

All Party Parliamentary Group on Deafness

AGM and Meeting | 5 September 2017 | Minutes

Room T, Portcullis House, Westminster

Present

- Jim Fitzpatrick MP (chair)
- Lilian Greenwood MP
- Tommy Sheppard MP
- Stephen Lloyd MP
- Dawn Butler MP
- Lord Borwick
- Neil Gray MP
- Richard Burden MP
- Rob Geaney, Action on Hearing Loss (minutes)
- Darren Townsend-Hanscomb, UK Council on Deafness

Apologies

- Lord Swifen
- Teresa Pearce
- Henry Smith
- Lord Shipley
- Debbie Abrahams

In attendance

- Damian Barry, British Deaf Association
- Toby Burton, The Economist
- David Buxton, Action on Disability
- Craig Crowley, UK Council on Deafness

Annual General Meeting

Jim Fitzpatrick MP was reappointed unopposed as Chair of the APPG.

Lilian Greenwood MP, Mike Penning MP, Lord Shipley, Ian Mearns, Stephen Lloyd MP and Tommy Sheppard MP were all appointed unopposed as Vice-Chair of the APPG.

Access to Work

Darren Townsend-Hanscomb gave an update to the meeting on the impact of the cap on Access to Work awards.

He explained that the cap has created a glass ceiling for deaf people. The cap was set at 1.5x the national average salary, currently £42,100. Disabled people on higher awards before October 2015 have 3 year transitional protection, with the cap affecting them from April 2018. He argued that this cap is unreasonable given that the scheme was set up, and is still needed, to reduce the cost to employers of employing people with higher support costs. Costs of a £1,000p.a. may not be a barrier to employment, but costs of £20,000p.a. are likely to be.

He went on to say that people in senior or professional roles spend a lot of time in communication with other people, so for deaf people to be effective in demanding roles, when doing this they use trained and qualified professional interpreters and speech to text operators. Given this, many Deaf people in senior and professional roles have budgets between £65,000 and £75,000, with some needing budgets higher than that. So the cap leaves most Deaf people in senior or professional roles with a support gap of over £20,000. This is the difference between them being able to work effectively, or not. Whilst some employers will pick up this cost, not all will, or can (e.g. charities) and not all have an employer (e.g. self employed).

Toby Burton, Chief Financial Officer, the Economist, then gave his personal experience of the Access to Work scheme and the potential impact that the cap would have on his ability to function in his role. He explained that the AtW cap will mean that he can only do my job for 3 days out of 5 working days a week as there is no possibility to perform a job managing different teams on those days where he has have no communication support because of the cap.

Stephen Lloyd MP asked about the proportion of the Access to Work budget spent on deaf scheme users. He also pointed out that there is still a high rate of employment amongst deaf unemployed people, and therefore thought that the Government could be concerned about the potential impact on the Access to Work budget should this field of employees enter the employment market. He urged the group not to shy away from the fact that it was talking about high-cost cases and said that they should be prepared to engage in a high profile campaign if necessary.

Jim Fitzpatrick asked the speakers if they had any sense of what could be realistically achieved with the Government on this issue. The consensus from the room was that whilst there was a strong case for removing the cap, the Government had indicated that this was not possible but that it might be possible to raise the threshold to reduce the impact on deaf scheme users.

Actions: Jim Fitzpatrick MP agreed to write to the Minister, Penny Mordaunt MP, seeking a meeting on the subject to be attended by parliamentarians and UKCoD stakeholders.

BSL Recognition

David Buxton updated the group on latest developments towards BSL recognition and legislation alongside an update on the potential role of the APPG in this campaign.

He explained that following the AGM in January the UKCoD membership had not been able to raise the necessary finance to support an APPG inquiry into the cost of BSL recognition.

However, he argued that since the general election there have been a number of developments which might change the best way forward. Labour now supports a BSL Act, this leaves only one political party Conservatives not supporting a BSL Act. BDA and UKCoD have met and discussed alternative plan – a Private Member Bill – BSL Bill – this will test Parliament on whether they will support a similar Bill (Scotland and Northern Ireland). This is still in discussions.

If a Private Members Bill fails, we know Parliament's own priorities in the next few years will be mostly Brexit, therefore UKCoD feel it is more sensible to seek a large funding to set up a BSL costings research project that will help APPGD to understand and capture

key issues. This will buy more time and present very strong case to the Ministers / Civil Servants after the end of Brexit.

David Buxton offered to update APPGD after further discussions with UKCoD and BDA as UKCoD is still keen to see this project continue subject to the available funding and capacity.

Stephen Lloyd asked what evaluation has been made of the impact of the Scottish legislation. Damian Barry responded that the Scottish Government are still consulting on their national BSL Plan and that it would potentially be another five years before a substantive evaluation of the legislation could be made.

Jim Fitzpatrick asked which Government department had responsibility for language recognition. David Buxton and Damian Berry both indicated that the DWP had usually responded on the issue of BSL, indicating that they considered BSL a disability issue – rather than one of language or culture. There was however some confusion as the subject could also come under the Government Equalities Office, Education, Cabinet Office or even Communities and Local Government.

Dawn Butler (Shadow Secretary of State for Women and Equalities) indicated that the Labour frontbench had worked across departmental teams before creating their policy and suggested that there was a lack of clarity about who held ministerial responsibility in Government.

Action: Given the confusion around ministerial responsibility for this area Jim Fitzpatrick agreed to table a WPQ to the Cabinet Office asking for confirmation of who the best target in Government would be – this information can then be used to determine the most effective way forward.

Any Other Business

No other matters were raised.