

# **BRITISH SIGN LANGUAGE (SCOTLAND) BILL: SUMMARY OF FACEBOOK COMMENTS**

## **Introduction**

The Education and Culture Committee set up a BSL group on Facebook in November 2014 with the aim of encouraging the Deaf community and BSL users to give us their views about the British Sign Language (Scotland) Bill. We especially wanted to allow people to submit their views in BSL video, a format which is well suited to Facebook.

Since it was created, the BSL group has attracted over 1900 members. Hundreds of comments have been posted, including numerous BSL videos.

This document identifies the key themes from these comments, particularly those most relevant to the Bill. It is not meant to be a complete analysis of all comments received, which are publicly available at: [BSL Facebook Group](#).

## **Importance of BSL**

Comments reflected there was strong support for the BSL Bill. There was very enthusiastic support for the opportunity the Bill provides to improve the quality of life for future generations of Deaf people.

Promoting the use of BSL was seen as vital as it is the language Deaf people use in daily life to connect to the world.

Many people commented they had missed out on normal family communication where, for example, family members had limited signing skills. They hoped the proposed change to the law would help families to enjoy fuller lives.

## **Legislating on BSL**

It was felt the Bill was necessary in order to recognise BSL as a language in its own right. The existing equality legislation was criticised as it labelled Deaf people as disabled and not part of a linguistic and cultural minority. Others commented that BSL deserved equal recognition to other minority languages like Gaelic and Welsh.

People hoped that recognising BSL in this way would help to break down barriers, reduce Deaf people's feelings of isolation and promote their integration into Scotland's communities. For example, it was suggested that giving BSL the same status as spoken languages would help to validate the parenting role of Deaf parents where they had hearing children.

## **Barriers to BSL users**

Many people had concerns about the barriers that stopped them accessing basic services. They hoped the Bill would resolve some of these issues by raising awareness of the needs of Deaf people.

## Access to education

To many, it was vital the Bill improved access to quality education for Deaf people. Many people's experiences of education had been negative - the use of sign language had not been widely used, which had limited their learning experience and left them feeling isolated.

One of the reasons for this had been the approach taken in schools throughout the UK to promote oralism (i.e. spoken language) as the preferred method of instruction rather than manual sign language. Several people said this had put Deaf children at a huge disadvantage.

People told us they wanted basic levels of BSL to be part of the school curriculum. Pupils at Clydeview Academy, in Inverclyde - who were encouraged to use BSL as a first language - enjoyed learning the language as it enabled them to communicate more easily. Another 14-year old pupil felt Deaf children were not treated equally compared to their hearing peers because there was not equal access to information in school.

A large number of comments expressed disappointment that the Bill did not include a requirement to provide BSL classes in schools. It was suggested that such a requirement should be included in the national plan. Many felt that such a move would improve educational outcomes for Deaf pupils and give them access to a wider range of employment opportunities and to further or higher education. Several others highlighted the importance of teaching Deaf children BSL at an early age, as this would maximise children's potential for future bilingualism.

## Access to healthcare

Deaf people also strongly felt the Bill could improve their lives by raising awareness about their needs in accessing health services.

People wanted healthcare professionals to be more Deaf aware and to understand that Deaf people often felt marginalised and isolated. For example, someone had felt they had been ignored in hospital and had not received the same level of emotional support from nurses as hearing patients. They had been forced to communicate by passing written notes back and forward.

A Deaf parent explained how she had taken her hearing child, who was sick, to the doctors. However, the child had to explain the symptoms to the doctor and then interpret to the parent what the doctor was saying. The parent hoped the Bill would mean that Deaf parents would be treated equally to hearing parents and be able to express their concerns easily.

Having an interpreter present at doctor and hospital appointments was critical. Some people had experienced potentially life-threatening situations where they had not been able to understand key messages about their illness or medication due to there not being an interpreter available. It was suggested that online interpreting services should be provided in hospitals and included in the national plan.

However, there were also some positive experiences. One person said their GP could use some sign language and this had been of great benefit. A number of others emphasised the importance of this and called for all doctors and NHS staff to be trained in the use of BSL.

Various comments referred to the need to ensure staff in social care settings were aware of the needs of Deaf people. It was of particular concern that older people in care homes should receive communication.

### Access to other services

Other comments highlighted difficulties Deaf people had experienced in accessing other services.

It could take the Police hours to arrange an interpreter and so describing an incident or making a report could be a lengthy process involving communicating by written notes. In an emergency situation such delays could be critical. It was also seen as important that Deaf people should have access to an interpreter at every stage of the criminal justice system.

Another comment was that Deaf people sometimes found it difficult to access counselling services, where they might feel uncomfortable having an interpreter present. Their view was that Deaf people had the right to share their experiences in the same way as hearing people and suggested more counsellors should be able to use sign language.

There was also a call for people in public facing positions to have some level of sign language ability. A number of comments highlighted this was the case in the USA where many hearing people working in hotels and at tourist attractions could use sign language, which they had learned in high school. This was seen as a good model, which, if implemented in Scotland, would have a significant impact on the quality of life of Deaf people.

Some people referred to a lack of awareness by bus drivers who required Deaf travellers to state their destination when using a National Entitlement Card. An alternative method of providing the information should be worked out that did not require the Deaf traveller to type the information into their mobile phone and then show the driver.

Other challenges related to the use of technologies. For instance, a number of people highlighted difficulties using speech-only intercoms and wanted video screens to be considered where appropriate.

There was also a call for banks to have greater Deaf awareness. In one case, a bank had refused to deal with a family member of a Deaf person because they were not the account holder, despite money apparently having been illicitly withdrawn from the bank account. It was suggested people were forced to lie and pretend to be the account holder.