

BSL (Scotland) Bill

Evidence to the Education and Culture Committee

I have already given my evidence and other comments on the Scottish Parliament's Facebook page. Here, I will add some more evidence to show why I strongly support Mark Griffen's BSL (Scotland) Bill.

1. Education

I had an oral education but had access to BSL outside the classroom; for instance, the school playground, playroom, dining room and dormitory when I was a pupil at Donaldson's School in Edinburgh. Learning BSL did not impair my English skills. Communicating with school peers and older pupils fluently in BSL had enhanced my social development.

I attended two universities and had totally different experiences. I attended a BSc Honours Biological Sciences course at University of Edinburgh after leaving Mary Hare Grammar school and had no BSL interpreters at all. It was a real struggle to get through the course and it was my own sheer determination that pulled me through. I was happy to prove to hearing people that I could attain a good degree. Ten years later I attended a MBA degree course at University of Strathclyde and this time I had access to BSL interpreters and notetakers. This had made a huge difference. Having BSL interpreters made it possible for me to fully participate in tutorials and seminars and also to raise questions to lecturers. No deaf person should suffer from lack of access to further and higher education – every deaf person has a right to education in all stages of their life. It is vital that there are enough high quality interpreters to meet deaf students' demand. This must be fully addressed in the BSL National Plan and authority plans.

2. Adult Education

In the past five years, I attended evening classes to learn and acquire new skills, like watercolour painting and Photoshop. At first I wanted to learn woodworking and there was a class at Clydebank College. I enrolled and asked this college for a BSL interpreter. They refused and instead offered an inductive loop system! I told the college that I was NOT a hearing aid user. They refused to meet my demand for a BSL interpreter. When the college cancelled the woodworking class (due to low numbers), I decided to apply for a watercolour painting course organised by the University of Glasgow. The University was more than happy to provide me an excellent BSL interpreter which made it possible for me to participate in this class fully. A few years later, I attended a few evening classes organised by City of Glasgow College and this college provided me excellent BSL interpreters for all the courses I attended. Tutors were most appreciative of BSL Interpreters' services. The BSL National Plan should ensure that **ALL** colleges should provide BSL interpreters to deaf students for their adult learning.

I attended a patchwork class organised by Deaf Action in Edinburgh in 2014. It was excellent because the tutor was Deaf. She communicated with the class in BSL.

There should be more Deaf tutors in Scotland – I know there are many Deaf people who are highly skilled in IT, photography, art, sewing, crafts, woodworking, etc. They should be given opportunity to train as tutors and colleges should be encouraged to employ them. They can teach both deaf and hearing students (via BSL interpreters). Gaining employment would bring additional tax to the Scottish Government coffers and additional spending which would benefit businesses.

There is a dearth of Deaf sports trainers in Scotland. Deaf sportspeople should be given opportunity to train as coaches and they would attract deaf people to take part in sport, thus enhancing their wellbeing and mental health.

3. Access to Health and Social Care

When my late husband was hospitalised, we came across a few health professionals who astounded us with their BSL skills – a consultant and a phlebologist. We were delighted because we were able to ask questions and have a proper conversation with them. One of my GPs can sign. She told me she believed that she should be able to communicate with me, not through a third party. This means I keep my health totally private.

My late husband was given home care – the local council provided carers to come and make sure that my husband was fully dressed, had breakfast and lunch and took his medication. However he was unable to have a proper conversation with carers because carers had no deaf awareness or BSL skills. All they did was putting a thumb up and write some notes on paper which was useless. I asked the council to have carers trained in Deaf awareness and BSL but to no avail.

I was given a card about support helpline but it was useless because the only way to access this helpline was via telephone. I also could not make use of services and activities that were organised for families whose member had dementia. I felt truly left out and alone.

Improved access to health and social care for Deaf BSL users should be included in the BSL National Plan.

Social care and Health professionals should be given opportunity to learn BSL while training to become nurses, doctors, dentists, health care workers, social workers, etc. This means there should be a BSL module in their courses. At one time, Glasgow and Edinburgh Universities had this module for medical students and nursing students – this practice should be carried on and copied by other universities.

