

The impact of the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 on deaf education

Summary

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1 Introduction

The British Sign Language (Scotland) Act was passed in 2015. The first national BSL plan was published in 2017. Of the ten long-term goals, several are about education in preschool, school, college and university. The national organisations named in the national plan were not asked to make their own plans but to meet targets in the national plan. In relation to education, these bodies are Education Scotland which is a government-funded body responsible for what is taught in schools and school inspections, the national exams body, Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), the General Teaching Council of Scotland (GTCS), Scotland's National centre for Languages (SCILT), the Students' Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) which provides grants and disabled students allowance, and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC). Local authorities published their plans in 2018 and so did all Scotland's colleges and universities.

1.1 Aims of the research

We wanted to look at the impact that the BSL (Scotland) Act 2015 has had so far on the education of deaf children and young people. We obtained agreement from the Ethics Committee of the School of Education and Sport at the University of Edinburgh to do the study.

1.2 Methods

We used documentary analysis for this study. This means we looked at recorded evidence on websites and BSL (Scotland) Act Facebook groups. This included information in BSL and in English. We used evidence from the Deaf Teachers Group Scotland, a group which communicates using Instant Messenger. We also used newsletters about deaf education sent to colleges. In a later part of our study, we will interview people.

2 National Plan

There are five goals in the national BSL plan about early years and learning BSL at school (11 – 15). The goals about learning BSL focus on children aged eight and over. Local authorities and the Scottish Book Trust are expected to achieve these goals. The teaching council has goals to encourage more deaf BSL users to become teachers and to provide guidance for teachers who work with deaf BSL using pupils.

Education Scotland was asked to focus on the needs of deaf BSL users who are parents to help them become more involved with their children's schooling (Goals 20-21). The government also had a goal (17) to find out about the level of BSL held by teachers of deaf children. The SFC was asked to set up a group to support colleges and universities as they drew up their own BSL plans (Goal 26). SAAS was asked to provide online information in BSL for deaf students (Goal 27).

3 National Public Authorities

There were two rounds of consultation before the BSL Bill was put to Parliament. In the first round of consultation in 2010, Learning Teaching Scotland (now called Education Scotland) put forward evidence saying they did not think a BSL Act was needed as the Equality Act (2010) would be enough.

We examined the websites of the GTCS, SQA, Education Scotland, SCILT, SFC and SAAS to find out how far they have achieved their national plan goals. The GTCS has not mentioned any action about their goals on their website. Education Scotland has developed pages in BSL aimed at deaf parents with hearing and deaf children. The SQA has pages about BSL units, but nothing in BSL for deaf school children who want to take their exams in BSL. SCILT has out of date information on its website from before the Act was passed. The SFC website shows that they are monitoring the college and university plans through their outcome agreement process which is linked to the funding they give colleges and universities. SAAS has put information on their website in BSL for students.

In general, we concluded that there could be more information on the websites of these organisations to show how they are progressing with their goals.

4 Local Authority plans

In relation to early years and school age years we noticed that many of the plans were written using a model example. A template had been sent to councils from the Equality Unit, part of the Scottish Government. This template was strong in the vision of a deaf learner's journey before school, transitions and support out of school, for example on trips. However, it did not mention what happens in the classroom, the main part of what nurseries and schools do. As a result, the local authority plans often missed out

teaching and learning. This was a missed opportunity which we hope will be fixed in next versions of local plans.

From studying these local plans, we could see that some assumptions have been made: that deaf children are seen as being in one of two groups, as BSL users or not. In practice this could mean that BSL users are just the small minority (about 8%) of deaf children who have deaf BSL using parents. In fact, the majority of severely and profoundly deaf children could benefit from having BSL available as a language from when they are born. It is not easy to organise this, but very few local authority plans discussed how young deaf children or their parents could learn BSL in a continuous way. Often councils suggested that third sector organisations such as the National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) could take on this work.

In some cases, councils did not record good practice with deaf BSL using children in their schools. In other cases, they did not mention in their plan other language policies. For example, North Lanarkshire Council does not allow BSL at all in school and taxis children who use BSL to South Lanarkshire.

5 Deaf Teachers Group

We asked a group of deaf teachers if we could use their Instant Messenger chat history from 2016 – 2021 as evidence for this report. The 18 current members gave their agreement. We agreed to keep names anonymous. One member of the group, Dr Audrey Cameron, agreed to be named.

