

Deaf jurors supported by sign language interpreter for first time

- First Deaf jurors complete jury service with British Sign Language interpreter support
- Law change allows interpreters in the jury deliberation room as the thirteenth person
- Move opens jury service up to thousands more people

This summer, Karen – a volunteer at charity DeafCOG in London – became the first Deaf person to complete jury service with a BSL interpreter at Croydon Crown Court, deliberating over a racially aggravated harassment case. Karen was also chosen by the other members of the jury to act as the jury foreperson – the spokesperson responsible for announcing the verdict.

Others are now following in Karen's footsteps, including Paul who served on a serious sexual assault case at Norwich Crown Court last month. Both jurors had three interpreters who rotated every 20 minutes to assist them, as well as the full support of the judge and HM Courts and Tribunals Service staff.

The move follows changes brought in through the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act, which allow BSL interpreters into the jury deliberation room. It is expected that this will open up jury service to over 80,000 Deaf people across England and Wales.

Speaking about her experiences in court, Karen said:

My jury experience at Croydon Crown Court went smoothly and exceeded my expectations.

The staff, from the jury manager, ushers, clerks and judges were extremely aware of the needs of myself and the BSL interpreting team. I was made to feel included every step of the way.

An excellent and amazing opportunity for me and what a great start to leading the way for other Deaf jurors in the future, now that BSL is recognised as a language.

Paul said:

Being on jury duty has been a dream of mine and I believe the Deaf/BSL community has so much to offer. When the law changed to allow the Deaf/BSL community to sit on a jury, and I received my summons, naturally I was excited but nervous as I did not know what to expect.

Upon arriving at Norwich Crown Court, I was made to feel very

welcome and there were three BSL interpreters ready. It was surreal experience and the whole process was streamlined and smooth. The training was clear and easy to follow, then the trial began, and I was amazed that I was treated equally to other jurors. This give me a sense of respect as the other jurors were keen to work with me and make me feel involved.

The trial ran over and the interpreters I had been working with were now unavailable. However, I was pleased to see the judge and court staff went above and beyond to find alternative interpreters for the rest of the trial. It was sorted without a hinderance. The judge requested feedback from me on how to improve for future cases and expressed a strong desire to make sure Norwich Crown Court is accessible and fair for all. I was deeply touched by this.

I was so honoured to be selected as the foreperson by other members of the jury, making me the first Deaf/BSL foreperson at Norwich Crown Court! It was a very empowering experience and I want to say thank you to everyone at the court and in the jury for making this possible. I look forward to seeing more of the Deaf/BSL community being part of the justice system, as it should be.

Guidance on working with jurors supported by BSL interpreters was provided to court staff, judges and other jury members to ensure they could communicate effectively with Karen and Paul, as well as the interpreters. Printed oaths for the interpreters were also placed in the courtrooms which contained new wording specific to not influencing, interfering or disclosing the deliberation of the jury.

Justice Minister Gareth Johnson said:

We are breaking down the barriers for Deaf people carrying out jury service, ensuring they can fully and equally participate in court proceedings.

I am delighted that the door is now open to thousands more potential jurors as we establish a more accessible and inclusive justice system for all.

Work and Pensions Secretary Chloe Smith said:

The first Deaf juror completing jury service is an historic moment on our path towards a more inclusive and accessible society. I am so glad to hear of Karen's positive experience whilse undertaking an important act of public service.

Earlier this year the British Sign Language Act became law, and I'm delighted to see that our work to recognise BSL as a language is fulfilling its promise to help remove barriers faced by the D/deaf

community.

The move has been well-received within the Deaf community.

Mark Atkinson, Chief Executive at RNID, said:

RNID and our supporters are delighted that deaf BSL users can now serve on juries and are no longer excluded from this act of citizenship. This move will allow tens of thousands of deaf people who use BSL as their first language to take part in jury service, a duty which all of us should have a responsibility to undertake.

We are pleased to see another step forward towards inclusion for the Deaf community, yet there are still many barriers which exist for deaf BSL users in society. We're pleased to see this positive step, and eagerly anticipate many more barriers being broken as Government works towards the delivery of the British Sign Language Act.

David Buxton, British Deaf Association Chair, said:

After decades of campaigning, the 87,000 Deaf people in the UK whose first or preferred language is BSL are now finally able to serve as jurors alongside their hearing fellow citizens.

We are pleased that the Ministry of Justice has recognised that a BSL interpreter is there to support the Deaf juror, rather than to act as a thirteenth juror. Interpreters follow a strict professional Code of Conduct which prevents them from influencing the judicial process in any way.

This represents a crucial and long overdue step forward in the equality, inclusion and participation of Deaf people in our democracy, combined with the BSL Act – which passed on the same day in April 2022 – recognising British Sign Language as a language of Great Britain in law for the first time.

Barriers to Deaf people's full democratic participation remain – we have yet to see the election of a Deaf MP – but we hope that this important step demonstrates the potentially huge contribution that the Deaf community in the UK can make to our society when reasonable adjustments such as BSL interpreters are provided as standard.

We look forward to continue working with the Government to break down further unnecessary barriers and challenge discriminatory attitudes and practices in future.

Notes to Editors

- According to the [British Deaf Association](#), an estimated 87,000 people in the UK use British Sign Language as their first or preferred language.
- In order to comply with GDPR, jurors are identified by first name only.