



Home Office

Home Secretary

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Dame Diana Johnson MP  
Chair, Home Affairs Committee  
House of Commons  
London  
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12 May 2022

Dear Chair

Thank you for your letter dated 18 February 2022 in relation to the evidence which your Committee heard on the experience of deaf victims of domestic abuse. I'd like to express my sadness to read about their horrific experiences and commend them for their bravery in speaking out. Whilst it would not be appropriate to comment on any specific case, their accounts of their experience with the police do not appear to be of the standard I would expect.

I have been clear that domestic abuse is a devastating crime that ruins lives, and that tackling it is an important part of this Government's Beating Crime Plan. That is why my Department published the Tackling Domestic Abuse Plan at the end of March, which will make it easier for victims to get the support they need and ensuring tough action against perpetrators.

### **Support for victims**

In the Domestic Abuse Plan, the Government committed to investing a minimum of £47.1 million over three years into support services, and to making the police, Family Courts, and Criminal Justice System easier for victims and survivors to navigate. Additionally, we will make it easier for them to disclose abuse through continued funding of vital helplines, and to get the tailored support they need from specialist and 'by and for' support services which are designed, and led by and for, individuals and the communities they serve. This is in recognition of the specific barriers that particular communities face in accessing support services that meet their needs.

The Home Office has provided an additional £1.5 million funding this year for 'by and for' service provision and plans to further increase funding for valuable specialist services for victims of violence against women and girls. This will make good our commitment in the cross-government Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy, which we published in July last year.

## **Funding and support for deaf people**

My Department has provided Sign Health: The Deaf Health Charity with £145,840 in the last financial year (2021/22) to increase the accessibility of domestic abuse information, advice and support for deaf users, as well as an additional £30,902 to support them during the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, we have provided Victim Support with £125,000 in 2021/22 to help build the capacity of Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (IDVAs) to support disabled victims and survivors and create a network of Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference disability champions.

We are also taking further action:

- **The Domestic Abuse Statutory Guidance will further support implementation of the definition of domestic abuse and provides further details on the different types of abuse and the forms they can take.** This includes providing guidance on recognising that individuals can be victims of abuse because of the way different personal or situational characteristics overlap, including deaf victims of domestic abuse, which can affect access to services and support if it not designed to meet their needs.
- **We are developing a new Victims Funding Strategy, as announced at the Hidden Harms Summit.** We want to ensure that there is a sustainable and joined up approach to funding across Government to maximise the impact of the support we provide, including for deaf victims and those with other protected characteristics.
- **We are leading the Safe Care at Home review jointly with colleagues in the Department for Health and Social Care.** This will cover both existing protections for adults abused in their own homes by people providing their care, and the support available to victims of such abuse. We are expecting to conclude this by the end of 2022. We are mindful that disability, including deafness, is one of the many factors raising challenges for victims and survivors of domestic abuse, and an area that we will need to address specifically.

In relation to the specific questions which you have raised, I have sought to provide you with as much information as possible to answer each of them.

### **How many police forces in England and Wales operate emergency and nonemergency SMS text or Video Relay Service (VRS) to enable deaf victims of crime to communicate in emergencies?**

Contact management is an operational matter for police forces. However, the Home Office is funding several national programmes to develop consistent, robust and accessible contact and engagement channels with the police. In relation to SMS Text, 'Textphone' is a service which enables hearing or speech impaired users to contact the police for 999 emergency and 101 non-emergency services. This is available nationally and all police forces can be reached by using it. An additional service known as 'EmergencySMS' is available nationally to users who register their phones on the service.

I can also confirm that Video Relay Service for the 999 emergency service will be introduced in June 2022 and will be available nationally. More information is published online at [www.999bsl.co.uk](http://www.999bsl.co.uk). At present, a number of police forces operate video relay service (VRS) for the 101 non-emergency service and some for the 999 emergency service, however this is implemented on a voluntary basis by Forces. The Home Office does not hold information on how many forces have chosen to offer this.

### **How many police forces in England and Wales employ Police Link Officers for Deaf people (PLOD)?**

There are 19 police forces currently signed up to the UK Police Link Officers for Deaf People.