This group operates as a support group for deaf people as they think about becoming a teacher, apply to university, go through their probation year and become fully qualified. Six of the members are teachers of deaf children. Ten people in this group use BSL.

The issues discussed by the group included how the education system works, particularly about deaf education. Some members of the group, often Audrey Cameron, act as mentors; she has been qualified as a school teacher from 2005. The teachers report that the probation year, the year after initial teacher education, is the most challenging for BSL users. This is because of the lack of BSL awareness amongst line managers. Some members were able to negotiate placements in deaf-

friendly schools while they were on initial teacher education, but this was less possible during the probation year.

The GTCS did meet once with the Deaf Teachers Group in 2018, but there has been no progress since on using the valuable experience of this group.

6 College and University Plans

The 16 colleges and 19 universities in Scotland have all made BSL plans. As with the local authorities, the Equality Unit sent out a template. As before, the template does not mention classroom learning. Seven colleges and five universities have minimal plans which follow the template. However, many of the plans are well developed, particularly in colleges and universities where there is already experience of supporting deaf students. City of Glasgow College, the Royal Conservatoire in Glasgow and the University of Edinburgh all show ambitious plans, and on their websites they demonstrate that they are offering high quality provision for deaf students and staff who use BSL.

We found little evidence of BSL tuition going on in colleges and universities. Only one college had BSL classes at SCQF 6 or above. Only two universities, Heriot Watt and Queen Margaret, offered BSL for credit as part of a degree. When we looked at the college and university websites, we discovered that some had no mention of BSL apart from the plan which they have to display. One university had negative messaging suggesting it may not be possible to provide BSL interpreters. The language used about deaf students often sees them as in need of help and impaired. The Conservatoire, on the other hand, has a very positive view of BSL users as staff and students on their website.

7 Third sector groups

The Government decided that third sector organisations would implement the national BSL plan. The current organisations in this partnership are the British Deaf Association (BDA), Deaf Action, Deafblind Scotland, and the NDCS. There is no information online about how the £900,000 of Scottish Government funding for the BSL Act implementation has been spent by these organisations. Deaf Action has been particularly active in the further and higher education sector. It seems that some of the projects, such as the early years BSL teaching to families run by NDCS, have now

ended. We discuss the danger of relying on voluntary organisations for provision, rather than expecting national public authorities and councils to take up this role as part of their ordinary responsibilities.

We looked at another third sector group, Adept, which produced newsletters for colleges and universities about ways of supporting deaf students. Over the period 2012 and 2019, the newsletters showed Adept was trying to influence colleges to set up a role of a tutor for deaf students who could use BSL fluently. Before the BSL Bill was passed in 2015, Adept also asked Skills Development Scotland to provide clearer information for deaf young people in BSL about apprenticeships. This last point has been taken up successfully by the BDA since the Act was passed.

8 Recommendations

We make 14 recommendations based on our findings.

1. We think there should be more national debate about how deaf children and their families learn BSL to help with future plans.
2. We ask national public authorities to be clearer on their websites about what they are doing about their goals in the national plan.
3. We suggest that the Government should change the BSL plan template so that classroom learning is clearly included.
4. We suggest that 7 colleges and 5 universities should then update their BSL plans.
5. We propose that local authorities should listen more to parents of deaf children and teachers of deaf children in drawing up their next plans.
6. We propose that national bodies or third sector organisations receiving Government money for implementing the national BSL plan should be more open about how this is used.
7. We ask the GTCS to work with the Deaf Teachers Group to learn from their experiences.
8. We propose that half the teachers of deaf children in each local authority should have SCQF BSL 6 within three years so that BSL can be actually available in the education system.
9. We ask the SFC to increase the number of colleges offering BSL at SCQF 6 and above across the country.

The impact of the BSL (Scotland) Act on deaf education - summary

10. We ask the SFC to work with City of Glasgow College to train bilingual deaf and hearing nursery nurses who are fluent in BSL.
11. We ask the College Development Network to provide more advice for colleges about how deaf people are discussed on the websites, linking better with their BSL plans.
12. We suggest that websites for councils, colleges and universities should improve their search engines so that BSL videos are easily findable.
13. We ask the Government to provide clearer guidance for educational institutions about how BSL should be organised on websites and how much should be translated.
14. We call on universities and colleges to share valuable resources such as BSL/English Interpreters so that good practice in some institutions can spread to others.