

Submission from Deaf Links and the Advocacy Service

Dear Sirs

As manager of Deaf Links and the Advocacy Service (amongst other services we provide) which serves the Deaf Community in Tayside I wish to add the following brief and I hope succinct general response to the questions mentioned in your call for evidence as to why the BSL (Scotland) Bill should be passed by the Scottish Parliament.

In my work, the Deaf people I work with, my colleagues in the advocacy service and myself constantly come up against the shocking lack of awareness from service providers, agencies, shops, banks, etc and the general public. They have no idea that British Sign Language is:

- One of the three indigenous languages of Scotland along with English and Gaelic
- Is a complete and rich language with it's own syntax and grammar - it is NOT a mimed form of English

There are also general assumptions made that all Deaf people must be able to lip read and read written notes.

This is an everyday barrier for Deaf people and ensures they are treated much less favourably than citizens who use other spoken languages such as Polish, Urdu, Chinese etc. The vast majority of BSL users in Scotland have a very low understanding of English due to the poor education they have received - something we in Deaf Links are not seeing improving with young Deaf people with regard to their understanding of English! I have been told by many Deaf people that I probably had better quality teaching in O Grade French at school than they received in English and yet they are expected to navigate their way through a Scottish society where all information and general knowledge is gleaned from the ability to hear information/communication or read it.

This impacts on every aspect of their lives as I am sure you will comprehend from the vast BSL evidence posted to the Scottish Government BSL (Scotland) Bill Facebook page.

To ensure we have a healthier, wealthier and fairer Scotland we must ensure that the indigenous language used by 13,000 Deaf people in Scotland is given legal recognition. The requirement of Public Authorities to publish plans and be accountable for their implementation is a must to achieve this aim.

I will close with an example that hopefully illustrates why it is so important that Deaf BSL users have recognition of their language and hopefully answers your first question regarding why new legislation is needed with regard to BSL.

One of our very elderly Deaf service users was viciously attacked in his home and was due to be the prime witness for the Crown in the case against the accused. He received many letters and leaflets from the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, and Witness Support Service in the lead up to the trial. He had never been a witness in court before and was very worried, stressed and upset about the process and what it would entail for him. He gave me the booklet he was sent that was an explanation of what witnesses could expect in court, the process, the special measures available etc. He could not read it. On the back it offered the publication in 29 FOREIGN spoken languages, Gaelic and Braille but no British Sign Language. I phoned to ask if the COPFS had a BSL format of the booklet in DVD or video clip. My request was met with huge surprise and the answer that they didn't have it in BSL but they were reviewing the booklet and would consider making it available for Deaf BSL users during the review. In June 2014 I received an email inviting me to the launch of the reviewed COPFS Witness information including a DVD. With much excitement I asked if this was a BSL DVD. I received the reply that no it wasn't, it had subtitles, and they would consider thinking about a BSL version.

If the very organisation (SOPFS) who is meant to uphold the law on behalf of the public and prosecute other agencies/public bodies/businesses/individuals who do not/ cannot/will not make

reasonable adjustments for Deaf BSL users under the Equality Act **do not/will not do it themselves** how can we expect others to do it?

It needs to be explicit that BSL is a Language, an indigenous language of Scotland at that, and bears no relevance to disability. This is why the BSL(Scotland) Bill must be passed to ensure a positive fair and equal future for the Scottish Deaf Community.

Yours sincerely

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Tayside Deaf Hub