

REPORT OF SERVICE DIRECTOR CUSTOMERS, GOVERNANCE AND EMPLOYEES

UPDATE TO REPORT THE PROGRESS ON THE COUNCIL'S COMMITMENT TO THE BRITISH SIGN LANGUAGE CHARTER

Purpose of the Report

1. To provide information to Elected Members regarding the review conducted by the British Deaf Association (BDA) to identify where the Council was in relation to the commitments made under the British Sign Language (BSL) Charter and to seek approval for the development of an action plan to consider and address the identified priority areas from the BDA.

Information

2. The British Deaf Association's British Sign Language Charter is designed as a vehicle to remove direct and indirect discrimination, reduce inequalities experienced by Deaf people and improve engagement between Deaf people and service providers. Designed and implemented by the British Deaf Association (BDA), the British Sign Language (BSL) Charter was initially created to support Local Authorities but has since expanded to incorporate wider public services - health, policing, housing, clinical commissioning groups.
3. Nottinghamshire County Council signed and adopted the BSL Charter in partnership with the BDA and Nottinghamshire Deaf Wellbeing Action Group on 10 December 2014. Nottinghamshire County Council is a member of the Nottinghamshire BSL Charter Partnership Group that was established with a number of Nottinghamshire based public service organisations after they signed the BSL Charter for their respective organisations.
4. Although a long-standing signatory of the Charter, the Council wants to ensure it is well-placed to meet any new requirements presented by the potential new legislation currently at the Committee stage of Parliament. The Bill seeks to recognise British Sign Language as a language of England, Wales and Scotland; to require the Secretary of State to report on the promotion and facilitation of the use of British Sign Language by ministerial government departments; and to require guidance to be issued in relation to British Sign Language
5. The BSL Charter sets out five pledges to improve access and rights for Deaf people who use British Sign Language. The Charter has been designed to be flexible for different types of service providing organisations, therefore a review is required to map the various BSL Charter pledges against relevant Nottinghamshire County Council activities. The five pledges of the BSL Charter are:

- Consult formally and informally with the local Deaf community on a regular basis
 - Ensure access for Deaf people to information and services
 - Support Deaf children and families
 - Ensure staff working with Deaf people can communicate effectively using British Sign Language
 - Promote learning and high-quality teaching of British Sign Language.
6. The BSL Charter presents Nottinghamshire County Council with an opportunity to address and reduce inequalities which may be experienced by Deaf people in Nottinghamshire in accessing its information and services. By implementing the Charter, the Council is leading by example and seeking to promote good practice in accessible communications to other organisations and businesses in Nottinghamshire. Colleagues from across a range of services across the Council have been engaged in the work to assess progress in the commitments made including from the Customer Service Centre, Adults and Children's social care, Communications, HR, the Disabled Employees Support Network and the recognised Trades Unions.
7. Since signing the Charter, the Council has worked with a number of different organisations to develop a broader approach to accessible and inclusive employment opportunities and how it delivers its services. These include achieving Disability Confident Leader accreditation in September 2021; ongoing work with Leonard Cheshire; and taking up membership of the Business Disability Forum to further assist with developing this area of work.
8. The review has considered the Council's progress against the pledges of the BSL Charter. A mapping exercise has formed the basis of the plan with staff and managers from across the council engaged in reviewing how the Council meets the commitments given in the pledges made. Nottinghamshire County Council is seeking to grow its understanding of the Deaf residents of Nottinghamshire who use BSL and has worked with the BDA who have provided expert insight into the barriers Deaf people may experience in accessing services and information provided by the Council in different contexts, media, and formats. Councillor Gordon Wheeler, in his role as Member Equality Champion, has met with members of the Deaf communities and with the BDA representative, to emphasise our commitment to working positively with them.
9. The review has enabled the Council to identify some priority areas for activity which are being developed into a comprehensive and evolving action plan. This report seeks Members' approval for the further development of this work, to continue to work with services across the Council to ensure the Council's publicly made commitments are translated into genuine actions which will improve services for and be accessible to Deaf people and their families.

