

Law change opens door to deaf jurors

- opens jury service to over 80,000 profoundly deaf people
- move permits British Sign Language interpreters to enter jury rooms
- part of sweeping reforms to the justice system announced today

Current laws strictly prohibit anyone beyond the 12 sworn jurors from entering jury deliberation rooms. This is to safeguard against outside influence. However, it means that an interpreter would be deemed an unlawful '13th person', thus preventing those who require their assistance from participating in this important civic duty.

Ministers are determined to ensure the justice system is accessible to everyone and will therefore legislate to remove this barrier to allow British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters inside jury rooms.

The move will mean over 80,000 deaf people across England and Wales can now participate in jury service. It forms part of wider reforms announced today seeking to build a fairer justice system.

Lord Chancellor, Robert Buckland QC MP, said:

Disability should not be a barrier to people carrying out this most important civic duty.

I am delighted we can open up jury service to many thousands more people and ensure our justice system becomes as accessible and inclusive as possible.

BSL interpreters can already enter courtrooms to assist deaf jurors, however they are currently not allowed into the room where verdicts are considered. This has meant that people with significant hearing impairments would need to be able to lip read during the deliberation process.

Under the changes, interpreters will be contractually bound to a confidentiality agreement, stipulating their obligation to remain impartial at all times and not to divulge any discussions that take place in jury rooms.

It builds on a range of provisions in place to ensure accessibility for jurors with disabilities, including making sure wheelchairs can be properly positioned to view proceedings, and allowing the use of guide dogs and braille cards.

Meanwhile, a £1 billion modernisation of courts and tribunals is underway, seeking to boost the use of technology, upgrade systems, and ensure it better responds to the needs of the public. It comes as hundreds of millions is being invested to tackle the impact of the pandemic on the courts and deliver speedier justice for victims.

Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work Justin Tomlinson said:

I am committed to making sure disabled people can participate fully in society and this announcement is a key step forward in achieving that ambition.

Our upcoming National Strategy for Disabled People will build on this, looking across government at how we can unlock opportunities to positively impact the lives of disabled people now and in the future.

Annie Roberts, Advocacy Officer at RNID said:

We welcome the planned change in the law allowing deaf people to sit as jurors. Jury service is an obligation we all have as law abiding citizens, deaf people are citizens and therefore its only right that we should be able to play our part in society equal to everyone else. This is a small step forward for an inclusive society and valuing the contribution of the deaf community to our country.

Notes to editors

- New legislation to allow BSL interpreters to be present in a jury deliberation room was introduced to parliament today as part of the Police, Crimes, Sentencing and Courts Bill.
- The impact of this change will be that profoundly deaf individuals will not be excluded from completing jury service simply because they require the assistance of a BSL interpreter.
- The courts already make reasonable adjustments for jurors with disabilities and arrange pre-trial visits to allow individuals to view the facilities at court and discuss their needs in more detail with court staff.
- For example, wheelchair users can receive practical help in dealing with documents and the appropriate positioning of their wheelchair to get a better view of proceedings. Blind and partially sighted jurors can be provided with braille oath cards, large print documents as well as having a guide dog present at all times.
- The courts also monitor developments in potential new technology which may provide further assistance to disabled jurors.
- Trial by jury is a fundamental aspect of our criminal justice system and serving as a juror is one of the most important civic duties that anyone can be asked to perform. Juries are composed of 12 individuals randomly selected by the Jury Central Summoning Bureau from the Electoral Register. This random selection enables jurors to bring varying life experiences and to be representative of the society they serve.