



Institute of British Sign Language
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14th October 2020

The Rt. Honourable Boris Johnson, MP
Office of the Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London
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Dear Prime Minister,

As Prime Minister during this unprecedented time of crisis, you will no doubt appreciate the need for the nation to pull together to protect the NHS, support the economy, keep ourselves and others safe.

However, this can only be achieved if we are ALL fully informed of the evolving situation and the latest guidelines to follow. Yet, as members of the Deaf community, we have been kept in the dark from the start due to the lack of live British Sign Language (BSL) interpretation in the room when such announcements are made. We have made repeated attempts to reach out to you via our MPs, on social media (#WhereIsTheInterpreter) and letters of support from different Deaf charities and organisations to explain that we need a British Sign Language interpreter in the room, not hidden away on a separate digital TV channel.

Not all deaf people have access to social media or digital channels and therefore cannot access this information. Many are still unaware that such access is available if you know where to look, expecting that in times of national emergency, access would be provided on all media outputs.

We have been told every number of excuses - that "it isn't safe", that the "room is too small", that it is "the responsibility of the BBC" - which does not make sense when nearly every other country in the world - including Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland - has included a sign language interpreter at their Covid-19 broadcasts. We cannot help but ask ourselves why we are not being included, and if the Government is aware of the risk we pose to ourselves and others if we do not understand the instructions and proposed guidelines to keep us safe. British Sign Language (BSL) is used by over 80,000 Deaf people in the UK, for whom English may be a second or third language. This means that even if subtitles are provided (which have not been consistently accurate) they may not be fully understood.

The UK Government recognised British Sign Language as an official language in its own right, on 18 March 2003, and is committed to funding a 'discrete programme of initiatives to improve access to BSL'.

We, therefore, implore you to put right this injustice and ease the distress caused by this marginalisation and isolation of our Deaf community by ensuring that we have equal access to the vital Covid-19 information by having a BSL interpreter present at future announcements.

Yours sincerely,

Michelle Jones – Executive Director

Institute of British Sign Language



Written in support of the #WhereIsTheInterpreter campaign.