

BSL Bill - Written Evidence from Deafblind Scotland

Deafblind Scotland represents Scotland Deaf citizens who have lost their sight to the extent that they meet the criteria of the Department of Health (1995) definition of deafblindness which states:

“A person is regarded as deafblind if their combined sight and hearing loss causes difficulties with communication, access to information and mobility”.

And as the Nordic definition further states “It limits activities of a person and restricts full participation in society to such a degree that society is required to facilitate specific services, environmental alterations and/or technology”

Deafblind Scotland supports the BSL Bill with all the opportunities it will hopefully provide for improving the lived experiences of Deaf people. We are in agreement with much of the evidence given within the SCOD submission but would add the following comments which are specific to deafblind people:

Deafblind people have concerns that authorities will assume if they have met the requirements for Deaf people the needs of deafblind people are also automatically met, and this is not the case.

Deafblind people only rarely fully benefit from measures implemented for Deaf people. This is due solely to the fact that they are registered blind and no longer able to access their own beautiful, visual language, which is based on the use of sight. If the Scottish Government wants Deafblind people to be able to benefit from the BSL Bill then they must make special arrangements to ensure this small group is able to benefit. (reference the Nordic definition) For Deafblind people British Sign Language has of necessity to become Tactile British Sign Language or Deafblind Manual. These variations of British Sign Language need to be recognised.

Language not disability

In addition to the distress that Deaf people experience when they seek information and language support to make informed choices, give informed consent and to be active citizens, deafblind people suffer the ignominy of being considered to be in need, not of language support, but of care. And due to their language support being funded from the Social Care budget they are the only group of people in Scotland who are liable to have to pay for language support.

The vast majority of Deafblind people do not receive Care, merely support with language, yet must undergo a lengthy detailed financial assessment and thereafter contribute to the costs of that language support if they are considered to be financially able to do so. Many local authorities provide free interpretation in all spoken languages and in British Sign Language. This is a discrimination which must be addressed.

A Unique Condition

Deafblindness is a unique condition which means that the individual cannot access their environment without being guided, and without receiving language support. Both are essential. In reality this means they need to receive the services of a guide/communicator in order to participate in society. This need is not formally recognised meaning this is a service they have to fight for, and – currently – to pay for. It is not on the “critical” list of support needs as deafblind people can and do survive, and live through the isolation, loneliness and deprivation of information which this condition imposes on them. Is this the Scottish Government’s vision of a fairer more inclusive Scotland? We think not, and the BSL Bill should be an opportunity to address this, both in the Bill and particularly in the National Plan. While deafblind representation on the BSL Group is to be welcomed, it is not enough, the need to make special arrangements to meet their needs has to be embedded in the Bill somehow, somewhere. The above measures should be addressed in some detail in the National Plan. We have a unique opportunity in the plan to begin to address the issues for this small group of few hundred Scottish citizens who suffer, mainly unintended, discrimination every single day.