaf people face, more BSL schools and teachers, access to communication support workers, and more awareness of available services in hospitals.

Anything else?	Theme	Frequency
Responses: 20	The service is useful / accessible / important	9
	Good for direct communication	3
	Helps with independence	3
	Improve interpreter attitude	1
	Poor customer service	1
	24/7 service is important	1
	Improve tech issues	3
	Regional variations should be considered	1
	More interpreters	1
	More publicity	1

Use of other services

I**f you selected services you have used and liked, please tell us what you liked about these services?**	Theme	Frequency
The following themes have been collated but have not been considered against the multiple-choice responses respondents gave in the question previous to this (which other services do they use).		
Responses: 43	Accessible / useful	9
	VRI good direct communication	3
	VRI efficient	2
	VRI good in emergency	1
	VRI needs more interpreters	1
	Tech improved	1
	VRI poor connection	1
	Helps with independence	3
	AI useful	3
	Provides alternatives / options	2
	Prefer in person	1

British Deaf Association Scotland in-person and online engagement responses

Usage of Video Relay Service

- **Frequency**: 40% (108 out of 273) answered that they never use the Contact Scotland BSL Service. Of those that used the service 22% (60 out of 273) was those who use on a **weekly** basis, while 15% use monthly (40 out of 273), 10% (28 out of 273) use it rarely. Only 4% use it daily (10 out of 273.
- **Medical appointments, customer service** followed by emergency services are the top type of calls used for VRS.
- A **smartphone** (44%) followed by **tablet** (31%) are the devices most often used to access VR.
- The majority of those who responded use **apps (log-in and password) to register** (37%) rather than making direct anonymous calls.
- In answering this question respondents reported not understanding the difference between logging in and making direct calls and wanted clarity on why registration was needed and whether this was so hearing people could call them back. They reported difficulties with logging in and registering and the need to continuously log in again and again, and suggested guidance on how to log in and register and make direct calls is provided.

Key features and preferences

- **Confidentiality, good quality interpreters** followed by **clear picture** are most important to users about VRS.
- Of those that responded (190 of 284) **67% said the video quality** is important for clear communication when using a video relay service.
- 53% (91 of 171) of those who responded would be confident downloading Video Relay Service apps or using their websites, 42% (122 out of 293(did not respond and 27% said they would not be confident.
- Of those that responded that they would not be confident, confidence in downloading and using apps and websites (particularly with apps and websites being in English), issues with passwords, and the need to have up-to-date phones or devices to access apps or websites, were some of the main reasons given for this.
- Of those that responded the majority, (188 out of 197) **95% said 24/7 access** to the service is important to them. (95 out of 293) **32.5% did not respond.**
- Of those that responded the majority, 56% (168 of 299) said **customer service was important** when accessing this service.
- Reasons given as to why this was important is for dealing with complaints and resolving issues quickly (including technical issues).
- 56% (168 of 299) said access to interpreters from Scotland or interpreters with knowledge of local Scottish signs and dialects was very important the remaining respondents were neutral (8%) or thought it was not important (10%).
- **Better quality interpreters, higher video/audio quality and more interpreter availability, were ranked the most important additional features** or improvements.

- Other features wanted by respondent was a fully accessible service to deafblind BSL users, able to type numbers/messages in a box, improved speech-to-text accuracy and customer service encouraging and implementing user feedback.
- Other features or improvement suggested included employing more interpreters, a community directory of phone numbers so people do not have to look these up, or to save and bookmark regularly used numbers, a call alert system to notify BSL users someone is trying to call them.
- The qualities that the highest volume of respondents selected as important in an interpreter were:
    - Experience with Deaf culture and understanding the needs of the Deaf community (220 respondents)
    - Good communication with both BSL users and hearing people (219)
    - Friendly and approachable (218)
    - **Fluency and accuracy in British Sign Language**, including awareness of regional variations (217)
    - **Professionalism** (e.g., punctuality, appearance, attitude, patience, behaviour) (217)
    - Flexibility (217)
- Other important qualities highlighted were;
    - Knowledge of the subject matter (217)
    - Ability to remain neutral, impartial, and respectful (214)
- Confidentiality and empathy in sensitive situations was also recognised as important.
- Attendees reported using and liking smart phone apps/technology (32 %, 87 out of 273), video captions (24%, 66 out of 273), Video Remote Interpreting (VRI) (21%, 58 out of 273) speech to text software (12%, 34 out of 273) and AI (8%, 23 out of 273).
- Some respondents were interested in VRI but expressed concerns regarding access to this technology for older BSL users.
- Some respondents were interested in AI but expressed concern regarding reducing use of face-to-face interpreting and accuracy.

