

Written evidence submitted by Action on Hearing Loss and Sense (CVD0017)

Accessibility of the Committee's proceedings

In addition to the evidence already submitted independently by Action on Hearing Loss and Sense, we would like to add the below evidence.

Both charities have recently given oral evidence to the Committee enquiries on 'coronavirus and the impact on people with protected characteristics' and 'coronavirus, disability and access to services'. Both organisations presented evidence relating to the challenges experienced by the deaf community. We very much welcomed these opportunities, and were particularly pleased about the level of support provided to enable evidence from Sense to be provided in British Sign Language (BSL). We do, however, have some concerns about the accessibility of the sessions more broadly and particularly for public scrutiny engagement. We understand that these are changing times and that we are all learning to deliver work differently and adapting to online platforms but feel that there are steps that the committee (and wider Parliament) should take.

It is disappointing that the Committee, who had the responsibility to facilitate the session and can liaise directly with Parliament TV, did not proactively ensure the accessibility of these sessions for those wishing to watch. This is particularly unfortunate given that the Committee used both sessions to scrutinise the provision of accessible information and asked a number of questions about the way the Government communicated with the BSL community. As a body which has responsibility for shaping public policy in relation to the Equality Act, including the Public Sector Equality Duty, and furthering the needs of disabled people, we would like to encourage the Committee to think about how it can be seen to lead by example.

In recent years, Parliament has made significant steps in improving the accessibility of its proceedings to BSL users. Under the leadership of the former MP, Jim Fitzpatrick, the All Party Parliamentary Group on Deafness (which Action on Hearing Loss supported, alongside the UK Council on Deafness, as the Secretariat) worked with the relevant authorities in the House of Commons to provide interpretation to relevant proceedings. Where oral evidence has been given in BSL, these sessions have been presented in a way that is accessible to BSL users viewing online, with the interpreter displayed in an in-vision box. As a result, a precedent has now been set which means that debates which directly relate to hearing loss and the BSL community are streamed with BSL interpretation. In recent months the House has also started to provide BSL interpretation for PMQs and the most significant urgent questions or oral statements. This is very welcome progress but we believe that Parliament can and should do more.

When Action on Hearing Loss gave evidence to the Select Committee we used our social media channels to publicise the session and encourage our supporters and followers to watch. It is important to us that the people we represent can see the actions we take and feel included in the work we undertake in partnership with them or on their behalf. It was, therefore, with regret that we had to notify our supporters that the session would not be accessible for those who require subtitles or BSL interpretation to follow proceedings. We subsequently received a volume of feedback expressing anger that the session was not accessible.

We hope that the Committee will consider how it can make its proceedings more accessible in the future and build on the progress that has been made. We believe that when the Committee is scrutinising policy which directly relates to the BSL community it would be proportionate to provide live subtitles and BSL interpretation.

July 2020