

Case study

Islington Pioneers UK's First Video Contact Centre for BSL Users



The SignVideo Contact Centre is the first Internet Protocol video contact centre in the UK for British Sign Language (BSL) interpretation. This specialist service offers deaf citizens immediate access to highly qualified sign language interpreters to communicate with their local authorities and hospitals. After successful adoption by Islington Council's customer services centre, Contact Islington, SignVideo is now being rolled out nationwide.

"Boroughs using SignVideo can now guarantee a level of quality and competence in sign language interpreting services. Sign language users can simply turn up and access their sessions without planning beforehand."

Tony Reed
Business Support and Development
Manager, Contact Islington

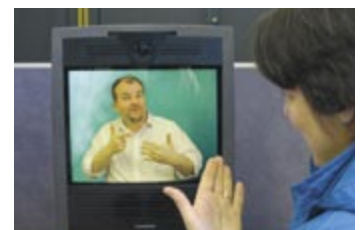
Overcoming Communication Barriers

Recent research by the Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID) reveals that the UK's 70,000 deaf sign language users often wait for up to six weeks before a registered interpreter is available to interpret on their behalf. Because there are only just over 250 members of the Register of BSL/English Interpreters, many deaf people must make do with a poorly qualified interpreter, which vastly increases the risk of misinterpretation in often serious situations such as emergencies in hospitals.

However, a new service is now available. Launched in 2005, the SignVideo Contact Centre offers a far more accessible and inclusive solution for BSL users by remotely connecting hospitals, local authorities and registered social landlords (RSLs) to a contact centre of highly qualified professional interpreters. The service overcomes the cost and time delays that currently prevent sign language users from dealing with simple issues – such as applying for a resident's parking permit or meeting a benefits adviser – while at the same time guaranteeing a high-quality interpreter.

For most councils, interpreters charge for a minimum of three hours and as much as £150 a session, plus expenses; at public meetings in town halls, two interpreters are often required, doubling the cost. In contrast, the SignVideo Contact Centre – with a 20 minute minimum session and a starting rate that is a seventh of conventional interpreter costs – offers organisations great value for money. The service is available on demand during business hours. And even if a council employs its own interpreter, the physical interpreter will not be available as quickly as the virtual interpreter, unless he or she is located in the same building.

In addition, all the interpreters employed are at the top of their profession. They are all full members of the Register of BSL/English Interpreters, unlike face-to-face agencies, which may use interpreters that are trainee, junior trainee, or, even worse, of a level of one, two, or three. The project has charmed deaf users and achieved widespread recognition. SignVideo was short-listed as a finalist in the prestigious e-Government National Awards 2005, making it the first deaf or disabled social enterprise to receive that accolade. SignVideo and Contact Islington were also recognised for their groundbreaking work with a runner-up award at the Government Computing BT Awards for Innovation 2006 in the 'Government to Citizen' category, and SignVideo has been short-listed for the 2006 National Customer Service Awards.



Government Grant helps with SignVideo Contact Centre Start Up

Significan't, the company behind SignVideo, is a social enterprise whose director Jeff McWhinney is himself deaf. McWhinney has more than 25 years' experience working for deaf organisations. In partnership with the Greater London Authority and London Connects, which support and promote the delivery of e-government services in London, Significan't received £500,000 from what is now the Department for Communities and Local Government's e-innovations unit towards the infrastructure installation.

The government grant allowed SignVideo to pilot the system in London and paid for the first year's operational costs. While the SignVideo Contact Centre was McWhinney's brainchild, it was Cisco that developed the underlying state-of-the-art technology and platform. The centre uses skills-based routing technology to ensure that customers are routed to the most appropriate sign language interpreter.

Using a video conferencing unit, users simply connect to the contact centre from home or a local authority site. This enables them to communicate with council officers in their own first language, BSL. The SignVideo service also benefits from the easy-to-use rich media collaborative environment deployed in today's remote conferencing industry, allowing contact centre interpreters to log on from their own homes.

SignVideo is working in an extended partnership with 2e2 and several independent service providers. The video conferencing units are supplied by another partner, Tandberg, a lead supplier of video conferencing equipment. Brigitte Francois, founder of Significan't, says: "SignVideo offers a solution that is the first of its kind, both in the UK and Europe. These are exciting times; it will not be long before video interpreting becomes a common feature of everyday life for deaf people."

Contact Islington Hosts Launch for Award-Winning Service

Islington Council hosted the pilot and launch for SignVideo through its Contact Islington contact centre. Consequently, 15 London councils are now on board, together with the accident and emergency units of two London hospitals – Guy's and St Thomas' Hospitals. Many more are now setting themselves up to follow suit.

Tony Reed, Business Support and Development Manager for Contact Islington, says: "It's all about social inclusion: Boroughs using SignVideo can now guarantee a level of quality and competence in sign language interpreting services."

SignVideo also helps boroughs to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 2005, which has placed a positive obligation on local authorities to extend access to public services for deaf people. "BSL language users can simply turn up and access their sessions without planning beforehand," Reed comments. "If they have broadband and a Web camera at home, they can even use it without leaving the house."

"This is a landmark in the history of the development of access in their own first language for deaf people. We've already received several inquiries from private sector organisations wishing to meet with obligations under the DDA."

Jeff McWhinney
Director, Significan't

Finalist



Runner up



**Government Computing
BT Awards
for Innovation**



Finalist



Reed says the deaf community in Islington was fully engaged with the pilot and helped refine the offering. "There were 35 users during the soft launch. Without a single piece of negative feedback, most took the service up immediately, raising everything from complex council tax queries to seeking advice on parking ticket appeals."

Since the launch, Islington has installed more Tandberg videoconferencing units and extended service access to its housing directorate and registrar's service for births, marriages and deaths. Through SignVideo, Islington offers not only BSL interpreters, but also interpreters skilled in International Signs and other sign languages on notice.

SignVideo delivers great value for money. It has cut the cost of providing sign language interpretation from approximately £150 a session to rarely more than £40. Waiting time for BSL interpretation has fallen from as many as six weeks to about 40 minutes (or three hours for other sign languages). And when compared to the previous method of using a text phone through a relay, the SignVideo service is at least seven times faster. A second contact centre is being planned for the north of England near Sheffield.

McWhinney says: "This is a landmark in the history of the development of access in their own first language for deaf people. We've already received several inquiries from private sector organisations wishing to meet their obligations under the DDA. We believe this application will progressively become more relevant to a wider audience."

Building on its extensive roots within the deaf community, SignVideo is now empowering many deaf citizens by providing the access to basic services that they have been seeking for so long. Given the drive and determination of its leadership, this service is expected to quickly become an accepted feature of all public institutions.

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Brigitte Francois
Founder, Significant

Benefits

- Speed of availability
- Social inclusion of local deaf community
- No need to book appointments in advance
- Guaranteed quality of interpreting service
- Great value for money
- Seven times faster than using a text phone through relay
- Helps meet legal obligations to provide full service access for deaf people

Features

- Converged voice and data network
- State-of-the-art video conferencing units
- Easy-to-use rich media collaborative environment
- Skills-routing technology connects customer to right agent
- Accessible from home with broadband and Web camera
- Interpreters are members of the UK Register of BSL/English Interpreters

SignVideo works in partnership with:



Contact

To find out more about SignVideo and how it will facilitate social inclusion, as well as help meet your legal obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act 2005, please contact:

Email: enquiries@significant-online.co.uk

Web: www.significant-online.co.uk

Phone: +44 (0) 208 463 1120