

Plain English Summary – TV Access Services Code

Ofcom’s TV Access Services Code (“the Code”) sets out rules for broadcasters on making a certain amount of their programmes accessible.

This document is a simplified summary only and is aimed at audiences. It should not be considered by broadcasters as replacing the Code which can be found on [our website](#).

Ofcom’s Code is about making subtitles, audio description and signing available on TV programmes. Together, these are known as ‘access services’:

- Subtitles are text on screen representing speech and sound effects
- Audio description is an additional spoken commentary that describes what is happening on screen, primarily for people with sight loss and blind people
- Sign-interpretation is when a signer, usually in the corner of the screen, translates a programme into sign-language (usually British Sign Language)
- Sign-presentation is when everyone in a programme uses sign-language

Legal background

Ofcom’s powers to make the rules on TV access services come from the Communications Act 2003. Separately, Ofcom’s powers to make the rules on access services for the BBC come from the BBC Agreement.

Targets

The Code includes targets on the minimum percentage of programmes on TV channels which must have access services. These targets start on a certain date (which is normally one year after the channel first began) and gradually increase with the maximum requirements coming into force after 10 years.

After 10 years, these targets continue at the same levels, which are:

- subtitling on 80% of programmes (this is 90% for ITV 1 and Channel 4 and 100% for BBC Channels)
- audio description on 10% of programmes
- sign-interpretation on 5% of programmes

Exemptions

Ofcom needs to make sure that the targets are proportionate for broadcasters to meet. The Code sets out the situations when the targets do not apply, which include:

Audience size:

Broadcasters do not have to provide access services on TV channels with a very small audience. For UK channels, this means less than 0.05% of total UK TV viewing.

Technical Difficulty

Broadcasters do not have to provide access services on certain TV programmes or channels if Ofcom thinks that it would be too technically difficult. This can include difficulties relating to certain types of programmes; for example, adding audio description to live news where there is not enough space between people talking in the programme.

Affordability

The Code includes lower subtitling targets (at one third and two thirds of the usual target levels) which apply when it will cost broadcasters more than 1% of their channel's turnover to meet the full targets.

However, if it would still cost more than 1% of the channel's turnover to meet these lower targets, then broadcasters do not have to provide any access services on that channel.

Alternative Signing Requirements

Broadcasters with larger audiences must meet the sign-interpretation targets described above. However, broadcasters with smaller audiences (which for UK channels means less than 1% of total viewing) have different options for meeting the signing requirements. They can either:

- show sign-presented programmes on their own TV channels (the highest target level for this is 75 minutes per month); or
- suggest alternative ways of meeting the signing requirements to Ofcom. Currently, several broadcasters pay a certain amount of money each year to the British Sign-Language Broadcasting Trust (BSLBT), which makes sign-presented programmes that are available on the [BSL Zone website](#), on Sky VoD/ Sky Go and NOW, and on certain slots on Film 4 and Together TV.

Awareness

Broadcasters must provide information on which programmes have access services, including using the symbols for subtitling (S), audio description (AD) and sign language (SL) in TV programme guides. They should also raise awareness in other ways, including making announcements on TV.

Scheduling

Broadcasters should show programmes with subtitles and audio description at popular viewing times. As signing cannot be turned on or off by viewers, Ofcom accepts that signed programmes may need to be shown outside of the most popular viewing times.

Ofcom encourages broadcasters not to use lots of repeated programmes with access services to meet targets.

Action plans

Ofcom encourages broadcasters to develop action plans on how to continue to make their channels more accessible.

Reporting

Ofcom [publishes a list](#) each summer setting out which channels need to provide access services in the following year.

Broadcasters must report to Ofcom every six months on the amount of access services they have provided on their channels. Ofcom [publishes reports](#) twice each year on the levels of access services provided.
