



Department for
Digital, Culture,
Media & Sport

Rt Hon Oliver Dowden CBE MP
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Catherine McKinnell MP
Chair, Petitions Committee
House of Commons
London
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GJ01/DC
13th May 2020

Dear Catherine,

Thank you for contacting me regarding the Government's response to the e-petition entitled "Require British Sign Language Interpreters for emergency announcements on TV". Your letter specifically asked the Government to provide a revised response that more directly responds to the petitioner's request for a live British Sign Language (BSL) interpreter to be used for emergency announcements or to give a detailed explanation of why the Government has not arranged its own BSL interpretation for ministerial statements on Covid.

As I set out in our initial response, we take this matter seriously and the Government aims to ensure that the Covid media announcements are accessible to as wide an audience as possible as part of our commitment to building a digitally inclusive society.

In accordance with Public Health England (PHE) guidelines, it is not possible to safely include a physical BSL interpreter in the room for the daily Covid briefings as this would also require additional operations staff such as an additional cameraman to be present. At Downing Street the Government is working within the constraints of a historical site with limited space. Everyone in government continues to practice social distancing, which means staying two metres apart where possible, and journalists are currently attending the daily briefings remotely rather than in person in order to prevent unnecessary risk. Having an interpreter physically attend, along with any additional staff required to facilitate broadcast of the interpretation, contradicts this information, and potentially puts them and others at risk.

However, to accommodate the needs of the deaf and signing community, the Government has asked the BBC to provide BSL interpretation at the daily Covid briefings via the BBC News channel and iPlayer, which are available on all TV packages as part of Freeview. We are also in discussion with the BBC to consider whether greater replication of this 'remote' signed interpretation across a wider range of media channels may be possible.

ITV's bespoke Sign Language studio, SignPost, is also offering content for the deaf community online, with a daily online news bulletin produced remotely from presenters' houses. This has a BSL interpreter covering all of the latest news regarding Covid. The Government will continue to engage with broadcasters about including signing provisions in future announcements to ensure that information is accessible.

Thank you for your letter and I hope you find this response and our revised response to the e-petition (attached) sufficient in answering the question.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Oliver Dowden', followed by a long horizontal flourish.

Rt Hon Oliver Dowden CBE MP
Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

E-petition response from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport – 13th May

Petition details:

Title: Government response to E-Petition requesting British Sign Language interpreters on announcements.

Government Response:

Summary Quote:

The Government has assessed that in accordance with Public Health England guidelines, we cannot safely include a British Sign Language interpreter in the room for daily briefings without potentially putting them and others at risk.

Full response:

The Government is committed to building a digitally inclusive society, and aims to ensure that COVID-19 media announcements are accessible for all UK audiences. As broadcasters are independent from the Government, they are responsible for their signing resources and for meeting statutory accessibility requirements set out by Ofcom.

Social distancing rules may make it harder for broadcasters to provide appropriate signing resources. However, the Government continues to engage with broadcasters on developing accessibility provisions that are in line with the Government's social distancing guidelines.

In line with Public Health England (PHE) guidelines, it is not possible to safely include a physical BSL interpreter in the room for daily briefings as this would require additional operations staff such as an additional cameraman to be present. At Downing Street the Government is working within the constraints of a historical site with limited space. Everyone in government continues to practice social distancing, which means staying two metres apart where possible, and journalists are currently attending the daily briefings remotely rather than in person in order to prevent unnecessary risk. Having an interpreter physically attend, along with any additional staff required to facilitate broadcast of the interpretation, contradicts the PHE guidelines, and potentially puts them and others at risk.

For these reasons the Government believes that it is right to limit the number of people present in the daily briefings to protect all those who must be present from additional risks.

However, it is vital that that public health information reaches everyone across the country, which is why BSL interpretation of the daily Covid briefings is now provided via the BBC News channel and iPlayer, which is available on all TV packages as part of Freeview. The Government continues to engage with broadcasters to ensure greater replication of this 'remote' signed interpretation across a wider range of media channels.

ITV's bespoke Sign Language studio, SignPost, is also offering content for the deaf community online, with a daily online news bulletin produced remotely from presenters'

houses. This has a BSL interpreter covering all of the latest news regarding Covid. The Government will continue to engage with broadcasters about including signing provisions in future announcements to ensure that information is accessible.

On wider programming signing requirements, Ofcom, as the independent broadcast regulator, enforces statutory targets for the amount of signing that eligible broadcasters, including BBC, ITV, Channel 4, and Channel 5, have to provide. It is up to the broadcasters to determine which programmes they select for signing. Ofcom encourages all broadcasters to go beyond their statutory requirements through best practice guidelines. These provide guidance for broadcasters on selecting programmes, advising that broadcasters should give priority to the most popular programmes and a broad range of programmes. It is Ofcom's role to monitor how broadcasters are meeting their signing targets, including taking into account the current circumstances.