Service availability and accessibility

- Of those who responded 31% (92 of 293) reported having encountered an issues with availability of interpreters. Of those who had encountered issues the most common reason was delays and queues waiting to get connected, switching part way through call and lack of option to pick sex of interpreter when needed.
- 31% (80 of 259) did not report having encountered any issues with the quality of interpreters. Of those who had encountered issues included the signing skills and knowledge of specific signs including Scottish signs, attitude, video quality.
- 27% (70 of 259) reported having encountered connection issues with the app or website hosting the service. Of those who had encountered issues included black screen and connectivity issues with interpreters working at home or Wi-Fi.

Organisational survey response

Demographics

- **77% public sector (34 out of 43) and 23% third sector (10 out of 43),** no responses from private sector.
- The makeup of the public sector responses was: 38% healthcare sector (13); government 29% (10); education 18% (6); social service 9% (3); court service 1% (1) and emergency services 1% (1).
- The third sector areas responses came from were social care, health and wellbeing and, sensory loss.
- 68% (30) were from large organisations (over 250 employees), followed by 16% (7) small (under 50 employees), (4) 9% medium (between 51 – 250) and 7% (3) micro (under 10)

Engaging BSL users

- The **organisations interact with British Sign Language (BSL) users in their service provision 43% daily**, 27% weekly, 18% monthly and 11% yearly.
- The main methods currently used to engage with BSL users were In-person BSL/English interpreters (23%), written communication (e.g., email, letters) (19%), followed by **Video Relay Services (15%)** and Online BSL/English interpreters (13%).

Staff

- 59% reported that **some staff were trained on how best to communicate with BSL users**, including Deaf or Deafblind people. While 27% confirmed all staff are trained and 14% answered that no staff are not trained.
- The majority of respondents felt their staff were somewhat (52%) or very aware (32%) of the communication needs of Deaf and Deafblind people.

Usage of Video Relay Service

- The biggest challenges businesses face in communicating with BSL users were noted as **difficulty in accessing interpreters quickly (35%), lack of awareness or training (26%), cost of accessibility services (23%) and lack of customer demand** (8%).
- 48% noted that the frequency of holding Video Relay Services calls with BSL users if **variable/ demand led**, while 25% noted that they never hold calls and the remaining respondents noted other frequencies.
- **Experience of using VRS:** Respondents were asked to respond to the question 'If you personally have used VRS, what was your experience like?' using 'neutral, positive, negative, and never used'. Respondents were then asked to explain their answer. The responses to the free text question have been categorised based on these two questions:
    - Neutral: 2 responses rated their experience as neutral
    - Only one respondent elaborated. Their response highlighted that the people they work with are not always aware how to use the service and that technical issues occur.
    - Positive: 20 responses rated their experiences positive.

    - 15 respondents elaborated on their ranking.
    - Generally, these respondents suggested it was a useful, quick and efficient way of communicating directly with BSL users. They also praised interpreters' skill and attitude.
    - Negative: 1 respondent ranked their experience as negative, and this was due to the connectivity and technical issues they experienced.
    - Never used: 21 respondents said they had never used the service.
    - 5 respondents gave explanations which included having in-house BSL interpretation available, one person was unaware of the service and another suggested that there are geographical / technological constraints.
- 45% reported that staff are trained in **signposting BSL users to Video Relay Services and how to use them** while 36% were not and 18% were unsure
- Most respondents, 75%, advertise the use of VRS or similar services within their organisation and to their customers/service users.
- Most respondents, 66% yes and 30% maybe, said their organisation would **benefit from material and information on how VRS and similar services operate** and how they can benefit your engagement with BSL users. Respondents specified training on how to use VRS and materials to publicise the service when asked for more detail on what material or information they would like on VRS.
- Most respondents, 52%, noted that **a short and easily digestible introductory guide** would be most beneficial to encourage employees to use VRS in their organisation, followed by 27% training for staff and 7% for ongoing support, 7% for none, 7% other.
- **Good quality interpreters (28%), easy-to-use (27%), confidentiality** (17%) were noted as most important to organisations when using Video Relay Service.
- When asked if it was important to their organisation to have 24/7 access to the service 48% said no, 39% said yes and 14 said maybe. The explanations given
    - YES: 17 Respondents answered that it was important to have 24/7 access to this service. From the responses given to this question, we can assume most of the respondents in this category worked in health and social care and provided "out of hours" and emergency services. Therefore, access to BSL interpretation is required throughout the day and night. Three respondents highlighted that 24/7 access is an equality issue and, just as hearing people can access communication 24/7, so should BSL users.
    - NO: 21 Respondents answered that it was not important to have 24/7 access to this service. Most of these respondents noted that their service did not operate out with core working hours. 5 respondents suggested that while they did not need it, they could understand that it would be useful to other services. 2 respondents noted that there were alternative out of hours services that their service users could access. Two respondents said it was not important to them, but their comment suggests that they may still need to use the service at evenings and weekends and for emergencies.

