

All Party Parliamentary Group on Deafness Meeting | 11th February 2021 | Minutes

Meeting held via Zoom (details circulated via Whips office in advance)

Present

- Lilian Greenwood MP (Chair)
- Rosie Cooper MP
- Ian Mearns MP
- Tommy Shepherd MP
- Liz Twist MP
- Marie Rimmer MP
- Jim Shannon MP
- Rachel Hopkins MP
- Office of Steve Brine MP
- Office of Marion Fellows MP
- Abigail Gorman, Policy and Public Affairs Manager, SignHealth
- Christopher Jones, UK Council on Deafness
- David Rose, UK Council on Deafness
- Robert Geaney, Head of Campaigns & Public Affairs, RNID
- Essie Mac Eyson, Public Affairs Officer, RNID (Minutes)

Apologies

- Peter Aldous MP
- Kerry McCarthy MP
- Paul Girvan MP
- Andrew Rosindell MP

In attendance

- Alixe Buckerfield De La Roche, House of Lords Advisor
- Jo Champion, Deputy Director of Advocacy and Campaigning, National Deaf Children's Society
- Jill Jones, UK Council on Deafness Trustee
- Marcus Hawthorn, The National Registers of Communication Professionals working with Deaf and Deafblind People (NRCPD)

Speakers

- Ralph Nattress, UK Council on Deafness Trustee
- James Watson-O'Neill, Chief Executive, SignHealth
- Andrew Dewey, Chief Executive, SLi Group
- Ayla Ozmen, Head of Research and Policy, RNID

1. Access to GP Remote Appointments

Ralph Nattress, Chair of the UK Council on Deafness (UKCoD) provided an overview of some of the barriers experienced by deaf people when accessing GP appointments. He highlighted a survey conducted by RNID which found that:

- Around half of the participants who had needed a GP appointment were not able to book one easily.
- Over half (59%) admitted they had 'put off' seeking medical advice from their GPs following the introduction of remote appointments.
- Almost two-thirds left their appointment unclear on the information provided.

It was noted that the Accessible Information Standard requires health and social care providers to *'identify, record, flag, share and meet'* the communication needs of deaf people – providing services in an accessible manner. Ralph also provided quotes from respondents to survey conducted by the UKCoD, whereby local GPs had considered the individual's communication needs and utilised technological solutions/adaptations which enabled deaf people to access their GP remotely. Some examples included:

- SMS, email, Relay UK,
- NHS Online Consult (an NHS simple alternative to Zoom),
- Video Relay Services or GP Portal
- + in person for those without equipment

However, he also stated that the objective should now be to ensure that compliance is delivered in a uniform way. This means ensuring that best practice is shared among GPs.

Rosie Cooper MP highlighted the differences in accessing services among the culturally deaf and those who have become deafened – noting in particular, the importance of commissioning British Sign Language interpreters.

Ian Mearns MP asked whether Ralph could provide a briefing on the issues that can be sent to his Clinical Commissioning Group. Ralph agreed to provide a briefing with Rob from RNID.

Action: Ralph to circulate briefing to MPs in attendance on the importance of the Accessible Information Standard and the reasonable adjustments available for accessing GPs.

With reference to Rosie Cooper MP's comment on BSL interpretation and its importance when accessing health services, Marcus Hawthorne, Executive Director, NRCPD (National Register of Communication Professionals working with Deaf and Deafblind People) highlighted NRCPD's campaign to ensure that BSL interpreters, Lipspeakers and interpreters for the deafblind who are working within the NHS are able to access to Covid vaccines.

He noted that without access to these vaccines, this could impact in-person interpreting. Mr Hawthorne noted that NRCPD have been in contact with Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) about vaccinations among these groups -noting that to date, 65 have responded positively, 8 have responded with a 'no' and 62 are yet to respond.

Action: Marcus to circulate a list of CCGs that have and have not responded. MPs will follow-up if their local CCG is yet to provide a response.

2. Access to Healthcare for British Sign Language (BSL) Users

James Watson-O'Neill, Chief Executive, SignHealth highlighted the fact that Personal Protective Equipment in the form of face masks can interrupt in-person BSL interpretation. Whilst noting that in-person interpreters are still the best option for BSL users, James stated that there was a need to fill the gap for the growing number of remote health appointments with no communication support and SignHealth therefore set up the app with InterpreterNow to provide 24/7 on-demand access to BSL interpreters through the new BSL Health Access service.

He highlighted that SignHealth's BSL Health Access Service achieved this by providing VRI (Video Remote Interpreting whereby participants are in the same room, but the interpreter joins remotely) and VRS (Video Relay Services whereby participants are telephoning each other from different locations and the interpreter relays the call).

Andrew Dewey, Chief Executive of SLi Group noted high demand for the app highlighting that:

- 60% of calls were made to GPs
- 80% to support phone calls
- 20% to support in-person communication

James Watson-O'Neill highlighted a couple of areas that he would welcome parliamentarians support with:

1. The Equality and Human Rights Commission raised concerns about the lack of government funding for this service and an NHS England grant has now

been approved but this funding was only for the period December –March 2021. He noted the Lilian Greenwood MP had written to Simon Stevens on this issue, but is yet to receive a response.

2. There is a Rapid Review of BSL interpretation completing at the end of February and this will provide a further opportunity to highlight the benefits of this service.

On the benefits of the service, Abigail Gorman, Policy and Public Affairs Manager, SignHealth provided an overview - including:

1. The fact that there is a clear complaints procedure if there are any issues with interpretation
2. It can help mitigate anxiety about physically going out to an appointment
3. It is quick and easy to book an appointment via the app.

Action: Secretariat to circulate letter written by Lilian Greenwood MP on this issue to MP's in attendance, if they could also write to Simon Stevens.

3. Accessible Government Communications

Ayla Ozmen, Head of Research & Policy, RNID highlighted the barriers that deaf people have experienced due to inaccessible Government communications. She noted that:

- There have been no in-person BSL interpreters for key broadcasts
- Mailings have been produced with no accessible formats available
- Social media content has been posted with no subtitles or BSL interpreters.

Ayla stated that RNID along with a number of other organisations therefore wrote to the Prime Minister to ask for a Senior Lead on Accessible Communications. This request was met but progress has been slow.

Ayla also noted that RNID along with other charities also developed a “shopping list” of accessible communication asks of Government to help improve accessibility. RNID fed this into their oral and written submissions to the Women and Equalities Select Committee Inquiry on Covid, disability and access to services.

The Committee included this within its list of recommendations, urging the Government to make progress on this by the end of the first quarter of 2021.

Ayla highlighted the importance of this recommendation – particularly with regards to the vaccination roll-out whereby people are still being contacted over the phone and with consent forms still be provided without BSL.

It was also stated that RNID had written to Minister for Women and Equalities, Liz Truss MP, as part of the Disability Charities Consortium about the Committee's recommendations, but have not yet received a response.

She noted that this raises further concerns over the Government's National Disability Strategy and its general lack of engagement with the disability community at large.

Liz Twist MP asked what the most urgent call is regarding this work – Ayla stated that the issues were linked, noting that communications on vaccines are tied to the fact that the information is being delivered via inaccessible press conferences.

Action: Lilian Greenwood MP stated that she would be willing to write a letter on behalf of the APPG, in support of the Committee's recommendations.

Action: MP's in attendance will table parliamentary questions on the issues raised.

4. Any other business

Jo Champion, Deputy Director, National Deaf Children's Society asked Lilian Greenwood MP if she had received a response to a letter which she wrote to Education Minister Vicky Ford MP on the provision of clear face coverings in school.

Action: Secretariat to circulate to Jo.