Other Options Considered

10. Under the Equality Act 2010 when making decisions about policies or the way in which we deliver our services, we must demonstrate that we have shown due regard to:
- eliminate discrimination, harassment, and victimisation
 - advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not
 - foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

11. The review draws together the existing improvements being made to services as well as providing further recommendations to strengthen the services delivered to our residents to ensure they are accessible and inclusive for the Deaf community within Nottinghamshire. Due to focussed aims of this piece of work, our British Deaf Association representative was considered the most appropriate person to undertake this review and therefore no other alternatives were considered.

Reasons for Recommendations

12. The Council has a legal duty to provide services to all the residents of Nottinghamshire. As we have signed the pledge as an organisation, it is necessary that going forward we are able to consider and implement the actions and recommendations suggested by the British Deaf Association. The recommendations suggested to us cover a number of key areas and will form part of the impetus to initiate change and improvements to our service delivery. As Covid restrictions are now lifted, this piece of work is very relevant as we would like to encourage and engage individuals within the Deaf community in making improvements to areas such as website accessibility and customer services.

13. This work is timely given the Government's support for a Private Member's Bill currently being considered in Parliament aiming to make British Sign Language (BSL) a recognised language in the UK and to help Deaf people play a more prominent role in society.

14. Taking a proactive stance on our commitment to the BSL Charter is ongoing evidence of how the Council is seeking to maintain its position as a Disability Confident Leader.

Statutory and Policy Implications

15. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, data protection and information governance finance, human resources, human rights, the NHS Constitution (public health services), the public sector equality duty, safeguarding of children and adults at risk, service users, smarter working, sustainability, and the environment and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

Data Protection and Information Governance

16. The British Deaf Association have engaged with colleagues around the organisation with their permission. The British Deaf Association have also consulted with those in the Deaf community and provided information not pertaining to any individual so avoiding a data protection breach.

Financial Implications

17. Any costs arising from the development and implementation of the action plan will be met from existing service budgets.

Human Resources Implications

18. The Council aims to ensure that it challenges any form of discrimination, harassment, or abuse towards its employees. It is important for our workforce to be aware of the issues that Deaf colleagues may face. The County Council strives to be an inclusive employer and to give due consideration to the needs of colleagues who are deaf. Improvements will be considered regarding the way in which reasonable adjustments can be implemented in a fair and inclusive way. Our ongoing work with the Business Disability Forum will assist the Council to fully understand their responsibilities regarding this.

Public Sector Equality Duty implications

19. Nottinghamshire County Council has recently set out its ambitions for our residents in the Nottinghamshire Plan. One of the ambition's is helping everyone access the best of Nottinghamshire. The Council seeks to create a more prosperous Nottinghamshire, which means supporting our diverse range of communities. In signing the British Sign Language Charter in 2014, we gave a public commitment which we are now reviving through this review of current systems and processes to ensure that we are meeting our Public Sector duty under the Equality Act and also committing to the charter in a way that it is capable of being monitored and progressed year by year.

Smarter Working Implications

20. There are a number of implications arising from hybrid working for Deaf employees and service users. Further work is required to fully understand the implications of working differently to maximise any advantages but also to mitigate against any issues which could create further barriers to accessibility of employment or services.

Implications for Service Users

21. The aim of this piece of work has been to ensure that service users who are deaf or have hearing difficulties will benefit from improved services in various areas within the Council. British Deaf Association have consulted with the Deaf community through Nottinghamshire Deaf Society to gain a deeper understanding of the issues facing individuals when accessing our services or employment opportunities

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Elected Members:

- 1) Welcome the joint work undertaken by the British Deaf Association, representatives of the local Deaf community and officers across the Council.
- 2) Agree to the development of an action plan to address priority areas of work arising from the review.

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For any enquiries about this report please contact: Gill Elder, Head of Human Resources on gill.elder@nottscg.go.uk or 01159773867

Constitutional Comments (KK 23/03/2022)

22. The proposals in this report are within the remit of the Personnel Committee.

Financial Comments (SES 22/03/2022)

23. There are no specific financial implications arising directly from this report.

HR Comments (GME 04/04/2022)

24. The employment implications are included in the body of the report. The Council is keen to demonstrate to its existing and future workforce the commitments it has made regarding support for members of the Deaf community both in terms of employment and the provision of services. At a time when the Council is facing unprecedented recruitment challenges, it is imperative that we maximise the talent pools from which we attract applications from.

Background Papers and Published Documents

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

- None

Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected

- All