    - MAYBE: 6 Respondents answered that 24/7 access may be useful. These responses suggested that this was because they did not personally work out of hours but understood that others would benefit from a 24/7 service or that it would be useful in an emergency.
- 82% (36 of 44) said **customer service was important** when accessing this service.
- **More interpreter availability, good quality interpreters and higher video/audio quality were ranked the three most important additional features** or improvements. Closely followed by fully accessible to deafblind BSL users, then improved speech-to-text accuracy, able to type numbers/messages in a box, and customer service encouraging and implementing user feedback.
- Other features or improvement suggested included:

Any additional Features?	Theme	Frequency
Total responses: 9	Reduce the cost of in person BSL interpreters	1
	More user friendly for Deaf and hearing people	1
	More info about the service	1
	Emergency clinical or medical use	1
	In-person BSL interpreter	1
	Ad-hoc appointment availability	
	More funding for language service professionals (regional specific)	1
	Ensuring interpreters attend pre-booked appointments	1

- The qualities that the highest volume of respondents selected as important in an interpreter (100%) were:
    - **Fluency and accuracy in British Sign Language**, including awareness of regional variations
    - **Professionalism** (e.g., punctuality, appearance, attitude, patience, behaviour)
    - Ability to remain neutral and impartial and respect confidentiality of BSL user
- Organisation reported using and liking speech to text software (22%), video captions (22%), smart phone apps/technology (21%) and Video Remote Interpreting (21%).

If you selected services you have used and liked, please tell use what your organisation liked about these services?	Theme	Frequency
The following themes have been collated but have not been considered against the multiple-choice responses respondents gave in the question previous to this (which other types of services do they use).		
Total responses 43	Accessible	9
	Easy to use	7
	Alternatives to video call	5
	Low cost	3
	Like to use videocall	3
	Don't have access to VRI	1
	Can be signposted to users	1
Anything else?	Theme	Frequency
Total responses: 13	Good it's free	1
	VSR service is needed	4
	Useful in emergencies	1
	VSR not used by the service or limited demand for VSR in the service	3
	Survey feedback*	2
	Contact Scotland is useful for wider sign language users (e.g., asylum seekers)	1
	Difficulty using services	1

Service availability and accessibility

- 59% (26 of 44) reported having encountered any issues with **availability of interpreters**. Of those who had encountered issues the most common reason was lack of supply of interpreters particularly deafblind or in remoter areas.

What issues have you experienced with interpreters?	Theme	Frequency (Respondents could tick multiple answers)
Total Respondents: 26	Lack of availability of interpreter	14
	Lack of available in-person interpreters	12
	Takes too long to find an interpreter	2
	Not available at short notice	2
	Cancellations/did not show to appointment	3
	Lack of quality of interpreters	1
	Lack of interpreters that sign other languages than BSL	1
	Cost	1

- 52% (23 of 44) did not report having encountered any issues with the **quality of interpreters**. Of those who had encountered issues included lack of deafblind awareness, poor translation, can't help due to complexity of meeting (i.e. child protection or hospital meetings) and local knowledge.

Issues with the quality of interpreters?	Theme	Frequency
Total respondents: 6	Lack deafblind awareness	1
	Quality varies depending on interpreter	1
	BSL user not content with qualification level of BSL interpreter	1
	Poor translation*	1
	Meeting too complex	1
	Regional BSL translation issues	1

- 52% (23 of 44) did not report having encountered **any connection issues with the app or website hosting the service**.

Connection issues?	Theme	Frequency
Total Respondents: 7	Poor quality connection/ Wi-Fi___33	5
	Poor quality during call	3
	Waste users' time	2

Three respondents who cited poor Wi-Fi linked this specifically to Wi-Fi within hospitals and one of these respondents also mentioned in schools too.