

*EUD seminar, Madrid, 22 May 2010*

## **EUD and efsli to sign working agreement**

by Maya de Wit, efsli president

The European Union of the Deaf (EUD) held their AGM on May 22<sup>nd</sup> in Madrid. All participants were invited to the venue of the Spanish Deaf Association (CNSE) where the AGM took place. A special tour of the building and the premises gave a glimpse of all the work CNSE has achieved over the years. In the building they meet with the regional associations, have services for deaf children and hearing parents, teach sign language classes, train interpreters, design and develop books and DVDs, and much more. After the tour all participants were invited to the special conference room on the lower level of the building.

Prior to the start of the AGM the official signing ceremony between the president of the EUD, Berglind Stefánsdóttir, and me as the efsli president. The specially designed working agreement determines, amongst others, how efsli and EUD should proceed and collaborate on common topics of interest, a minimum number of meetings



per year, the participation in each others annual conference or seminar. A full copy of the agreement will be published on the efsli website. The efsli board is very happy that the collaboration between EUD and efsli is now formalised and the efsli board is very much looking forward to our further cooperation with EUD.

The day prior to the AGM, the EUD held a seminar hosted by the CNSE. Approximately 100 persons from across Europe, mainly deaf people, participated in the seminar. Interpretation was provided in international sign, English, Spanish, and speech to text in English and Spanish. Several special invited guests from the Spanish government and WFD vice president Feliciano Sola Limia, held a small ceremonial speech at the opening ceremony. The presenters focused on the importance of the seminar topic 'poverty & social exclusion' and also give a big thank you for the 17 years contribution of the CNSE president, Luis Cañón Reguera.

The keynote speaker was Dr. Ádám Kósa, the first deaf member of the European parliament. Ádám Kósa has analysed the different ways in which sign language has been recognised in Europe. There are three levels: in the constitution, in the law, and in

regulations. In order to claim the right to sign language, sign language must be recognised in the constitution. If sign language is mentioned in a regulation, then this can be changed at any time by the national government. *Ádám Kósa* recommends to have sign language recognised in the constitution and in a comprehensive accompanying law. This is the best possible option to ensure your rights to sign language and related services.

The EU can help in the process of sign language recognition by taking on a resolution. This resolution must then be recognised by the national states. When negotiating or discussing sign language with the authorities, *Ádám Kósa* also recommends to use the term first language instead of mother tongue. The term first language is more clear for those who have little or no knowledge of sign language.

There are several points that are crucial in getting sign language recognised. The first one is visibility. The deaf association must lobby for sign language recognition in a visible way. Secondly the law that recognises sign language must be based on equal standards and opportunities. *Ádám Kósa* mentioned for example the comprehensive law in Hungary in which parents of deaf children receive funding to attend sign language classes to learn how to communicate with their deaf children.

Looking at the current situation in Europe the recognition, rights and services for deaf people are in each country different. The philosophy of the EU is that an EU citizen can live and work in any European country, but this is difficult for deaf people since they can not receive the same services in each country.

There are several tools that can be used when lobbying for the recognition of sign language: the Lisbon treaty (2009), the UN charter of equal rights, and the UN convention for people with disabilities (2007). The national deaf associations themselves must now take on action and work at national level to get sign language recognised. One option is to work on a petition that must be signed by a certain number of citizens in the country to have the parliament discuss the issue. This can also be done at EU level. If one million signatures are gathered the parliament has to discuss the matter.

*Ádám Kósa* ended his presentation by stating the very importance of having more statistics on deaf people and related services. In addition, we must realise that when sign language is recognised, then poverty among deaf people will be reduced. All deaf organisations must fight their governments in this matter, and aim for the constitutional recognition of their sign language.