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**TX: 18.03.03 – BRITISH SIGN LANGUAGE TO BE RECOGNISED AS AN OFFICIAL LANGUAGE**

**PRESENTER: JOHN WAITE**

**WAITE**

The Government has announced that British Sign Language or BSL is to be recognised as an official language. It's already used by around 70,000 deaf people, more people in other words than speak Gaelic or Welsh. And it's not a form of communication system by hearing people but a real language which has evolved in the nation's deaf community over hundreds of years. But while organisations like the British Deaf Association and the RNID welcome the news that it's finally to be formally recognised there are still many problems for the deaf community due to a severe lack of sign language interpreters. With just one interpreter for every 150 deaf people the RNID calls the situation a national disgrace. Well we'll be talking the disabilities minister in a moment but first this report from Claire Marsh.

**ACTUALITY**

You know that doctors' handwriting is notoriously difficult to read so it's not very good to have a flowing ...

**MARSH**

Heather McCurly is a lecturer in interpreting at the Bristol Centre for Deaf Studies and has been a sign language interpreter for 10 years. She's one of only 300 registered sign language interpreters serving over 50,000 deaf people in the UK. This means thousands of deaf individuals are denied access to a number of basic services, such as doctors' appointments and job interviews. Without official status Heather says the profession hasn't been given the recognition it needs.

**MCCURLY**

It's very difficult for us to demand - this is an official language in this country, therefore this person needs an interpreter. So I think it's partly about perception, people are now getting to know about sign language interpreting the more we're out and about doing our job.

**MARSH**

Sandra Smith is a deaf lecturer at the Bristol Centre. Here Heather translates her response as I asked her why interpreters are important to a deaf person's life.

**SMITH**

It's very important in terms of communication, it's not just important for deaf people, it's important for the hearing people as well. Because communication is two way, so if I sign and a hearing person doesn't understand what I'm saying obviously they need to do that, so it's important for both parties - hearing people and deaf people - to have an interpreter.

**MARSH**

Clare Baker is the communications director at the deaf charity the RNID. She says a lack of funding and a prospect of a seven year training course needs to be addressed to encourage more interpreters.

### **BAKER**

A deaf person may well have to wait for three weeks until they can get an appointment with the GP's surgery when a registered interpreter will be available - this is not good enough. What the RNID requires is for the RNID and government departments to sit down together to work out a strategy so that across the UK we can improve the training programmes and the time for hearing people to go through those interpreter training programmes.

### **MARSH**

There are currently two ways to become an interpreter - you can study part-time and gain a basic level in sign language but in order to complete level 2, which is the equivalent of a GCSE, it takes up to three years. Interpreters must then go on to complete either a university degree or a series of NVQs which could add a further four years to your training before you become a registered interpreter. It's hard work but as Jonathan Fields, a trainee interpreter at Bristol, explains it is a hard job.

### **FIELDS**

It's identical to spoken language interpreters, so if you want to become a French language interpreter then you'd have to learn it a lot, you'd have to go to university and understand the literature and you'd have to become completely bilingual in that. And sign language is identical - you need to be bilingual in a language to do that and it takes a number of years unless you're born into a deaf family.

### **MARSH**

Sign is a complex language, it has its own grammar, a whole new vocabulary and can't be taught through a textbook as it's a three dimensional language. John Mansini is a deaf lecturer at the Bristol Centre for Deaf Studies. I spent the morning with him as he patiently taught me to sign.

### **ACTUALITY**

John's explaining that when you talk it's very important to use your face, so ..difficult - I must really look like it's difficult. It's very expensive - so I'm putting money into a meter, which is just my thumb and my index finger flicking and then ... it's expensive, which is ...

### **MARSH**

The complexity of the language is immense, the facial expressions and positions of the hands are vital, if you get these wrong you could say something completely different and much like spoken English there are regional differences, so asking for a fizzy drink in Preston equates to asking for sex in Bristol - not something you want to get mixed up. Twenty five thousand people embark on a sign language course every year but the length of time needed to complete an interpreting course is a main deterrent for many students. The RNID says at least 3,000 registered interpreters are needed, it's calling for an intense 18 month course to help ease the demand. But in the meantime Clare Baker, from the RNID, says the severe shortfall has serious implications for the deaf.

### **BAKER**

Because of the level of demand at the moment there is a black market out there so we are finding people who are not properly qualified are working out in the field - this is a very, very bad situation and it means that the deaf person is not getting the quality service that they so rightly need.

### **MARSH**

Heather McCurly says this is very serious as an interpreter is dealing with people's lives.

### **MCCURLY**

Some of the situations that we're working in are literally a matter of life and death circumstances, if you're doing a doctor's appointment you're talking about the health and the welfare of the deaf person. If mistakes are being made then you're having a huge effect on somebody's life, it can be very dangerous.

### **MARSH**

Now the language has been recognised officially it's hoped this will strengthen the status of interpreters and help to get rid of black market signers and encourage both the recruitment and training of much needed registered interpreters.

### **WAITE**

Clare Marsh reporting. The disabilities minister Maria Eagle joins us now. The British Deaf Association's been campaigning to get British Sign Language officially recognised for 20 years minister, why have you decided to agree to do it now?

### **EAGLE**

Well I've been working on this for about 18 months, since I came into the job, and we have to persuade everybody across government, we have to persuade people that it's a good idea and we've managed to persuade them of that. I think it's important that we recognise that British Sign Language is a language, not just a means of communication, government now does that and in addition we're also making available a million pounds to try and do some work towards increasing the supply of interpreters, for example, and do some other work that will try and make sure that in future it'll be easier to use BSL because more people will be qualified.

### **WAITE**

Well that is very crucial, as we heard in that report from Clare Marsh - we need to get some more sign interpreters and a million pounds, though it may sound like a lot of money, isn't a huge amount when so many - there are so many deaf people and so few interpreters.

### **EAGLE**

Well you know we have to start somewhere and there were a number of issues raised in your interview there about what some of the barriers might be and we need to work as a government with the deaf people and their organisations to work out what the barriers are, to make sure that we can overcome them and of course money is one of the things that's needed. But the other thing is we need an agreed way forward and I hope that today and the recognition that has been given by the Government to British Sign Language today will be a first step on a road to make major improvements across the board.

### **WAITE**

Yes but what will it mean, do you think, in practice - how far will that recognition go? I mean certain Scandinavian countries, who are ahead of us on this, they have sign language as part of the national curriculum.

### **EAGLE**

There's no doubt about the fact that if you met with me this morning organisations of and for deaf people who came to the Secretary of State's office this morning to hear this announcement, you only had to look at the faces of people there to realise how important it is in terms of esteem for the deaf community, there's no doubt about that. And I think that now that we've done that we can talk together, go forward to solve some of these practical problems that were raised in your interviews about BSL and about making sure that there's more availability for people in the deaf community for communication and language in BSL and obviously getting more people qualified, whether it's the NVQs, whether it's new qualifications that are needed, is a key part of making sure that BSL interpretation's more widely available.

**WAITE**

Minister many thanks - Maria Eagle the disabilities minister.