

Government backs latest stage of British Sign Language Bill

- The government backs Bill's next step to make British Sign Language (BSL) a recognised language in GB
- The British Sign Language Bill will benefit more than 150,000 BSL signers
- The Third Reading of the British Sign Language Bill takes place today (Friday 18 March 2022)

The British Sign Language Bill, a Private Member's Bill introduced by Rosie Cooper MP, will, if passed into law, recognise BSL as a language of England, Wales and Scotland in its own right.

It will be 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 Bill also places a requirement on the DWP Secretary of State to issue guidance to ministerial departments on the promotion and facilitation of BSL.

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

We know many D/deaf people can experience social isolation and face reduced access to work and education because of barriers in communicating their basic needs and aspirations.

Legally recognising BSL will create a more inclusive and accessible society, improving the lives of D/deaf people and helping public services to get it right.

Rosie Cooper MP said:

This Bill is all about improving the lives of deaf people and the Minister and I have worked together in strengthening it and achieving cross-party approval.

I am confident that with the support of MPs across all parties today, we can get this Bill passed and start making positive steps to give deaf people equal access to public services.

David Buxton, Chair of the British Deaf Association said:

The BSL Bill presents a real opportunity for change, to finally break down avoidable communication barriers and to give Deaf people and their language – BSL – the recognition, inclusion, and equality that they deserve.

If the BSL Bill passes into law, we are ready to work hand-in-hand with the UK government to redesign public services that meet the unique needs of the 151,000 people who have British Sign Language as their first or preferred language.

We also hope that the legal recognition of BSL will encourage many more people across the UK to learn British Sign Language and go on to become interpreters, bilingual professionals and allies of the Deaf community. BSL can bring us all together as a society.

Mark Atkinson, Chief Executive at RNID, said:

We at RNID, our supporters and the wider Deaf community are delighted that the British Sign Language Bill is set to clear the final stage of its passage through the House of Commons. We hope it receives the same support from peers in the House of Lords as it has from MPs and ministers.

We welcome the mechanisms within the Bill and commitment from government to working with a proposed advisory board of Deaf people to put the Bill into practice. Giving the Deaf community a seat at the table will mean government policies and public services will meet the needs of Deaf people for fully inclusive and accessible services.

We mustn't miss the vital opportunity the Bill gives us to win legal recognition of BSL and expand Deaf people's rights. On behalf of the Deaf community and alongside other charities, we will continue pushing to make sure the Bill is passed into law before the end of this session of Parliament.

The Minister for Disabled People has also announced the launch of an advisory board of BSL signers to offer guidance to the DWP on matters relating to BSL; examine how the DWP goes about increasing the number of BSL interpreters; and make sure the Access to Work scheme better meets the needs of BSL signers to support them in employment.

The Third Reading of the Bill will take place today in the House of Commons

and the Government will once again be supporting its introduction into law.

The BSL Bill was first introduced on 16 June 2021 and passed the Second Reading stage on 28 January 2022, receiving unanimous cross-party support.

The Minister for Disabled People 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.

- Figures from the British Deaf Association suggest that 151,000 people use BSL in the UK, 87,000 of which are D/deaf.
- A Private Members Bill on BSL was introduced on 16 June 2021 and had its Second Reading on 28 January 2022.
- The Bill is recognising 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.
- The Bill will be supported by a package of non-legislative measures, including:
 - establishing a non-statutory advisory board of BSL signers to advise the DWP Secretary of State 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 users; and
 - consider how government can further facilitate and promote BSL usage.
 - The Access to Work scheme is available to help people who are disabled or have a physical or mental health condition stay in employment and covers those who work from home. It can provide grants up to £62,900 to keep a job accessible.

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