

NHS Norfolk and Waveney CCG received a query relating to interpretation services and contracts.

The query and answer provided in a written response can be found below:

What is the current situation with the Interpreting and Translation Contract? Since the change of provider to D A Languages in April 2019, Deaf BSL users have found it very difficult to access primary health care.

Despite acknowledged difficulties the Contract was extended for 6 months whilst further investigation and patient engagement is carried out. The change of provider was made without consultation with Deaf patients and without an Equality Impact Assessment. Throughout the pandemic primary health care has been inaccessible and Deaf patients have had to ask Deaf Connexions (the BSL provider for the previous 20 years) for assistance in booking appointments and contacting surgeries.

Opticians have refused to provide Interpreters at all, rendering the likes of specsavers inaccessible and in breach of the Equality Act. Healthwatch Norfolk are soon to hold a virtual event for Deaf patient engagement but as the event relies solely on technological prowess many of the Deaf community will not be able to access the event as many do not use the internet, emails, etc. This is because their first language is BSL (British Sign Language) which is a visual spatial language and their English literacy skills are extremely limited.

The contract is commissioned by NHS England and NHS Improvement (NHSEI) and because of this we have liaised with them for further comment. They have acknowledged it has been a difficult time during the pandemic, with poor access to BSL interpreters for some people. NHSEI have recently extended the DA Languages contract in the Norfolk area to include opticians and this is now up and running.

An additional service called the Enhanced Deaf Support Service is also about to commence and we are hopeful this will go live next month. This will offer support to individuals in the deaf community unable to use the existing arrangements in making primary care appointments. This will run until March 2022, with an ongoing review to better understand patients' needs to inform how the future service operates. The provider of this service will be announced shortly.

In the longer term work will start in June 2021 with a view to having a provider in place covering all four primary care contractor groups (dentists, pharmacists, GPs and Opticians) from 1 November 2021. This will practically cover the whole of the East of England, with a minor exception for one contractor group outside of Norfolk. The feedback from the local engagement events in 2020 have been used to inform these requirements.