

Written evidence submitted by Signature (VUK 87)

1. This submission is made by [Action Deafness](#), [Action on Hearing Loss](#), the [British Deaf Association \(BDA\)](#), the [National Deaf Children's Society \(NDCS\)](#), the [National Registers of Communication Professionals Working with Deaf and Deafblind People \(NRCPD\)](#), the [Royal Association for Deaf People \(RAD\)](#), [Sense](#), [Signature](#) and [SignHealth](#).
2. This submission addresses the lack of access to election and voting information for people whose first or preferred language is British Sign Language (BSL).
3. For the purposes of this submission we use the term 'deaf' to encompass people who are deaf, deafened, hard of hearing and deafblind throughout.
4. Using the 2011 Census data we can estimate that BSL is the first or preferred language of at least 24,500 deaf people in the UK. This may be an underestimate because
 - a. it was not made clear this was the first census which recognised BSL as a language;
 - b. the census is often completed by the 'head of the household' who may not have written BSL for the appropriate family member(s);
 - c. many people who use BSL regularly may have ticked 'English' as their first language; and
 - d. an IPSOS Mori GP Patient Survey in 2009/10 led to estimates of 125,000 deaf adults in the UK who used BSL.
5. BSL is a visual-gestural indigenous language with its own grammar and principles. They are completely different from the grammatical structure of English. Many people whose first language is BSL are not fluent in written English.
6. The website of the Office for Disability Issues states: "British Sign Language (BSL) is a gestural language used in the UK's deaf community. It is not related to English or any other spoken languages."
7. The website of the Office for Disability Issues also states: "BSL was officially recognised by the Government as being a full, independent language in March 2003."
8. Therefore, whilst making sure written information is accessible is a good start it does not provide equal access for people whose first language is BSL. It is equivalent to arguing plain English is accessible for someone who was brought up speaking only Welsh.

9. Without access to information about elections and voting in their own language, people whose first language is BSL are not able to fully participate and contribute as equal and valued citizens. They are less likely to know how to register and when to vote. They are less able to make an informed decision.

Voting information in BSL

10. Neither <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk> nor <http://www.aboutmyvote.co.uk> provide information in BSL. The Electoral Commission does make some information available in BSL via its YouTube page. It is not clearly signposted from either of the websites.
11. <http://www.parliament.uk/about/how/elections-and-voting> does not provide information in BSL.
12. None of the political parties represented in the UK Parliament, nor the United Kingdom Independence Party, provide information on their websites in BSL.
13. We contacted all the political parties represented in the UK Parliament, plus the United Kingdom Independence Party. We received replies from Plaid Cymru, the Labour Party and the United Kingdom Independence Party.
 - a. Plaid Cymru said: “We are looking into the possibility of using sign language in our in our online resources. We have placed subtitles online for our party political broadcast and have made sure that our manifesto is readable.”
 - b. The Labour Party said: “We would always strive to ensure our materials are fully accessible, and if we receive a request for information in alternative formats then we will do whatever we can to provide it in the requested format. We normally produce an accessible copy of the manifesto, and provide BSL translators at events such as Labour Party Annual Conference.”
 - c. The United Kingdom Independence Party said: “No we do not - however we would love to.”

Recommendations

14. The Committee should recommend that
 - a. all online information about elections and voting be made available in British Sign Language (BSL), including

- i. Electoral Commission websites;
 - ii. Parliament websites; and
 - iii. political party websites;
- b. all nationally distributed printed materials about elections and voting should include a web address to the information in BSL;
- c. all party political broadcasts should be signed and subtitled;
- d. all televised election debates should be signed and subtitled;
- e. all television programmes related to elections and voting should be signed and subtitled;
- f. consideration should be given to providing funding to political parties to make sure deaf people can access information, in particular smaller parties; and
- g. ballot papers should include photographs of candidates to make them more accessible for all.

15. The Committee should also consider how representation may affect voter behaviour. There are very few disabled MPs but disabled people make up 17 per cent of the population. If more disabled people were members of Parliament it is likely they would be active in representing and encouraging the involvement of other disabled people.

7 May 2014