



Health and Social Care Committee

House of Commons London SW1A 0AA

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From Rt Hon. Jeremy Hunt MP

6 October 2020

Rt Hon Matt Hancock
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care

Letter by Email

Dear Matt

I am writing to follow up on an exchange which took place when you appeared before the Health & Social Care Select Committee earlier this month.

Dean Russell MP said: "I have two questions related to mental health, but I also want to ask about one specific group, the deaf community, which has been very anxious throughout the pandemic and moving forward. As you know, one of the biggest challenges is that there are 150,000 British Sign Language users across the UK. I understand that the cost of the basic service to provide BSL for those who engage by telephone, via an app, is around £10, so it is a cost of about £1.5 million over the course of the year. I was reached out to by a charity called SignHealth. They say that at the moment that service is not being covered by the NHS. They are having to try to cover it as part of their charitable donations, and they are getting close to running out of money. Can you confirm whether, moving forward, it will be possible to enable sign language to be available to all who need it and that the NHS could fund that?"

To which you replied: "I am very happy to look at that. It seems very reasonable. Let me see what I can do." (Source: Health and Social Care Committee, Oral evidence: Social care: funding and workforce, HC 206, Tuesday 8 September 2020, Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 8 September 2020.)

Two weeks later, the situation is still unresolved. The charity will run out money within days and the service will stop. Urgent action is now needed.

As Dean mentioned, since April this year SignHealth, the deaf healthcare charity has been providing access to British Sign Language Interpreters through a new emergency online service – BSL Health Access. This service is free at the point of use and SignHealth has been paying for it from its own reserves. As a result of its launch, over the past five months NHS staff and deaf patients have been supported to have thousands of conversations and this has made it possible for deaf people to talk to their GPs, pharmacists to check prescriptions with patients, and for paramedics to communicate with deaf people in an emergency. This service is saving lives.

When BSL Health Access was launched, it was done so as an immediate response to the pandemic and the significantly increased barriers to health that face deaf people: the use of face masks makes lip-reading impossible, social distancing means that deaf people cannot be accompanied to appointments, and many health services are now primarily available over the phone. There is still a significant lack of information available to deaf BSL users about COVID-19.

Deaf people needed immediate access to BSL Interpreters in order to access healthcare in their first language, and SignHealth knew that they could not wait for funding from NHS England to be put in place before launching this life-saving service. No other service was available, and NHS England was at risk of failing in meeting its access requirements for the deaf community.

SignHealth has been in constant contact with Olivia Butterworth, NHS England's Head of Public Participation, since before the service was launched. Having led the development of the Accessible Information Standard in 2016, Olivia understands the health inequalities faced by the deaf community and has championed the service and its need for funding inside NHS England. Olivia has put forward a business case for a Non-Competed Grant to enable SignHealth to pay for the BSL Health Access and for the service to continue until March 2021. The cost of the service is a modest £1.5 million.

I understand that this business case is currently awaiting approval.

SignHealth has been paying for this service from the charity's reserves and cannot continue to do so for much longer. Without it, tens of thousands of deaf people will have no access to NHS services.

COVID-19 has exposed the significant barriers to care and the health inequalities experienced by deaf people. It is vital that NHS England and NHS Improvement address this issue and deal with it once and for all.

I would be most grateful to receive an update about the status of the NHS England grant request and any measures the Department for Health & Social Care itself can take in the meantime to see this vital service is supported and continued, and the needs of this vulnerable community are met.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Jeremy'.

Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP
Chair, Health and Social Care Committee



Department
of Health &
Social Care

*From the Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care*

*Victoria Street
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The Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP
Chair, Health and Social Care Committee
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23 October 2020

Dear Jeremy,

Thank you for your letter of 6 October. It is essential that deaf people and people with hearing loss can get the interpretation and communication support they need to access health services, especially at this time. I am committed to finding a solution as quickly as possible so that we can ensure this vital, often lifesaving, support is available to people.

As you acknowledge in your letter, the accessible information standard places a requirement on individual providers of health and care services to provide information in appropriate formats, including British Sign Language (BSL) to those that need it.

At the national level, NHS England has provided BSL through other means, for example for its 111 service a contract is in place which allows access to support from Interpreter Now. We have also taken steps to address communication barriers during the pandemic through the trialling of new transparent face masks which permit lip reading for example.

Nonetheless, while other support is in place for deaf people and for people with hearing loss, we recognise that BSL Health Access has been an important service.

I understand that BSL Health Access was established and fully operational before funding was sought and that NHS England and Improvement (E/I) financial standing orders prevent them from retrospectively funding this service.

You asked about the business case for future provision of this service. This service isn't one which NHS E/I would usually fund as it is a provider responsibility. However, the case is being reconsidered recognising that the pandemic has brought about unique challenges which have had a subsequent impact on individual providers' ability to meet accessibility standards, for example digital consultations disrupting arrangements to provide access to BSL interpretation that providers had in place. It is the intention of NHSE/I to provide, subject to clearance from a commercial panel which is pending, a one-off non-competed grant until the end of March 2021. A letter has been sent from NHSE/I to the CEO of SignHealth, on 16 October, to inform them of the situation and the progress of the grant.

Thank you again for bringing this matter to my attention, we are working with NHSE/I to bring about a solution that will ensure deaf people and those with hearing loss continue to receive the right support, particularly during this worrying and unsettled time. I will endeavour to update the Committee once the commercial decision has been made.

Yours ever,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Matt". The signature is stylized with a large 'M' and a cursive 'att'.

MATT HANCOCK