

British Sign Language Bill set to clear final stage before becoming law

The British Sign Language Bill, a Private Member's Bill introduced by Rosie Cooper MP last year and backed by the government, will receive its third reading in the House of Lords today before it passes into law following Royal Assent.

The BSL Act will recognise BSL as a language of England, Wales and Scotland in its own right. It is also supported by a duty on the Secretary of State for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to regularly report on what each relevant government department has done to promote or facilitate the use of British Sign Language in its communications with the public.

The Act further places a requirement on the DWP Secretary of State to issue guidance to departments on the promotion and facilitation of BSL. The guidance will be developed together with D/deaf BSL signers.

Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work Chloe Smith MP said:

Today is a momentous day and I truly hope it will transform the lives of D/deaf people across the country.

The BSL Bill will help remove barriers faced by the D/deaf community in daily life and is a further welcome step towards a more inclusive and accessible society.

I am so grateful to the efforts of Rosie Cooper MP and the wonderful campaigners who have brought the BSL Bill to the point of passing into law and I'm proud to have played a small part in its journey.

Rosie Cooper MP said:

At long last, the Deaf community will be able to say that their language is legally recognised.

Working across party lines and with the Deaf community, I really believe we have made history by creating a mechanism for Deaf people to achieve equal access to public services. Their voices will be heard loud and clear and there will be no excuse for failing to respect BSL as a language.

The hard work doesn't stop here however, but the door is now open for the Deaf community make real progress fixing the injustices that they continue to face.

David Buxton, Chair of the British Deaf Association, said:

We are extremely pleased to see the UK Parliament finally vote to recognise British Sign Language as a language of Great Britain in law today, after 19 long years of campaigning.

Today is a historic day for the Deaf community in the UK, and an inspiration for other countries around the world where the national sign language has not yet been recognised in law.

The British Deaf Association looks forward to working hand in hand with the government and civil servants to implement and monitor the progress of the BSL Act 2022.

While today is a day to celebrate, we are aware that this marks the first step on a long path towards providing truly equal access to public services, information and opportunities for Deaf BSL users in Great Britain.

Mark Atkinson, Chief Executive at RNID, said:

RNID and our supporters join with the Deaf community today to celebrate this historic moment as British Sign Language passes the final hurdle before it is legally recognised in England, Wales and Scotland.

We're immensely proud to have worked alongside other deaf organisations and parliamentarians to support this campaign. We look forward to the BSL Bill getting Royal Assent soon and to working with the government to make sure the BSL Act makes a real difference to the lives of Deaf people in the UK.

The Third Reading of the BSL Bill takes place today in the House of Lords and following this it will receive Royal Assent.

The BSL Bill was first introduced on 16 June 2021 and passed through the House of Commons on 17 March 2022, receiving unanimous cross-party support.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work has worked closely with Labour MP Rosie Cooper and D/deaf people's charities and organisations, such as the Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID) and the British Deaf Association (BDA), to ensure the Bill effectively meets the needs of those who will benefit most.

Additional information

- Figures from the British Deaf Association suggest that 151,000 people use BSL in the UK, 87,000 of whom are D/deaf.
- The BSL Bill recognises BSL as a language of England, Wales and Scotland in its own right supported by a duty on the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to regularly report on what each relevant government department has done to promote or facilitate the use of British Sign Language in its communications with the public.
- The Bill also places a requirement on the DWP Secretary of State to issue guidance on the promotion and facilitation of BSL, which will be developed together with D/deaf BSL signers as part of the advisory board.
- As equality law is devolved in Northern Ireland, the Bill does not extend to Northern Ireland, in recognition of the existence of both British and Irish Sign Language among the Northern Irish deaf community. The UK government would encourage similar legal provisions to be adopted in Northern Ireland in due course. Both BSL and ISL (Irish Sign Language) were officially recognised as minority languages in Northern Ireland in March 2004.
- The BSL Bill does not impose additional duties under the Equality Act 2010.
- The Bill is supported by a package of non-legislative measures, including:
 - establishing a non-statutory advisory board of BSL signers to advise DWP SoS on matters related to BSL;
 - examining how the government might increase the number of BSL interpreters;
 - reviewing how the DWP might work to ensure the Access to Work fund helps BSL signers;
 - and consider how the government can further facilitate and promote BSL.
- The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work has also announced the launch of an advisory board of BSL signers to offer guidance to the government on matters relating to BSL; examine how the number of BSL interpreters could be increased; and make sure the Access to Work scheme better meets the needs of BSL signers to support them in employment.

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