

Re: Consultation on sustainable, independent and impartial news in the Nations, locally and in the regions

Dear sir/madam,

RNID Cymru is the charity working to create a world where deafness or hearing loss do not limit or determine opportunity and where people value their hearing. We work to ensure that people who are deaf or hard of hearing have the same rights and opportunities to lead a full and enriching life. We strive to break down stigma and create acceptance of deafness and hearing loss. We aim to promote hearing health, prevent hearing loss and cure deafness.

There are an estimated 480,000 people who are deaf in Wales. It is estimated that 1 in 7 of the general population has some degree of hearing loss. British Sign Language (BSL) is a visual, spatial language that uses movement of the hands, body face, and head. BSL has its own grammar, syntax, idioms and regional variations. It is the first or preferred language of approximately 3,000 people in Wales. The Welsh Assembly Government formally recognised BSL as a language in its own right in January 2004, and since then has invested significantly to provide more qualified, professional interpreters as a resource for public services.

RNID Cymru welcomes the opportunity to comment on this consultation on sustainable, independent and impartial news in the Nations, locally and in the regions.

RNID Cymru welcomes the Government's recognition that news at all levels is the priority for audiences and the most important public service content for society. We agree that news provision remains an integral part of democracy which not only helps hold public institutions to account but also informs and provides a voice to the nations and regions in the UK. Furthermore, we also agree that it is vital that audiences have a range of trusted, independent and impartial sources of news from and about the Nations, locally and in the English regions.

However, as the consultation document rightly states, pressures across the market place mean that news provided in the Nations, locally and in the regions is diminishing or risks significant decrease. British Sign

Language users in Wales have already seen a significant decrease in the provision of accessible news. In March 2009, Wales Tonight, ITV Wales' evening news bulletin stopped its signed headlines coverage, which had run for 23 years. At the time, ITV Wales argued that subtitling Wales Tonight was an acceptable alternative. However, deaf BSL users should have the chance to access Welsh news in their first language. This deprived BSL users of the only daily BSL news provision in Wales. The decision was taken without consultation, discussion or research into audience response to the service.

The decision by ITV Wales was criticised by all the main political parties in Wales. First Minister Rhodri Morgan was amongst the first to condemn the decision. He stated in Plenary on February 3rd 2009:

"... In many of the changes that ITV has imposed on ITV Wales, you can see a consistent pattern whereby it is trying to wriggle out of its public service broadcasting obligations.

"This is another example of this. If there is one decision that ITV should immediately reverse, it is the one that you have just described to us, because there is no possible justification for dropping the signed news service just because it may not be available in all of the English regions or in Scotland or Northern Ireland."

Following a campaign by a number of deaf organisations in Wales, thirty seven Assembly Members signed a statement of opinion, condemning ITV Wales's decision.

The Communications Act 2003 sets minimum targets for signing of programmes by broadcasters. It is the responsibility of Ofcom to ensure that these requirements are met. However, Ofcom do not have the right to determine which programmes should carry this service, as this has been judged as a decision that should be made by broadcasters. Therefore as Ofcom's powers in this area are limited, ITV Wales was permitted to take this decision as ITV as a network is meeting its UK agreement to sign 5% of its content.

Currently, BBC Wales broadcasts just one weekly signed bulletin, falling some way short of a genuinely accessible news service. Viewers who use BSL in Wales have been left with no alternative accessible news coverage about local and regional affairs.

In light of the Government's proposals set out in the consultation to introduce independently funded news consortia (IFNCS), RNID Cymru

would like assurances that the needs of the deaf community in Wales will be considered and met. When awarding contracts to IFNCs, we call on the Government to include the provision of television access services (subtitling, signing and audio description) into the range of considered key criteria. Furthermore, during the pilot stage RNID Cymru calls on Government to consider the provision of television access services as part of any review into the effectiveness of the IFNCs.

RNID Cymru does not wish to comment on should the Television License Fee be used to support impartial news in the Nations, locally and regional in addition to BBC services. However, RNID Cymru would like assurances that if IFNCs would be funded by the Television License Fee, guidance and regulation would be in place with regards to providing accessible news bulletins for all citizens.

In conclusion:

- RNID Cymru feels that this consultation is a timely opportunity to revisit the need for accessible local and regional news provision for people who are deaf. The current targets have failed to protect signed news bulletins in Wales. Deaf BSL users should have the chance to access news in the Nations, locally and in the English regions in their first language.
- RNID Cymru would like assurances that the accessibility of news provision will be considered as key criteria when awarding and reviewing IFNCs, particularly if they were to be funded by the Television License fee.
- RNID Cymru welcomes the opportunity to participate in this debate and want to assure the Department of our willingness to engage and contribute to any movement to address this issue.

Yours sincerely,

Richard Williams
Director, RNID Cymru

Please note that this response is also endorsed by:

Richard Jones, National Projects Manager, Deaf Association Wales

Norman Moore, Director, Wales Council for Deaf People

Cedric Moon, Wales Deaf Broadcasting Council

Jayne Dulson, Director, National Deaf Children Society Cymru