



Jonathan Allan
Chief Operating Office
Channel 4
24 Horseferry Road
London
SW1P 2TX

14 October 2021

Dear Jonathan

The Channel 4 Subtitling Crisis of 2021

I am writing on behalf of the members, supporters and followers who have contacted RNID to obtain further information about the disruption to access services on the various Channel 4 channels and on-demand services.

I appreciate your time this morning to discuss this issue and where we shared the complaints and anger which the deaf community have communicated to us.

It is clear that you are personally frustrated and apologetic about the situation. And recognise that this incident has harmed Channel 4's reputation as an organisation with the highest ambitions to include and represent deaf and disabled communities.

However, television remains a key part of our culture and the basis for the everyday conversation people have with friends, family and colleagues. For the past 20 days Channel 4 have excluded many of the 12 million people across the UK who are deaf or have a hearing loss. We understand you are working on fixing the problem, but we are disappointed at the length of time it is taking.

Chairman: John Morgan Chief Executive Officer: Mark Atkinson

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As I set out when we met, many people have contacted us or taken to social media to express their anger. Here are some examples:

“Apparently Channel 4 says that difference starts conversations. Hard to be part of that conversation when there are no subtitles.”

“Why are there still no subtitles @BritishBakeOff? @Channel4 failing ‘altogether’ to be inclusive. At least apologise to/warn viewers before the show starts.”

“Come on @Channel4 where are the #subtitles?! You are supposed to be an inclusive channel but you are excluding d/Deaf & hard of hearing people, as well as other individuals reliant on subtitles. It is the same as having no sound and doing nothing. Please address this urgently.”

Channel 4 has released several statements in the past two weeks. These are a start, but our supporters are clear they are not enough. Here’s what deaf people have told us they want:

- **Estimated time to resolve this issue.** Of all the questions that have been raised to us, unsurprisingly the most common is how long it will take to resolve these problems. I understand this is not a simple question, but we believe that the deaf community is entitled to better information.
- **Information about current provision.** At the moment, information for viewers about individual shows – whether on the Electronic Programme Guide or your own website – is inaccurate and still shows information about the access services that should be available. We believe people should have accurate information about what is actually available.
- **Clarify when and where accessible version will be available on-demand.** You have committed to making all shows available on-demand with the missing accessibility. However, the on-demand market is very fractured and viewers find content on different platforms and devices, which often come with differing levels of access services. People need clarity about when and where these on-demand services will be accessible.

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- **Accessible information.** Channel 4's communications must be tailored to the needs of deaf people and accessible for them. The main source of information has been in written English, something that will not be as accessible to many members of the deaf community. We believe you should provide regular video updates in BSL and share them on social media. RNID is happy to give you advice and support to make this happen.

I have no doubt this lack of access services will be especially troubling for Channel 4. RNID admire the leadership that Channel 4 has shown towards disability and the way that you have delivered your commitment to diversity and the representation of disability. However, it is clear from what our supporters have told us that the current problems have damaged the trust that the deaf community has in the channel. As a colleague of mine stated to me, the deaf community wants you to:

“Listen to us and make us feel accepted equally to hearing audiences. They have a lot of ground to make up, not just for not providing subtitles, but for not listening to us and keeping us informed which made us feel like we don't have worth.”

We hope that you will reflect on this feedback and consider the steps that Channel 4 will need to take to regain the trust of the viewers who feel that they have been badly let down, by both the lack of access services and the poor dialogue that Channel 4 have had with the deaf community. Again, if RNID can support with this work, then we would be happy to do so.

We also hope that when the immediate crisis is over, Channel 4 will look at the resilience of its current systems and the back-up options that it maintains. Also that you communicate your actions accessibly to the deaf community, so they have confidence in your commitment to accessibility. It is also vital that Channel 4 engages with the deaf community on long-term accessibility and involves deaf people in the decisions that you are making about their access.

As I explained at our meeting, RNID will be sharing this letter on our website and on social media and through other channels. We ask that Channel 4 set out its response to the issues we have raised and communicates this to the deaf community. We are happy to assist in ensuring that your explanation reaches our audience.

I look forward to receiving your response.

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Yours sincerely

Harriet Oppenheimer
Deputy Chief Executive

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