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Dear Jonathan

Consultation on The Future of Public Service Media

Thank you for your letter of 27 January to Minister Hargey. I have been asked to reply.

The Minister remains committed to ensuring that broadcasting content and commissions are relevant to and fairly represent NI and in contributing to the process where her department has a direct interest. To this end I have appended a response from my colleagues in Languages Branch given the Department's policy remit for the two local sign languages – British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL).

I have also seen the Northern Ireland Screen response to your consultation and have noted it with interest. We would certainly be keen to continue the relationship with Ofcom and to learn more in terms of your proposals and explore broader areas of mutual interest. I would be happy to arrange a meeting, including my Languages colleagues and I look forward to hearing from you if you thought that might be helpful.

Yours sincerely

John Ball

Languages Branch
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Response to Consultation on The Future of Public Service Media

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of access to critical - and potentially life-saving - public health information for the public. This is carried in many forms, including on public service broadcasting of news bulletins and current affairs programmes, as well as by televised public health advertisements and announcements.

DfC has the policy remit for the two local sign languages – British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL) - and officials are in regular contact with the local Deaf community. Unfortunately, the feedback we have received from that community is that accessibility to such broadcasts is worryingly insufficient due to the lack of added ‘signed’ and/or subtitled translations. Although it is acknowledged that some headline news bulletins carry signed translations, these are few and the more in-depth inquisitorial broadcasts and current affairs programmes are not signed. Those that are signed carry British Sign Language translations only - reflecting its use in Great Britain audience however, this causes access problems for local Irish Sign Language users which is a completely different language.

It is accepted that wider society has acquired an understanding, to a greater or lesser degree, of COVID-19 terminologies and information and advice however, this has not translated to the local BSL/ISL community. This community has, by and large, been subject to at best misunderstanding as programme makers frequently provide subtitles. Consistent research illustrates that deaf children leave education with the average reading age of a nine year old hearing child. Therefore, such subtitling, particularly of complex subject matters such as a pandemic is insufficient. At worst, it sends a message to the Deaf sign language community – and one which is routinely referred in their discussions with officials – that they are of less value than their hearing counterparts due to the barriers they

experience in accessing information. This misunderstanding of sign language users' needs is reflected in the following comment to the 2016 Sign Language Framework Consultation translated from BSL to English: "It is so important that we have more access for Deaf people in NI to the television system through having regular onscreen signers, and not just subtitles. Subtitles are helpful but they are of limited benefit to people for whom English is not their first language."

The practical solutions for accessibility to news/current affairs can be viewed during the NI Ministers' daily COVID-19 news conferences when a BSL and an ISL interpreter provide signed support to ministers giving their COVID-19 updates. This support is provided by and funded by The Executive Office. In addition, DfC Languages Branch is providing funding to Deaf BSL and ISL translators to provide their own pilot initiative of daily VLOGs for BSL/ISL users to provide translations of key pandemic information and advice and to discuss the impacts on the local Deaf community via social media platforms. The Republic of Ireland presents ISL signed weather forecasts on RTE – another example of broadcasting which hearing society takes for granted. Such interventions present examples of ways for broadcasters to imbed cost effective BSL/ISL access to their programmes.