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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

WAITE

Minister many thanks - Maria Eagle the disabilities minister.