

# Support to families to learn sign language - National Deaf Children's Society position paper (October 2022)

## Summary

Sign language can help ensure and support effective communication within families with deaf children. However, more than 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents with no prior experience of deafness or knowledge of sign language. Local authorities should make sure there is sufficient provision available to families with deaf children to learn sign language to an advanced level (level 3), available at no cost and addressing their needs as families.

UK Governments should ensure there is sufficient funding available to local and combined authorities to provide this support.

Please note that this paper focuses predominantly on support to parent carers to learn sign language to enable or support communication with their deaf child. We also use the term sign language in a broad sense to reflect the fact that some families may use signs from British or Irish Sign Language (BSL or ISL) alongside spoken English (sometimes known as sign-supported English) whilst others may use BSL or ISL as a main language. It's important to recognise that BSL and ISL are separate, rich and important languages in their own right, with their own rules on grammar and syntax.

## Background

- We believe it's important that families are provided with balanced and impartial information and support on language and communication to enable them to make the choices they feel are most appropriate for their child.
- Families may decide to learn sign language for a range of different reasons. Some families may use sign language because their child is struggling to understand or access a spoken language and/or where the child has limited access to sound, even with hearing technology.
- Even where families are using spoken language, many families make a positive and informed choice to learn sign language to support this. They report that knowing even some signs can be of benefit in a wide range of situations, such as when children are in the bath, swimming or where there is lots of background noise. They also report that using sign language can sometimes help reduce feelings of frustration among some deaf children and so reduce behaviour difficulties.
- We also know that, whilst hearing aids and cochlear implants bring huge benefits to many children, they do not 'cure' deafness. They are also not infallible and sign language can also help when families are waiting for devices to be fitted or repaired.
- There are also wider benefits to learning sign language in terms of facilitating contact with other deaf children and adults. This can be important in developing a positive identity as a deaf person and allowing access to a wider community of deaf sign language users.
- There is sometimes a concern among some professionals that learning sign language can hinder the development of spoken language and listening skills. However, research has shown that this is not the case, providing children are still exposed to a rich home language and learning environment. Indeed, some research indicates that exposure to sign language can help children with their spoken language.

## Our position

Despite the benefits to many families of learning sign language, surveys of local authorities over time have confirmed there remains a postcode lottery in provision of support to families to learn sign language. In extreme cases, we continue to hear of families paying thousands of pounds to be able to learn sign language to support communication with their child. We believe this is unacceptable.

We believe that local authorities have a duty to secure sufficient provision for families to learn sign language to an advanced level. This is based on our understanding of legislation (see later), as well as more fundamentally on what families are telling us they need.

A good offer for families will be one that demonstrably meets the needs of local families. However, we would expect the following points to be considered by local authorities when developing their offer.

- Support to learn sign language to an advanced level, or the level that they believe they require, should be available to families at no cost. Ideally, it should address their needs as families and reflect the vocabulary that is most relevant to them. Where families do not speak English as their first language, it may be necessary to provide additional support as needed (for example, a home language interpreter).
- We believe that all families should have the opportunity to learn sign language. This includes both parent carers in two parent families. We do not support the use of any unreasonable or restrictive eligibility criteria, for example, such as only providing funding for families of children with severe or profound deafness. Support should also ideally be available to wider family members so that deaf children can be involved in all aspects of family life.
- We believe local authorities should ensure there are a range of different opportunities and pathways for families to develop advanced skills in sign language if they would like to. By advanced, we mean a Level 3 course in BSL or ISL. Many areas start with a 'family sign language' curriculum, often drawing from that developed by the National Deaf Children's Society. These teach sign language in a more family-oriented way and act as 'entry-level' course for families that are new to deafness and sign language. Families are then provided opportunities to take Level 1, 2 and 3 courses in BSL or ISL.
- We believe that support to learn sign language should be led by tutors who are appropriately skilled in teaching and sign language. Tutors should generally be qualified to at least two levels above that which they are teaching. Tutors should ideally be deaf themselves or have lived experienced of deafness (because, for example, they are children of deaf adults, known as CODA). Those delivering family sign language should understand the contexts that different families may be in and know how to support them to learn family friendly signs in a friendly and engaging manner.
- Some families may prefer or find it easier to learn sign language face-to-face, particularly if they are learning to a more advanced level. At the same time, we recognise there are practical benefits to also delivering remotely, particularly in terms of being able to reach a larger number of families. We suggest to local authorities that they consider a hybrid approach, taking into account the needs of different families in their area.
- We expect local authorities to either directly provide or to commission support for families to learn sign language. In many areas, there are local bodies or groups that can be commissioned to deliver this. Support can also be commissioned from national bodies, including the National Deaf Children's Society.
- We recognise that in some smaller local authorities there may be challenges in developing a viable offer for the relatively smaller number of families wishing to learn. This is especially the case for more advanced courses in BSL or ISL. In these cases, we expect local authorities to consider how these practicalities can be overcome. For example, we encourage and expect local authorities to work with neighbouring authorities in developing their offer. Cross-border working in this way can be an effective way of ensuring value for money when delivering support for children with low incidence needs. Combined authorities in England may also have an important role to play in securing and delivering this support given their devolved responsibilities for adult education budgets.

