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Dear Lords,

British Sign Language Private Members' Bill: House of Lords Second Reading

I must thank the Noble Lords for their contributions to the debate on the British Sign Language Bill on Friday 25 March. I committed to write to clarify a number of points raised during the debate, which I have set out below.

UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Baroness Grey-Thompson raised a question about the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

The UK government is committed to implementing UNCRPD through strong policies and legislation. The UNCRPD calls for states to accept, recognise, facilitate and promote the use of sign languages¹. Measures proposed in the BSL Bill and the non-statutory measures alongside the Bill will help meet our obligations under the treaty.

The UNCRPD text itself does not specifically mandate that families of Deaf and hard-of-hearing children must be given information about BSL. The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disability has advised the UK government to allocate resources for the education of children with hearing impairments, their families and others, such as classmates and co-workers, in British Sign Language and tactile language².

As part of the reporting obligations under the UNCRPD, the UK government will, in due course, and no earlier than 2023, report our progress on any BSL and

¹ See Article 21 of the UNCRPD.

² Paragraph 47c of the 2017 concluding observations on the initial report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland by the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

family-related recommendations made by the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, following the 2017 UK Periodic Review.

We recognise that many Deaf BSL signers can face barriers in their lives in communicating their basic needs and aspirations. As you will know, alongside the Bill the Minister for Disabled People has announced a suite of non-statutory measures which will help promote and facilitate the use of BSL. These include:

- establishing a non-statutory advisory board of British Sign Language signers to advise the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on matters relating to BSL;
- examining how we might increase the number of BSL interpreters;
- reviewing and updating Access to Work products to ensure they are fully accessible for all BSL signers; and
- considering how government can further facilitate and promote BSL usage.

The government believes wholeheartedly that BSL signers have a key role to play in advising this government on how we can support them to lead fulfilling, independent lives. The non-statutory board of BSL signers will make sure their views are central to progressing practical improvements. This board will advise the government on matters relating to BSL and of particular pertinence to Deaf BSL signers, which will include helping to formulate the guidance in clause 3 of the Bill.

Secondary legislation on captioning

Lord Bruce of Bennachie raised three important questions: on the progress of secondary legislation on captioning, access to Video Relay Services and proposals to introduce sign language-related legislation in Northern Ireland.

On the first question, the government recognises that as part of a digitally inclusive society, television content should be accessible for all UK audiences regardless of which platform is used to view that content. As viewing habits continue to shift from live to on demand, the government is committed to seeing an improvement in the provision of accessible services for video-on-demand.

That is why the Digital Economy Act 2017 introduced new provisions to the Communications Act giving the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) the power to establish new accessibility requirements – in relation to subtitling, audio description and sign language – for on-demand providers.

As part of the process to implement these new requirements, the government asked Ofcom to provide recommendations on how legislation would work in practice. Ofcom's latest report 'Further Statement: Making on-demand services accessible', was published on 9 July 2021. DCMS officials are carefully considering Ofcom's latest proposals before setting out next steps on implementation.

Video Relay Services

A number of service and telecommunications companies have introduced Video Relay Service (VRS), which allows Deaf people to communicate with people who cannot use BSL via an interpreter using video phones. DWP has successfully completed the expansion of VRS from Disability Services to all its service lines. However, we acknowledge there is more work to do.

Alongside the Bill, the government has announced that it will establish a board of BSL signers to advise the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on matters relating to BSL. We hope to work with the board on a number of issues of importance to BSL signers, which may include access to Video Relay Services.

Northern Ireland sign language legislation proposals

This Bill does not extend to Northern Ireland, in recognition of the existence of both British and Irish Sign Language among the Northern Irish Deaf community. This decision also reflects the territorial scope of the Equality Act 2010, which (with very limited exceptions) is limited to Great Britain.

The Northern Ireland Assembly is currently dissolved ahead of its May election. Therefore, it is not possible at this time to understand when a Bill might be taken forward.

I hope that this clarifies the relevant points made during the Bill's Second Reading. I would like to again thank all colleagues who took part. As I said during the debate, if you have any further concerns you would like to raise with me about the Bill, please get in touch. My officials would also be happy to meet and talk through any further questions you may have.

I will place a copy of this letter in the library and send a copy to Rosie Cooper MP and Lord Holmes.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Debbie Steadman-Scott". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

**BARONESS STEDMAN-SCOTT
MINISTER FOR WORK AND PENSIONS (LORDS)**