Attainment of school pupils with a sensory impairment
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1. Heriot-Watt University (HWU) is the academic home to Scotland’s largest concentration of scholars (15 individuals at the time of writing) specialising in the field of Sign Language Studies. In the REF2014 UK-wide audit of research, HWU’s case study on ‘Ensuring greater equality for sign language users’, describing the impact of our work in the field over the last decade, was recognised as outstanding in terms of its reach and significance for society. This written evidence is a personal submission which draws upon intensive dialogue within this academic team and with students and partners in the community and professions, and on the author’s global experience of 30 years’ academic engagement with Sign Language Studies.

2. The Education and Culture Committee has asked for contributions to a short inquiry established to consider how the attainment levels of school pupils with a hearing and/or a visual impairment can be improved. The Committee issued a call for views on the inquiry, seeking "concise and specific suggestions about what could be done to improve the attainment of children with a sensory impairment".

3. This submission concerns itself solely with the education of deaf and hard-of-hearing children. The Committee’s attention to this issue is welcome. The attainment gap between deaf and hard-of-hearing children (abbreviated to ‘deaf children’ hereafter) and hearing children at international, UK and Scottish levels is well documented and has persisted across generations.

4. International, UK and Scottish research has shown that this gap is not beyond repair. Models of good practice exist at all educational levels and in diverse social contexts. The current educational, social, political and linguistic climate in Scotland is, in many respects, currently highly favourable for addressing this issue.

5. This paper (kept concise, in accordance with the Committee’s request) suggests a twelve-point manifesto, developed in the light of the cumulative body of evidence amassed from relevant research. The
twelve points are proposed as a holistic response to the challenge identified by the Committee in establishing this enquiry.

i. The potential for deaf children to grow into adulthood preferring spoken or signed language cannot be identified at birth or prelingually. It is therefore logical to afford those children the greatest possible opportunity to access both forms of languages in parallel from diagnosis onwards. In the case of signed language, this should be the full, natural signed language known as British Sign Language (BSL). Families of deaf children should be taught to use BSL by fluent signers, preferably Deaf people who can model Deaf adulthood to the children and their families. Families should receive sustained expert input (eg from qualified experts associated with organisations such as the National Deaf Children's Society and/or the British Deaf Association) to support them in developing and maintaining balanced bilingualism in the child's young life. This support should continue until such time as the young person attains the maturity (eg at age 16) to make confident, informed decisions about his or her own linguistic future.

ii. The input of Deaf, BSL-using adults is imperative to the development of children and young people whose future may entail the use of BSL as a preferred language. For as long as a 'BSL-centred' future remains a potential outcome for a deaf child or young person, therefore, their education should be delivered where possible by such adults. These may either be classroom teachers – in which case, public resources should be invested in the attainment of teaching qualifications by Deaf adults – or, where this is not immediately feasible, educational assistants working alongside a qualified teacher.

iii. The social, personal and cognitive development of deaf children – as with all children – requires consistent access to a peer group with whom they can routinely communicate, interact and play. Deaf children therefore should not be schooled in environments where they have little or no access to a group of peers with similar communicative patterns, experiences and ontological characteristics. Research strongly suggests that the optimal model is neither the all-deaf environment dominant before the 1970s, nor isolation as a rare deaf person within a mainstream classroom, but the intermediate situation whereby a small community of deaf people is established within a larger educational setting, permitting a balance between these two poles to be sustained.

iv. Where the teachers of BSL-using deaf children are not themselves Deaf, these teachers must be fully bilingual (ie qualified in BSL skills to the highest level). It cannot be reasonable to expect deaf children to attain qualifications
equivalent to those of their hearing peers if they are taught by people who cannot communicate effectively in the child’s preferred language. No distinction is made here as regards the age of the child: teaching younger children requires highly complex and nuanced linguistic skills no matter what the language of instruction – pedagogic theory amply demonstrates this fact – and therefore complete fluency in BSL is required for teaching deaf children, just as mastery of English is unquestionably obligatory for teachers of hearing children.