4. Access to legal services

I have had to use my lawyer several times when buying a house, making a will, etc. but I am really vexed that I had to pay for a BSL interpreter. This is most unfair because I had to pay interpreter's fees as well as lawyers' fees. Whereas hearing people pay only lawyers' fees. It is not our fault that we are Deaf. The BSL (Scotland) Bill should put an end to this unfair practice.

5. Access to financial services

I am fortunate to have a financial adviser who can communicate with me because his parents are Deaf. I feel confident in making decisions about my finances and pension, thanks to him. He has a wide group of Deaf clients. There should be more financial advisers who can communicate with Deaf people. Deaf people should NOT rely on their families to help translate financial advice – loss of privacy about their own finances.

6. Access to banking, insurance, telecommunications, Marks & Spencer, etc.

It is so annoying and frustrating to be told by a bank or insurer that they would not accept my telephone calls via TextRelay. No matter how many times I tried to explain to them that TextRelay operators are totally confidential and have signed up to the Official Secrets Act, they still refused. If Video Relay Services (VRS) are financially supported, more Deaf people will use this service. NHS 24 use VRS and should be applauded for this but unfortunately not all NHS services are using VRS. The BSL (Scotland) Bill should ensure that every health authority should have access to VRS.

The National Advisory Group should look at how VRS is funded in USA – it is funded by telecommunication companies.

7. Independence in using BSL interpreter services

While I believe that public authorities should provide BSL interpreters to Deaf people free of charge when accessing their services, however I strongly believe that Deaf people should have freedom to choose and pay for BSL interpreters. Some (not all) Deaf people have direct payments (DP) or disabled living allowances (DLA or PIP) which enable them to pay for BSL interpreters. Applying for a DP or DLA/PIP can be horrendous for many Deaf BSL users. There is no consistency in how Deaf people get their DP or DLA/PIP. This should be thrown out and be replaced with a voucher scheme similar to the one used in Scandinavia. Therefore I strongly urge the BSL National Advisory Group to look into this.

8. Access to emergency and/or important information

I remember the time when my local waterworks was contaminated with diesel. I became aware of this situation only when my neighbour alerted me. She had access to radio and also heard the van with tannoy in the street. Deaf people, like me are council tax payers and have the equal right to access all kinds of information at the same time as our neighbours receive information.

It is a common practice in USA, Canada and Australia where Sign Language Interpreters stand beside a government official or police officer, interpreting their statements to media. I was disappointed that when Alex Salmond had a press conference, announcing his resignation after the Scottish Referendum, there was no BSL interpreter.

Whenever there is a health alert like Ebola, SARS, Bird Flu, etc., there should be a BSL version.

Whenever there is a weather warning, there should be a BSL version.

9. Learning BSL in school

Deaf and hearing children should be given every opportunity to learn BSL in school. It is easier to learn and remember any language when they are young. Learning BSL is much more useful than learning a foreign language because they are more likely to meet and sign to Deaf people in their own country. I remember the joy of being served by shop assistants who can sign to me, the joy of signing to my obstetrician who put his colleagues to shame (!), the joy of being served by a waiter who can sign. How did this happen? They learned and paid for BSL classes. Imagine if all children learn BSL in school, Deaf people will be able to communicate with their bank, insurer, doctor, dentist, optician, shop assistant, waiting staff, social worker, leisure staff, etc., etc. They will not need to search and book BSL interpreters which cost money. There is a long term benefit of saving money.

Deaf BSL users should be given opportunity to train and teach BSL in schools, FE and Adult Education colleges.

Yes there is a strong need to change the law to promote the use of BSL. Relying on people's goodwill, awareness training, etc. is not enough and ineffective. It is like asking drivers to put on their seat belts again and again through many countless media campaigns. The UK Government realised that this had not worked and so introduced a law making it mandatory for drivers and passengers to wear seat belts. So yes we need the BSL (Scotland) Bill to pass.

I hope you find this useful.

Lilian Young

