

1. British Sign Language (Scotland) Bill

The final Stage 3 debate in relation to the British Sign Language (Scotland) Bill is due to take place on Thursday 17 September at 15.45. We believe that, if passed, this landmark legislation could become a key driver in improving outcomes for deaf children, young people and their families. **We urge you to continue to support the passage of this Bill by voting in favour of it on Thursday.**

2. Introduction

The National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) is the leading charity in Scotland dedicated to creating a world without barriers for deaf children and young people. In Scotland, we have a dedicated team based in Glasgow and led by Heather Gray, Director. The team has a strong focus on addressing the attainment gap that exists for deaf learners. This includes the work we do with our Young Campaigners who are a group of deaf young people aged 14-20 years old. They call for better services and campaign on issues affecting deaf children in Scotland.

NDCS uses the term "deaf" to refer to all types and levels of hearing loss.

3. Background

NDCS welcomes the British Sign Language (Scotland) Bill – this landmark legislation has real potential to bring about change for deaf children, their families and all British Sign Language (BSL) users in Scotland. If passed, the Bill will see Scotland lead the way in the UK in terms of acknowledging and strengthening the valuable place of BSL in our society.

The Bill's aspirations to promote and raise awareness of the language to ensure it is fully embedded into society are commendable. The enabling framework the Bill sets out could result strengthened provision in BSL in the delivery of public services and ultimately improve outcomes for deaf children and adults.

Key facts:

- NDCS estimates there are as many as 3850 deaf children in Scotland. There are currently no complete national data set on numbers of deaf children and young people in Scotland and their preferred language.
- A non-governmental survey has suggested that 3% of deaf children solely use BSL, around 12% use sign language in combination with another language and 0.6% use a sign system other than BSL.¹
- According to the same survey, 71% of peripatetic hearing impairment services in Scotland do not have staff who are qualified to BSL level 3 (approx Higher) or beyond. There were 6 authorities with a member of staff with no BSL qualification.
- 90% of deaf children have hearing parents – with little or no experience of deafness. Providing information about BSL as early as possible is crucial.

¹ Consortium for Research into Deaf Education 2013 Scotland Report

- A recent survey of parents across Scotland raised concerns about the consistency of information provision they had had about using BSL with their child. While it is positive that approximately 50% of the 75 respondents received information about BSL either at the point of diagnosis or in the early years, 15% only gained this knowledge when their child reached primary school and a worrying 35% said they had never received information about BSL.

For a comprehensive overview on NDCS' views on the British Sign Language (Scotland) Bill, please refer to our [evidence submission](#) to the Education and Culture Committee dated 2 February 2015.

4. Summary of NDCS' position on the Bill

NDCS welcomes the duties that will be placed on national and local authorities to develop plans which set out how they will achieve the aims of the Bill in consultation with BSL users.

NDCS strongly recommends that these plans have a key focus on improving outcomes for deaf children and young people by addressing the unique challenges they face. Such as:

- a) Closing the **education attainment gap** for deaf learners;
- b) Ensuring that children and young people who access teaching and learning through BSL are supported by Communication Support Workers (CSWs) who are able to accurately interpret what the teacher is saying. This requires **minimum levels of qualification in BSL**.
- c) **BSL becoming an accredited school qualification** within the full Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, and having the same status as other languages;
- d) Improving the availability of **Family Sign Language (FSL)** which enhances the ability of hearing parents to communicate with their deaf child and promote their development. NDCS Scotland currently delivers FSL courses and understands the lasting impact this kind of support can have on children and families;

It is critical that the aspirations of the Bill are **appropriately resourced** so they can be fully realised. For example, the delivery of FSL is not routinely funded and will require national and local investment in order to address this gap in BSL service delivery.

5. Education Attainment

Scottish Government data shows that there is a significant attainment gap for hearing impaired school leavers, and the attainment of this group is among the lowest of all pupils in Scotland. In the 2012/13 year, the average tariff score of deaf school leavers was 289, while the average score for leavers with no additional support needs was 439. In the same year, almost 10% of deaf school leavers left with no school qualifications at SCQF Level 2 or above compared with 2% of all pupils.²

NDCS has welcomed the formal acknowledgement of the education attainment gap for deaf learners by the Scottish Government and their commitment to closing it.³

² Scottish Government, 2014, [Attainment and Leaver Destinations Supplementary Data](#)

³ See NDCS [Close the Gap](#) report

The Scottish Parliament has recently carried out an Inquiry into the attainment of pupils with a sensory impairment. The Inquiry highlighted some of the challenges facing deaf education and we hope the forthcoming Inquiry Report will produce recommendations for improving outcomes for deaf learners.

NDCS regards closing the attainment gap for deaf learners as a key area for inclusion within a future National Plan for BSL promotion in Scotland.

