

Government backs vital British Sign Language Bill

The government pledges commitment to improving accessibility for deaf people across the country by backing a vital Bill which will see British Sign Language (BSL) become a recognised language.

The British Sign Language Bill, a Private Member's Bill introduced by Rosie Cooper MP, signals promotion and facilitation of BSL when making public service announcements, encouraging other service providers to do the same.

If passed, it would also see the launch of an advisory board of BSL users to:

- offer guidance to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) on how and when to use it
- examine how the DWP goes about increasing the number of BSL interpreters
- make sure the Access to Work scheme better meets the needs of BSL users to support them in employment

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

Effective communication is vital to creating a more inclusive and accessible society, and legally recognising British Sign Language in Great Britain is a significant step towards ensuring that deaf people are not excluded from reaching their potential.

Passing the Bill will see government commit to improving the lives of deaf people, and will encourage organisations across the nation to take up the BSL mantle, benefitting both themselves and the deaf community.

BSL offers a lifeline to 250,000 Brits who communicate through the visual medium, which consists of a combination of hand gestures, facial expressions and body language.

The Minister for Disabled People has worked closely with Labour MP Rosie Cooper and deaf people's 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 the most.

Backing the Bill is just one of the steps the government is taking to improve the lives of disabled people and those with long-term health conditions across the UK.

Some of the highlights include:

- the Department for Work and Pensions has launched an Access to Work

pilot scheme to help ease the transition from university into employment for disabled graduates

- the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has launched a consultation on flexible working, which has potential to improve accessibility in the workplace
- the Department for Transport has launched a passenger assistance app to make travelling by train easier for wheelchair users

Recent figures from the British Deaf Association suggest that on any day up to 250,000 people use some BSL.

A Private Members Bill on BSL was introduced on 16 June 2021 and will have Second Reading on 28 January 2022.

The Bill is recognising BSL as a language of the UK in its own right supported by a duty on ministerial departments to report their BSL usage on an annual basis.

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.

The Bill will be supported by a package of non-legislative measures, including:

- establishing a non statutory advisory board of BSL users to advise the DWP Secretary of State on guidance on BSL
- examining how the government might increase the number of BSL interpreters
- reviewing how DWP might work to ensure the Access to Work fund helps BSL users
- suggesting how we update the National Disability Strategy in our 'one year on' report to 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.