v. Should it be the case, in the short term, that a deaf child's access to the curriculum is facilitated through linguistic mediation (ie between the spoken language used by the teacher and the BSL preferred by the pupil), this should be provided by a fully-qualified BSL/English interpreter. Recent history in the UK (since the 1980s) has seen a move towards ‘communication support workers’ (CSWs) providing these services. CSWs are rarely fluent signers, and even more rarely fully qualified interpreters: they may also have little formal education themselves beyond compulsory levels. It is unrealistic to suppose that it could be in the deaf pupil's interests to receive their education at second hand (ie not directly from the teacher) and from someone who has not been trained in the complex skills of interpreting, and/or is unable to express the educational content fluently in the target language. BSL/English interpreters' work should not be confined to the classroom: to achieve meaningfully complete integration within the school community, deaf children (and signing members deaf and hearing pupils' families) should have signed access to all school-related activities, including extra-curricular activities.

vi. Educational materials for pupils whose preferred language is BSL, should be available in BSL. Every item of learning material not provided in BSL is, in effect, another small disadvantage such pupils face in relation to their hearing peers. The cumulative effect of the disparity is self-evident. This is recognised to be an enormous challenge, but it is non-negotiable if the aspiration to create a 'level playing field' for BSL users in education is to be taken seriously.

vii. Deaf children must be readily permitted to participate in public examinations and to use the language of their choice in doing so (ie both in receiving examination source material, and in producing their responses to it). All examinable communication (receptive or productive) should be translated by qualified BSL/English interpreters/translators who are familiar with the curriculum and the pedagogic context and, wherever possible, have post-compulsory-level knowledge of the subject matter or discipline.
viii. In order to ensure that appropriate BSL skills are attainable amongst all of the relevant groups identified above – deaf children, family members, teachers, assistants, interpreters/translators – suitable learning programmes, delivered by qualified personnel, need to be available. Central to this workforce are BSL teachers: with a suitable linguistic background including longstanding BSL fluency, they require professional, tertiary-level training as context-sensitive teachers of signed language.

ix. Deaf children's educational aspirations should be entirely akin to those of hearing pupils, yet there is a history of under 25 years in which a sustained effort has been made to facilitate deaf students' access to higher education. Whereas, over that period, a handful of universities in England have emerged as 'magnets' for deaf students, no university yet occupies such a role in Scotland. The Scottish Funding Council should invest in universities to enable them to develop the facilities to attract and support deaf people where appropriate.

x. In a similar vein, deaf children and those involved in their education should be encouraged to engage in external liaison (national and international) in order to widen horizons and identify good practice. The 21st century Deaf community is immensely mobile and global in outlook; this disposition should be facilitated by educational processes, to enhance the citizenship of deaf pupils. At the UK level, travel between regions has been key to sustaining a thriving, co-operative UK-wide Deaf community with a well-developed language underpinned by a deep and diverse knowledge-base. Such interactions could readily be supported through enhanced use of communications technologies, so that deaf children – whilst clustered in relatively small groups for learning and socialisation purposes – are nevertheless enabled to connect and exchange with non-local peers.

xi. There already exists a body of relevant research – on BSL structure and teaching, deaf education and interpreting – which should be drawn upon and extended through ongoing development. Scotland has a long and proud history of deaf education – centred upon Edinburgh which is also the home of the earliest detailed description of BSL structure on linguistic principles – and can lay claim to one of Europe's greatest concentrations of academic expertise in sign language studies today. This provides a strong platform to be exploited and expanded through sustained research and application.

xii. Finally, the British Sign Language (Scotland) Bill currently before Parliament creates the perfect opportunity for a Scotland-wide programme of BSL promotion. Key vehicles probably include a. adding BSL as an option for hearing pupils within the school curriculum via the 1+2 languages policy, to expand the pool of
signers in the community and to deepen public understanding of BSL as a full, natural language; b. increased use of BSL within the media (eg through broadcasts akin to the BBC’s 15-part ‘Beginner’s Guide’ to BSL, which significantly boosted public appreciation of the language in the 1980s); c. improved public visibility of BSL, led by the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government, through such measures as routine presentation of information in BSL at public events and in communications to citizens, and evidence of BSL learning on the part of Government Ministers and holders of public offices.

6. It will apparent that the above measures cannot be implemented immediately. Scotland requires a long-term plan to attain these targets, with a transparent programme of sustained investment and a public commitment on the part of relevant authorities to achieve specific milestones to an agreed schedule. In the light of all the evidence pointing to a persistent, unacceptable gap in attainment for deaf pupils in education, such a project must be seen as a priority for a country that truly values the wellbeing of all of its citizens.