

BRITISH SIGN LANGUAGE (SCOTLAND) BILL: SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE

Aims and approach of the Bill

The Education and Culture Committee received 95 written submissions and 39 videos in response to its call for evidence on the British Sign Language (Scotland) Bill.

There was substantial support for the fundamental aim of the Bill, to promote the use of British Sign Language (BSL). This support came from public authorities, the Scottish Government and the Deaf community.

However, there were different views about how best to achieve this. Many highlighted the need to increase recognition of BSL as an indigenous language to Scotland, similar to Gaelic. They hoped legislating for BSL as the Bill proposes would lead to increased use of BSL, increase the number of BSL interpreters, and offer more opportunities for people to learn about Deaf culture.

A number of public authorities held a different view. Their preference was to take a disability-centred approach and suggested that existing equality legislation was a more appropriate mechanism to achieve the aims of the Bill. This approach was rejected by much of the Deaf community on the basis that BSL users should not need to self-identify as “disabled” in order to have their language needs met.

Promotion of BSL

There was uncertainty about what promotion of BSL would entail in practice. Several respondents focused on improving access to services, particularly education and healthcare, as the best form of promotion.

Others indicated that promotional activity could include working with families to introduce BSL to hearing parents and family members, working at all levels of education to introduce BSL to hearing learners, and arts and media engagement to nurture BSL cultural output.

However, there was concern that the Bill would use up scarce resources, which could be better directed in other ways to support BSL users. It was also suggested that the Bill could have a detrimental effect on the available resources to support people with other communication needs.

Others took the view that BSL merited recognition as a language in its own right and existing legislation together with the Scottish Government’s *See Hear* sensory impairment strategy protected other languages and forms of communication adequately.

Duties on Scottish Ministers

The appointment of a Scottish Minister to take lead responsibility for BSL was broadly welcomed.

Some people commented on the Minister’s role. It was seen as important that the Minister should maintain regular engagement with the Deaf community to inform the

national plan and to maintain an up to date understanding of the issues affecting Deaf people. Others felt that the lead Minister should be able to use basic BSL.

There was also support for the Scottish Government's proposal to establish a BSL national advisory group. The relationship between the advisory group, the lead Minister and the Deaf community was seen as crucial to promoting BSL effectively.

BSL Plans

Respondents generally agreed that consistency between the national plan and authority plans would be useful. There was also general agreement that the plans should be made available in BSL.

The main area of concern was the content of the plans. Some people suggested plans should specify actions in relation to education, health, criminal justice, civil rights and accessibility. Others highlighted the importance of ensuring plans included measurable outcomes.

Many people considered the promotion of BSL in an education setting as a priority and called for this to be included in BSL plans. Some highlighted the Scottish Government's 1+2 language learning policy as a possible mechanism for promoting BSL, and others suggested plans should include a commitment for BSL to be part of the school curriculum.

It was also suggested that support for Deaf children was particularly important during their early years.

In addition, there was strong support for raising the minimum BSL qualification level required by communication support workers and teachers of the deaf from level 1 (a minimum of level 3 was mentioned).

Access to health services was also a key issue that people felt should be included in BSL plans. Some called for healthcare professionals to be Deaf aware, while others noted the challenges of not being able to directly communicate with health professionals either about their own conditions, or about those affecting their children. It was suggested that the health sector needed to find better ways of providing BSL support for Deaf patients, or patients who had Deaf family members.

It was also suggested that BSL plans should take account of the specific interests of deafblind people. Specifically, there was a call for more deafblind communicators to be trained.

Others commented that further guidance on the content of the national plan and authority plans was required. This would help public authorities to work out the resource implications of the Bill.

Many recognised the value of the performance review as a useful mechanism for holding public authorities to account. However, some commented that any monitoring or scrutiny of local authority plans should be done at a local level rather than by the Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament.

Consultation on BSL plans

There was support for engaging the Deaf community as early as possible in the development of BSL plans.

Also, there was support for the Scottish Government's proposal for collective consultation on the plans. This was seen as a way to relieve some of the burden from the Deaf community in local areas, which could be swamped with requests to review plans.

The Facebook group set up by the Education and Culture Committee was seen as a good model for engaging the Deaf community and it was suggested this type of forum could be used for future engagement or consultation activities.

Other barriers experienced by Deaf people

In addition to accessing education and healthcare, many referred to the barriers Deaf people experienced when trying to access services.

It was suggested there was a lack of awareness of the needs of BSL users on the part of day to day service providers and many called for frontline staff to be Deaf aware. For example, it was felt that staff at benefit and passport offices and job centres should be able to communicate with Deaf people.

Others highlighted the problems Deaf people often faced in relation to work situations. Workers repeatedly mentioned feeling isolated, being bullied or experiencing limits on opportunities.