### **How many BSL interpreters are approved under the recently introduced Police Approved Interpreters and Translators (PAIT) Scheme?**

The National Police Language Service (NPLS) is responsible for overseeing all aspects of language services procurement and operational deployments, and for providing advice and support to police forces, investigators, senior officers and other staff using interpreters and translators. The NPLS publishes a list of suppliers, of which there are currently six in use across England and Wales. Further information on each is available at <https://www.police.uk/pu/policing-in-the-uk/national-police-language-services-npls/what-we-do>

### **Would you support the roll-out of mandatory deaf awareness training for police officers?**

Police Forces may choose to mandate training on deaf awareness in response to a local need. This is a decision to be taken by Chief Constables using their specific local insight and expertise and therefore is not monitored or mandated by the Home Office.

In order to build consistency nationally, the College of Policing is currently developing an online package for Police Forces to improve their capacity and capability to respond to and manage incidents involving deaf people. Reflecting the College's remit, this will not be mandatory training. The College have confirmed their expectation is that this training package will help establish a consistent service to the public across all police force areas; and improve police officer and staff awareness of the needs of deaf people. This package of training can be accessed by police forces based on local need and is expected to be implemented and available later this year and will be publicised appropriately.

### **What is the current guidance for police officers on the provision of BSL interpretation for police interviews, forensic examinations and formal statements?**

The Victims' Code sets out the minimum standard that all organisations, including the police, must provide to victims of crime in England and Wales. It sets out that victims' have the right to be treated with respect, dignity, sensitivity, compassion and courtesy from all agencies. It also sets out that victims who have difficulty understanding or speaking English have the right to use an interpreter to help them understand being interviewed by the police, giving evidence as a witness, or reporting a crime to police. This includes spoken or non-spoken interpretation, such as BSL required for deaf victims.

'Achieving Best Evidence' (ABE) guidance relates to interviewing victims and witnesses and includes circumstances where BSL interpretation is required. It sets out that witnesses should always be interviewed in the language of their choice, unless exceptional circumstances prevail (for example, in respect of the availability of interpreters). This will normally be the witness's first language, unless specific circumstances result in their second language being more appropriate. It also sets out that interpreters should be appropriately accredited and trained so that they understand the need to avoid altering the meaning of questions and responses. In practice, this means that they should either be selected from the National Register of Public Service Interpreters or the Signature National Registers of Communication Professionals Working with Deaf and Deafblind people (NRCPD), or be trained and experienced to an equivalent standard. Furthermore, family members, other close relatives or members of the community should not be used to interpret either during the interview or when preparing the witness for it. The ABE guidance is available for full viewing on Gov.uk: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/achieving-best-evidence-in-criminal-proceedings>

In relation to interviewing of suspects with a hearing impediment, the Police and Criminal Evidence Act Code C covers detention and questioning of suspects in police custody and requires the provision of an independent interpreter during interviews. The College of Policing has published Authorised Professional Practice (APP) guidance makes reference to specialist support from the police for people detained who suffer from a hearing impediment.

### **How will the Home Office 'promote or facilitate the use of British Sign Language in its communications with the public'?**

The British Sign Language Act 2022 requires the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to submit a report by 30 July 2023 detailing what all relevant government departments such as the Home Office are doing to promote or facilitate the use of BSL in its communications with the public. The reporting will be published and will provide a better understanding of how BSL is being used across Government, and how we can continue to improve communication for BSL signers. DWP will request that time be made available for a debate on the findings of the report, and subsequent reports will be published within the following three years, as set out in Clause 2 Subsection 6 of the Bill.

We will set out further detail of our work in line with the scope and timings of the reporting as set out in the Act. However, I am happy to detail some of the work which my Department is undertaking at this early stage. My Department has engaged with

both individuals and representatives from deaf and disabled communities, and we are using that learning to better understand how we can encourage all officials in the Department to make our engagement more inclusive and facilitate the use of BSL. We are also taking immediate right now where we can. For example, the Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) consultation document and the final VAWG strategy published last year included BSL videos. In addition, two of our public campaigns – ‘You are not alone’ which aims to tackle domestic abuse, and the ‘Enough’ campaign to tackle VAWG were both published in British Sign Language.

With our good wishes  


**The Rt Hon Priti Patel MP**