- If commissioning support for families with deaf children, local authorities should be sure that they are commissioning support to learn sign language, rather than other systems or approaches used, such as Makaton. Makaton is a simplified form of sign language, incorporating symbols and gestures, and is normally used with children with additional needs. Makaton or other alternative sign systems should not be seen as an alternative or substitute for sign language. Similarly, we would also not see Baby Sign programmes, where families are introduced to basic signs through visual, fun activities, as an alternative or substitute for sign language.
- The local authority should adopt an informed choice approach, ensuring that families are able to access information and support about different communication approaches and are appropriately guided or supported with this during the early years, recognising that decisions are not fixed in stone or in time.
- Families should be given clear information about the availability and provision of support with language and communication in their area. In England, this information should be clearly available through the Local Offer. Our evidence indicates considerable unmet demand. However, where a lack of demand among local families is being cited as a reason why support to learn sign language is not being provided in the local area, we expect local authorities to have robust evidence in place to demonstrate this. This should include evidence of attempts to inform all families of the option to learn sign language.
- Local authorities should ensure there are opportunity for families to feed back on the availability and quality of support to learn sign language. For example, this could be through Children’s Hearing Services Working Groups (CHSWGs) or through local consultations and feedback exercises.
- We understand that lack of funding for support for deaf children is a barrier in some areas to providing more support for families to learn sign language. We expect UK governments to ensure that local authorities are able to deliver the full range of support that deaf children need in line with quality standards and best practice (including, for example, peripatetic Teacher of the Deaf support, specialist provision, assistive listening devices, etc.). We will work with local authorities to make the case for additional funding where necessary.

## **Legal considerations**

In our view, a failure by a local authority to provide support to families to learn sign language could be challengeable on a number of grounds. The following section is not intended to be exhaustive but summarises some key legal considerations.

For example, under the Equality Act 2010, there is a duty on public bodies in Great Britain to make “reasonable adjustments” so as to avoid placing a disabled person at a “substantial disadvantage”. There is also a duty on public bodies to have “due regard” to the need to take steps to advance equality of opportunity for disabled people. This is known as the Public Sector Equality Duty. Similar duties are in place in Northern Ireland.

It could be argued that the provision of support with sign language to families would not be an onerous burden on local authorities but which would have a significant positive impact on deaf children.

In addition, there are a number of provisions with the United Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), both of which have been ratified by the UK Government, which also support the provision of support to families to learn sign language.

Separately, the Children Act 1989 imposes a duty on local authorities in England to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in need. Deaf children fall within the definition of children in need. Section 27 of the

Children and Families Act 2014 also requires local authorities in England to keep provision for disabled children under review and consider the extent to which this provision is sufficient to meet their needs.

### **Summary checklist of factors to consider**

1. The local authority can demonstrate that families are able to access support to learn sign language to Level 3 at no cost in their area. There are different pathways in place to enable this.
2. Support to learn sign language addresses the needs of families and is available at family-friendly times.
3. All families are able to access support if they would like to, regardless of the level of their child's deafness. There is a clear and strong justification for any eligibility criteria.
4. The local authority is confident that support to learn sign language is being delivered by appropriately qualified tutors. There is no inappropriate conflation or substitution with other systems or programmes such as Makaton or Baby Sign.
5. The local authority can demonstrate they support and enable families to make informed choices about language and communication approaches.
6. Families can easily access information about local support available to learn sign language.
7. There are opportunities for families to feedback on the availability and quality of support to learn sign language.

### **Contact**

Our Local Engagement team can provide further information and support – email

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