

Falkirk Council Education Service Response to the BSL Bill

CALL FOR EVIDENCE

Introduction

Falkirk Council provides an excellent continuum of provision for D/deaf children and young people. This comprises of Windsor Park School for the Deaf and a Peripatetic Service for hearing impaired children and young people who are supported from diagnosis to school leaving age.

Children who attend Windsor Park School are taught through Total Communication incorporating speech, audition, lip reading and Sign Supported English. British Sign Language is also introduced at an early stage to facilitate the pupils' communication variations and needs.

A profoundly deaf Sign Language Tutor is employed two days a week to provide BSL sessions for the primary and secondary deaf pupils, teaching and support staff, family members and all associated agencies who are working with deaf children. He also provides deaf awareness and sign language classes for hearing pupils within the cluster schools. Education staff, front line staff and members of the community are also invited to attend when there are vacancies in the classes. Classes are very popular and over the past 15 years he has taught basic signing skills to over 1,000 people some of whom have gone on to achieve BSL 1 & 2 levels.

Responses to the Committee's questions

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

Language and communication is a basic human right and it is everyone's responsibility to ensure they provide the most effective means to establish a person's needs, likes, wants and preferences.

For many years D/deaf people were deprived of an effective education because 'oralism' was the policy in almost all local authorities' schools in Scotland. This was suitable for D/deaf children and young people who had some useful residual hearing and could lip-read. Many of these children and young people were thought to be more intelligent than they were simply because their speech was intelligible. Intelligible speech has nothing to do with intelligence.

The more severe/profound intelligent D/deaf students were deprived of an effective education because they had no useful residual hearing, were poorly aided and unskilled at lip-reading. Most of these young people left school with no qualifications and little or no language or method of communication. It is now

time that D/deaf people had a voice to promote their preferred language and choice of communication and this Bill would give recognition and status to BSL.

- 2. How realistic do you think the aim for the Bill is, to increase the use public authorities make of BSL and to respond to demand for services in BSL?*

The legislation is aspirational but would raise the profile and awareness of the needs BSL users have within public services. It will also allow BSL users to have much better access to general information. However it will require an increase in the number of interpreters and BSL tutors and a willingness for service managers to ensure staff are deaf aware and/or attend BSL classes before this could be achieved.

Parents of deaf children should also be given the option and opportunity to develop sign language skills to improve communication with their child at home. This would help children to improve their language and communication skills prior to starting nursery or formal education.

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

The Government should give clear guidance to public bodies that budgets should not be reduced or reallocated from current services for D/deaf non-BSL users.

- 4. The Bill asks the Government to prepare and publish a BSL National Plan in each Parliamentary session, every 4 years. The Government will be required to designate a Minister with lead responsibility for BSL. What should this Minister do?*

The cycle for publishing a BSL National Plan and Performance Review should be extended. If there is not to be a lead Minister those involved should learn about deafness and associated implications of language and communication deprivation. They should learn some sign language and arrange opportunities for deaf people to leave comments or express their opinions/concerns directly to them through some form of social media. A BSL National Advisory Group should be established to support the Scottish Ministers to monitor progress in listed authorities. This group should include a number of BSL users.

- 5. Will the Performance Review process ensure that the listed authorities are held to account?*

The requirement of a Performance Review from a listed authority on how they are promoting BSL will continually raise awareness of the need to improve services for BSL users and the expectation that progress is being made. The person/s responsible for collating the Performance Review will wish to show progress in their particular area so they will endeavour to identify current developments and evidence even the slightest improvement.

6. *The Bill sets out what a BSL Authority plan should include (3(3) and 3 (4). Do you have any comments on the proposed content of the Plans?*

Falkirk Council would support 3(3), i.e. the public body would set out their own aims, timescales and review. They should however have regard to the National Plan and priorities set by consultations with BSL users.

In 3(4) the Bill aims to make the Authority plan have consistency with the National Plan. This would be similar to the National Plan for Gaelic and should prove successful.

7. *The policy memorandum explains the timescale for publication of authority plans. Do you have any comments on these proposed timescales?*

Not at this time.

8. *In preparing an Authority Plan a public authority must consult with those who are likely to be affected by it, or who have an interest in it. The plan must take into account any comments made during consultation. What effect do you think these requirements will have on your organisation?*

Within Falkirk we consult regularly with our D/deaf and hearing parents to ensure the best provision for their D/deaf children and young people. We also consult with present and former pupils and parents to identify ways to improve our service.

Through multi-agency meetings we link closely with all associated agencies involved with BSL service users to identify gaps in provision and ways to close these gaps. We invite visitors from various D/deaf groups to speak to the pupils and parents when an opportunity arises.

These requirements will ensure that we continue to seek new ways of promoting BSL and improve communication between D/deaf and hearing children and adults.

9. *The Bill lists 117 public authorities that will be required to publish Authority plans. Would you suggest any changes to this list?*

No, the listed authorities include SQA, Education Scotland, universities, colleges and education authorities.