

Education and Culture Committee
British Sign Language (Scotland) Bill

Fact-finding visits

Introduction

The Committee held two fact-finding visits to help inform its scrutiny of the BSL Bill:

- Windsor Park School and Sensory Service, Falkirk, on 9 December 2014; and
- Deaf Action, Edinburgh, on 20 January 2015.

Background on the visits is contained in the **Annexe**.

The key aims of the visits were:

- to understand the challenges experienced by Deaf people;
- to discuss the importance and benefits of using BSL; and
- to consider what impact the BSL Bill might have.

This paper summarises the main points to have emerged from both visits.

Key issues discussed

Challenges accessing services

People told us they had to overcome barriers in order to access everyday services. For example, how they felt isolated and unable to access healthcare services.

One person said they had to wait hours for an interpreter in A&E, and another said they had only been able to get an interpreter in hospital after a hearing family member followed up the request.

We were told that hospitals lacked awareness of the communication needs of Deaf patients, or patients with Deaf family members. There were calls for improvements in the way hospitals provided information to patients and their families, such as by text message. Others commented that information leaflets were sometimes unhelpful and should be improved, and that general health warnings needed to be communicated in ways Deaf people could understand.

It was also suggested that greater use could be made of centralised video and online interpretation services, for example at doctor and hospital appointments. However, it was acknowledged that in some circumstances it would be better to have face-to-face contact.

Other people on our visits highlighted difficulties with using every day financial services. For example, people said banks and insurance companies had refused to deal with enquiries and requests to purchase insurance made via an interpreter.

Some people suggested that contacting the emergency services could be made easier by using SMS messaging. Others felt that information at train stations, such as last minute platform changes, needed to be more effectively communicated to Deaf people. It was also suggested that public bodies should make general information available in the form of BSL video clips.

There were also calls for additional support in the workplace, particularly for someone's first day in a new job. It was suggested workplaces could use signed video induction tools for Deaf staff, which would save time and avoid the need to book interpreters.

Other people told us they would like to see better Deaf awareness at polling stations and from representatives canvassing for support in the build up to elections.

The particular needs of Deafblind people were also highlighted. It was recognised that their needs had to be taken into account when public bodies were considering how to make services accessible to Deaf people.

In addition, the cost of learning BSL – which could run to thousands of pounds – was prohibitive to many. This meant family members could sometimes not afford to learn BSL. This was a particular problem given that 90% of Deaf children were born into hearing families.

Challenges relating to education

People told us about the difficulties they had experienced as children going through education and there was concern about the quality of education Deaf children received today.

It was felt that Deaf pupils should get more support in school to ensure they understood what the teacher was saying. It was acknowledged that Deaf children were often some of the most vulnerable in society and so they needed extra help to make sure they succeeded at school.

It was suggested BSL should be a part of the school curriculum, like other languages such as French and German, and for it to be included as an option in the list of new national qualifications. The reference to BSL in the Scottish Government's 1+2 language policy was seen as a useful starting point and one that could be built upon.

Others highlighted there was a need to ensure teachers of Deaf children were qualified in BSL to a high standard. It was, however, acknowledged teaching cover would have to be arranged to allow teachers to attend BSL training courses and this could sometimes be difficult to arrange.

A good example of support provided to Deaf children was at Windsor Park School and Sensory Centre, in Falkirk. We saw how the teaching staff and a BSL tutor worked with children at the nearby Falkirk High School where BSL was an everyday part of school life.

The BSL tutor delivered a programme of BSL sessions for the primary and secondary Deaf pupils, teaching and support staff, family members and associated agencies working with Deaf children. The tutor also provided deaf awareness and sign

language classes for hearing pupils as well as for education staff, front line staff and members of the community.

Windsor Park introduced sign language to its pupils at an early age, which was seen as critical. It also used BSL interpreters for school events such as prize ceremonies and assemblies, as well as parents' evenings and a discussion about children's rights with the Children's Commissioner.

We met some of the secondary pupils who received support from Windsor Park and they told us learning BSL had helped them to be able to communicate with their classmates and friends. Signing, they said, was most important when there was a lot of information given by the teacher, or they were not using their hearing aids, for example at the swimming pool.

Impact of the Bill

People hoped the Bill would raise awareness of the challenges faced by Deaf people, which would in turn encourage action to improve access to services. While it was acknowledged this was a long-term process, people supported the Bill in the hope it would improve the lives of Deaf children and young people in the future.

We asked people whether they thought the production of BSL plans was the best use of money, and if the resources could be spent on anything else that would deliver greater quality of life for BSL users. Some people commented that instead of creating paperwork, the money could be better spent on tangible things, such as more interpreters. However, the majority view was that the Bill was a hugely important step in recognising and promoting BSL as a language and raising awareness and understanding of the communication needs of Deaf people.

By raising awareness of Deaf people's needs, it was hoped the Bill would begin to break down barriers faced by the vulnerable, reducing their feelings of isolation and promoting a more inclusive society.

It was also said the Bill provided a huge opportunity to begin to raise people's expectations of what Deaf children and young people could achieve in life. Someone suggested it could be important in helping parents to understand the benefits of their child learning BSL.

Others commented that the Bill provided an opportunity for BSL users to influence how resources to support BSL would be used in the future. Also, it was suggested the Bill might encourage more people to choose to train as BSL interpreters.

There was, however, concern about the financial pressure councils were under, which could mean a lack of money to implement the actions included in the BSL plans.

Windsor Park School and Sensory Service

The School sits alongside Falkirk High School and Bantaskin Primary School. The Committee visited the three purpose-built classrooms that are situated within the High School.

Specialist support is currently provided for 10 primary and 7 secondary pupils who have significant hearing loss. Some of the pupils also have a range of other physical and learning impairments. With support, the pupils integrate into the primary and secondary mainstream establishments that are on-campus.

In addition, the School provides an outreach service, which allows staff to support pupils with sensory impairments across the local authority area.

The Committee also met members of the Sensory Services Team based in the Forth Valley Sensory Centre, Falkirk. This social work team provides communication support for adults who have a hearing or visual impairment.

Deaf Action

Deaf Action was established in 1835 and was the first formally constituted Deaf organisation in the UK.

Deaf Action promotes the welfare of deaf people and those with other sensory and support needs, including those who are blind, partially sighted and deafblind.

Specifically, Deaf Action provides social work services, assistance on financial matters and communication support. It also provides training on deaf awareness issues as well as specialist accommodation and care for deaf people with additional support needs.