

## **BSL Bill :Response to call for Evidence – Amy Cheskin**

### General Approach

*1. Do you think we need to change the law to promote the use of BSL and, if so, why?*

Unfortunately the answer is yes. In a society where every penny has to be accounted for and budgeted, organisations look to the government and the law to establish their priorities. The Equalities Act has been out since 2010 and it hasn't really changed things for BSL users. One of the reasons for this is that BSL users tend to have a distinct lack of voice and/or are easily ignored. Everyone is always the most comfortable with someone speaking their own language, identifying with their own culture - including organisations and businesses. BSL users sometimes sit outside of this even though they are on home soil. There is something out silence that unnerves (hearing) people. We can watch foreign films with subtitles, but even a silent movie must have a musical score to help the 'hearing population' feel comfortable.

Having something enshrined in law forces people outside of that comfort zone. It makes them have to listen. It would be wonderful if society didn't need a law to promote the inclusion of BSL users, but that's not the case in 2015.

BSL being approved and promoted in law will also be a fantastic boost for the deaf community who use BSL. BSL has suffered for too long under the prejudice of being a lesser language, that those deaf who are able to speak, write, or even sign in English (Sign Supported English) are those who are more intelligent and more worthy in some way. BSL users have been treated, sometimes even within their own community, like second class - even third class citizens. This needs to stop. Having the government call for a change in attitude and perception filters down. It will help BSL users feel proud, confident, capable in their own language, equal...and once they are that, who knows what they will achieve!

*2. (Public authorities to increase use of BSL and respond to demand) How realistic do you think this aim is and to what extent do you believe the Bill can achieve this objective?*

As public authorities increase their use of BSL, it is hoped it will encourage other establishments - especially educationally ones - to do the same. Realistically this is a long term goal, things are not going to change over night, in terms of being able to better respond to demand. What we need is to set plans in motion that will increase the number of hearing BSL users/signers. This means having public authorities look at subsidising BSL classes (initially for families / friends of deaf children), supporting SQA though it's overhaul of BSL qualifications (currently up to level 3 that are MUCH cheaper than the Signature alternative), looking at having BSL placed on to the curriculum from nursery age upwards. The result of this will be - yes, more interpreters, but also more shop assistants, more dentists, more surgeons, more lawyers, more psychiatrists who are BSL competent and maybe even fluent. A side benefit of this will be a more confident, healthier, better educated rising deaf BSL using generation as societal barriers, exclusion, isolation, bullying, ignorance, become a thing of the past.

Additionally, as public authorities respect and use BSL, the attitude of "deaf and dumb" (i.e. stupid) may finally be laid to rest, and the wider community come to know and respect BSL users as intelligent, fascinating, funny, culturally-rich, varied group of individuals they are.

3. *Could there be unintended consequences for other languages or forms of communication used by the deaf community?*

I hope not, and I expect not. As most other languages / communications used by the deaf community relate more to English (spoken / lip-read / written / sign supported English), whilst the support for these groups is not perfect it is definitely a large step ahead of BSL users experience. What is interesting about the BSL user community is that they are open and embracing...they are willing to use whatever means possible to communicate. Giving a deaf person BSL gives understanding, once there is understanding their ability to learn and master other languages is increased. I think that where members of the deaf community do not have BSL it has often not been a matter of choice. I met a woman last week who is 50, was born deaf, and is learning BSL for the first time. I think rather than taking something from the community, it is giving something to the community.

That said, I think there is merit in providing a plain English translation of all documentation, and subtitled BSL videos for those members of the deaf community who, like the 50yr old I met, are just finding their feet in BSL.

#### Duties on the Scottish Ministers

4. *What should this Minister do?*

The purpose of having someone leading / looking after the Bill is to make sure it's not forgotten, to be reminding the Scottish Government of the promises made, to be accountable to BSL users. I also think it would be a good idea for this Minister to learn BSL and regularly meet with the deaf community and its representatives to make sure that their voice continues to be heard throughout the drafting of plans, reviews etc. The Minister will have a responsibility to lead by example and show that BSL is worth the effort. In 4 years the Minister should be able to get up to BSL Level 3 with no problems.

5. *If listed authorities say they will do something relating to the promotion of BSL, will the Performance Review process ensure they are held to account?*

It depends on what is in the National Plans because it is that that they will be called to account for. As it stands the performance review will show what they have done / not done, but it has no penalties and so how far authorities will feel they are / or have to be accountable to it is a question that for me stands unanswered.

#### BSL Authority Plans

6. *Do you have any comments on the proposed content of the Plans?*

I think if the Scottish Government takes stock of the content of their Facebook page on this topic they will be able to highlight the important issues direct from BSL users, namely: Education, Interpreters (both quality and quantity), Medical care, Mental Health, Care of the Elderly etc.

I hope that an emphasis on improving attitude and people's perception of BSL users is included as well. One of the biggest frustrations I face as a person who represents BSL users is the attitude and discrimination they undergo in every instance. If I interpret well - I am applauded for it, rather than the BSL user. In "breaks" I am spoken to as a fellow human, while the BSL user is ignored. When I BSL users is forcefully enough to interrupt a conversation it is considered rude, but if a hearing person interrupts / speaks over a persons signs it's accepted.

I also think the plans need to be robust in their language. Too often I see job adverts that say "a willingness to learn BSL" - what does that mean? I have for many years

had a willingness to train to run a marathon, and yet I still haven't run one, although the willingness to train is there. Dreams are great - but there needs to be commitment i.e. In year one x amount of people will learn BSL level 1, by year 3 x amount will have level 2 etc. This doesn't just relate to learning BSL, it's relevant in all areas. There needs to be clear goals / objectives that the plans are working towards.

7. *Do you have any comments on these proposed timescales?*

Although it would be nice to have things happening sooner, the timescales seem reasonable given what is trying to be achieved.

8. *In preparing its Authority Plan, a public authority must consult with those who are "likely to be directly affected by the Authority Plan or otherwise to have an interest in that Plan" (Section 3(6)) and must take into account any comments made to it during the consultation (Section 3(5)). What effect do you think these requirements will have on you or your organisation?*

If I were asked, I would willingly contribute my time, talents and whatever else I am able. I have no doubt that this would be time consuming, and perhaps at some points even burdensome...but it's like raising a child - if you put in the hard yards at the beginning it really does yield better results in the end.

9. *Would you suggest any changes to the list of public authorities?*

N/a

#### Financial implications

The majority of these questions don't apply to me. What I will say is - I know BSL is an expensive business. It's expensive to pay for interpreters, to pay for training etc. BUT that's the point. It's never going to get any cheaper for any one - Government (including Access to Work), Public Authorities, private organisations, businesses etc. unless BSL is promoted and supported. I believe that the costs incurred will decrease as time moves on as a direct result of some of the measures put in place now.

Yours

Amy Cheskin