6. Communication support in education

The role of CSWs is critical to ensuring that children and young people who rely on signing to access teaching and learning receive accurate interpretation of what the teacher is saying and what is going on in class.⁴ Ensuring CSWs in schools and colleges have a minimum level of BSL qualification so that they can effectively fulfil this role is fundamental. *“They should have a higher level [of BSL]. For science and things there is a lot of jargon so they need to understand that.”*⁵

Deaf young people who use BSL as their preferred language require a high quality of fluency of support which, given the lack of qualification framework for support staff, is not always on hand. It can be frustrating for learners to not feel confident that everything the teacher is saying is being effectively translated to them and they understand everything that is going on in the classroom, *“sometimes the teachers have limited signing skills and I don’t understand.”*⁶

NDCS believes the Bill is an opportunity to strengthen the consistency of qualifications for those working with deaf learners across Scotland, and address issues such as minimum qualifications for Teachers of the Deaf (ToDs) and CSWs, as well as the regulatory framework they work within.

7. BSL within the modern language curriculum

All children, including those who are deaf, should have the option to develop BSL skills. Currently, a very small number of children have the opportunity to study BSL at school, and none have the opportunity to develop their BSL skills right through secondary school due to lack of qualifying routes in senior years through SQA.

NDCS recommends that the Bill and subsequent Plans that will be required to be produced are a significant opportunity to ensure BSL becomes an accredited school qualification within the full Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework. The 1 + 2 language initiative to promote the learning of languages in primary school provides a clear model through which BSL could be included. Developing these opportunities would have the benefit of strengthening and enriching the inclusive education experiences of all children and young people.

8. Family sign language and the early years

⁴ For more information on the role of CSWs see [NDCS evidence submission](#) 2 February 2015

⁵ Quote from young person at NDCS & Education Scotland’s Deaf Learners Conference 2015

⁶ Quote from young person at NDCS & Education Scotland’s Deaf Learners Conference 2015

Deafness in childhood has a major impact on the learning of spoken language. With 90% of deaf children being born to hearing parents or carers, it is crucial that families receive timely early interventions of support and information, as highlighted in the Scottish Government's See Hear sensory impairment strategy.

NDCS believes it is essential that families are provided with information and access to the full range of support options and communication methods available to them. Information about these options should be presented to families in their own terms, taking into account their cultural and social background in such a way that enhances a family's ability to make informed decisions which reflect their own views and meet the needs of their child.

Those parents or carers who wish to use BSL to communicate with their deaf child currently have little support available to meet their needs. There is currently no nationally funded provision for these parents to access appropriate training or classes in order to communicate with their child through sign language. Traditional BSL classes are more appropriate for adult life and interactions while family provision needs to include signs and phrases to facilitate play and child-centred activities.

NDCS' early years project, Your Child Your Choices, delivers FSL to families with deaf children in the Early Years. It is the only curriculum in the UK of its kind and is unique in that the BSL is taught in a child-centred way using vocabulary suitable for a young child. According to its independent evaluation report, the delivery of FSL course contributes strongly to deaf children having improved vocabulary and positive family relationships as a result of their parents having better communication skills.⁷

NDCS regards the possible development of a National Plan to promote BSL as a significant opportunity to progress national FSL provision.

9. Resourcing the Bill

The position of authorities to respond to demand for services in BSL will depend on a number of contributing factors. Authorities will need to deliver on their plans and will need to invest into BSL provision in order to do so. In a time of tight budgetary pressures this will be challenging. There are also current workforce constraints in Scotland of those qualified to deliver services in BSL with only around 80 interpreters in the country. As such there is concern around the logistics involved in implementing the aspirations of the Bill. NDCS proposes that guidance is developed to accompany the Bill which addresses these issues and suggests ways in which listed authorities can efficiently and creatively meet their new duties.

NDCS proposes that more investment from the Scottish Government is required to enhance BSL provision for deaf children and young people. This investment should support authorities to implement their plans and create real change and improvement in outcomes for this group. It is also vital that appropriate resources are put in place to ensure the improvement of outcomes and to close the educational attainment gap for deaf learners in Scotland. NDCS has welcomed the Scottish Attainment Challenge funding and has highlighted the opportunity it presents to target funds to deaf learners as a way of tackling the attainment gap they experience. Learning from this initiative could be usefully transferred across to other groups of learners with additional support

⁷ For more information on FSL see [NDCS evidence submission](#) dated 2 February 2015

needs. NDCS also recommends that in developing its National Plan the Scottish Government will consider some of the very positive developments that the Department for Education is funding in England through the I-Sign project.⁸

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⁸ For more information on I-Sign see [NDCS evidence submission](#) 2 February 2015