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The Rt Hon Chloe Smith MP
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Dear Chloe,

I would like to thank you once again for securing the recent Westminster Hall Debate on the British Sign Language Act 2022 and British Sign Language Report 2023. I found the debate to be constructive, collaborative and informative. It celebrated the Government's significant achievements to date, whilst acknowledging that there is still more work to be done.

I am keen to ensure that action across Government on BSL is driven forward now. I am pleased to say that I have already discussed this important issue with the group of Ministerial Disability Champions who will be taking work forward in their individual departments, and we will continue to discuss BSL in our ongoing conversations to encourage action.

There were many interesting points raised during the debate and I endeavoured to respond to them in full. I made a commitment to follow up by letter and answer anything that went unaddressed - please do share this letter with colleagues as you see fit, and I will place a copy in the House Library.

In the debate you expressed interest in the forthcoming Disability Action Plan. All responses to the consultation (which ran between 18 July 2023 and 6 October 2023) are now being analysed, and these findings will inform the final Disability Action Plan. Throughout the debate we heard about the importance of collaboration across the Devolved Administrations and creating an aligned approach. We will continue to work with officials in the Devolved Administrations throughout the development of the Disability Action Plan to ensure that the actions will make a difference to disabled people across the UK.

On the matter of the guidance detailed in Section 3 of the BSL Act I would like to take this opportunity to clarify that the intention is to publish by the summer of 2024. It is important that we use the expertise of the BSL Advisory Board to ensure that we get the guidance right, specifically when we are offering guidance to support public authorities with the provision of BSL as a reasonable adjustment in front-facing settings.

I understand that a key issue for the d/Deaf community is the number of interpreters available. We will work closely with the BSL Advisory Board to identify potential solutions. It is vitally important that we listen to their expertise in this area.

In addition to the BSL Act, the rights of BSL users are already protected by the Equality Act 2010, which requires 'reasonable adjustments' (such as a BSL interpreter), to enable access to a service. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) provides guidance on the Equality Act for employers, workers, service users, service providers and education providers, and their helpline, the Equality Advisory & Support Service (EASS), advises and assists individuals on issues relating to equality and human rights, across England, Scotland and Wales. As this is relatively new legislation, there is very little evidence as yet on how the Act has driven up standards of BSL provision via redress.

During the debate we heard several questions regarding the quality and availability of data. The Government collects a variety of data on disabled people who have "difficulty hearing" and their outcomes, drawing on the definition of disability as understood in the Equality Act 2010 and impairment type as collected in available data. In addition, the Government has set out a comprehensive approach to improving its evidence on disabled people, including the BSL population. This encompasses: improving administrative and survey data across Government to ensure they reflect disabled people's needs and the barriers they meet; an annual survey to collect robust information on disabled people's lived experience; monitoring public perceptions

towards disabled people; and building expertise on disability related evidence. Transparency is an important part of this, as is the continued willingness to make improvements. With regards to the presentation of data outlining BSL activity by ministerial departments, we will investigate how best to ensure the next report is even more transparent and meaningful.

I was grateful for Angela Richardson's incredibly important point on the support for the interpretation needs of those fleeing domestic abuse. I would be grateful for more detail about this issue and, as mentioned, I would be happy to ask the Ministerial Disability Champions in the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice to look into this. I will write separately to Angela on this point.

Turning to education and creating opportunities for the next generation to develop language skills at an early stage, I know that you share my enthusiasm for the Department for Education's development of a BSL GCSE and I look forward to hearing their next steps following analysis of their consultation responses. Primary schools are, of course, able to teach BSL to their pupils if they wish to do so and I am particularly interested in how schools are capturing a growing interest in BSL. With this specific point in mind, I have asked my officials to seek an update from the Department for Education on the work they are doing to drive forward the uptake, availability and usage of BSL in our schools, to reflect the questions from Jim Shannon. I agree with his emphasis on the importance of inclusivity and join-up on these matters across the Devolved Administrations. Disability Unit officials already meet regularly with their counterparts across the Devolved Administrations to discuss work on BSL and I will ask them to continue to incorporate this approach into their discussions.

I hope that the information contained in this letter, in combination with the information I outlined on the day of the Westminster Hall Debate, provide a clear indication of this Government's strong commitment to BSL and to ongoing implementation of the BSL Act. I also repeat my offer of a follow-up cross-party meeting to discuss what more the Houses of Parliament authorities can do to promote and facilitate BSL interpretation.

With best wishes,

Yours ever,



Tom Pursglove MP
Minister of State for Disabled People, Health and Work