Submission from Deaf Links

From our prospective, Deaf advocacy, it is vital for the Deaf community that changes are made for the benefit of profoundly Deaf people. There is a lack of Deaf awareness in the community at large, all too often Deaf people are faced with situations where they are unable to communicate properly, I refer especially to communication with NHS Tayside, councils, banks, DWP etc, although not exclusively. There is a false belief that Deaf people can read and write English fluently and therefore can be communicated with via this medium. The lack of understanding by the public, public bodies, communication companies etc is concerning. Many times we have asked for our service users to be contacted by text rather than organisations insisting on communication by phone-calls, which robs profoundly Deaf people of their independence, and in some circumstances increases their vulnerability, especially where they may have to divulge personal information to friends and relatives. In an age when there are a range of different communication options, skype, text etc it would be more inclusive for many people if these were adopted as standard means of communication, although it must also be noted, that we have found previously, where people may be willing to try these, education is needed regarding information giving. I refer to an incident where a hospital ward in Tayside agreed to set up text communication to enable a profoundly Deaf woman access information about her mother, unfortunately the information given to her in text “Mrs ………. fine today” did not match the information given to her hearing relatives “Mrs …………… unwell and condition deteriorating” Sadly this is not an isolated incident, we have found the information texted to profoundly Deaf people to be inadequate and not a true reflection of the condition referred to, in most circumstances.

BSL is a separate and unique language, few BSL users have English skills to allow them to communicate in writing, and very few have lip reading skills, this due to a failing of education toward profoundly Deaf people, through the years, and poor advice from Social Services to the families.

In a nutshell, the BSL bill needs to enhance the recognition of this separate language, it needs to create improvement for BSL users in areas of communication, enabling all to live independent lives, it needs to make sure that information is provided in a BSL format, the community is often excluded from important information that we all take for granted, for example the Scottish referendum, information about this and the debates that ensued were missed by many BSL users not having access to this in an understandable medium.

I would suggest that all government advice, all election information, parliamentary debates etc are communicated by BSL as well as English. It would not be difficult for a BSL interpreter to be present at these meetings, for there to be a BSL version transmitted. This should also be standard for all news broadcasts. By making these changes it would go a long way to improving the lives and enhancing the independence of profoundly Deaf people.