Personal Story:

Before commenting on the BSL (Scotland) Bill, I would first like to share my experience as a BSL user in Scotland. I moved to Glasgow three years ago from England because of my husband’s job relocation. At the time of our move, I was conscious that services to Deaf people in Scotland were said to lag behind that of England. Yet to our surprise and delight, we found life much easier for us here in Scotland. For instance, our GP could sign because she has a Deaf daughter. We also found that our dentist, whose sister is Deaf, has some basic sign language too. Also, our new neighbours are friendly towards us and one of them even has a Deaf work colleague and has picked up some signs.

When we sent our children to school, we were happy to see that their new head teacher has Deaf awareness. At our request, BSL interpreters are provided for parents’ evenings, plays and other events. The teachers are doing their best by meeting our communication needs. So there are some real positives within the public sector in Scotland. Indeed, I want to applaud local authorities, who support staff members to learn BSL. Recently, we were thrilled to meet three workers at Glasgow IPS Customer Service Centre that could sign, which helped when processing our child’s renewal passport.

And in the private sector, we were impressed that one employee at the Apple store in the city of Glasgow could sign fluently when interacting with Deaf customers due to having Deaf family members and growing up in a bilingual environment.

All of this has helped us settle, but of course, it hasn’t all been plain sailing. There was a hiccup at Renfrewshire Council for example, when we applied for a bus pass. Because we have a good command of English, we understand that one of the criteria for qualifying is that we must provide a medical letter from our GP, or an audiogram from an audiologist, to verify that we are Deaf. When the council worker saw the medical letter, he said it is unacceptable. We were determined and wrote notes back and forth on this issue, confident in the knowledge that either proof should be acceptable. The worker was annoyed and walked off to make a call to his superior. Eventually he came back and apologised for his mistake. Happy with the result, it concerned us that other Deaf people who struggle with English and insecure about communicating in this way with paper and pen would not have achieved a successful outcome. Writing back and forth in this was with limited English requires patience and effort from both sides. Either a BSL interpreter or worker with competent BSL skills would have been better.

Given the growing level of support as the Bill progresses through the Scottish Parliament, I’m beginning to get excited about the changes it may bring. So, without being too complacent about its successful enactment, I want to ask those involved in the BSL (Scotland) Bill campaign to take a few moments to consider what it will achieve for Deaf people in Scotland. And can we be sure that the changes it brings are positive and improve the lives of Deaf People? For this reason, I do not think that it is too early to begin thinking ‘what next after its enactment?’

I fully support the plans to set up a National Advisory Group is set up, after the Bill is enacted, with a Scottish Minister overseeing its practical implementation and other stakeholders brought in to assist. It is this last part that I’m interested in however, the stakeholders. I’m reminded of a popular political sound bite in recent times, when it was argued that decisions about Scotland’s future are best taken by the people who care most about Scotland. Applied in this case, it would seem logical that any group set up to apply the Bill in practical terms should be arranged to ensure that within the group the balance of power is held firmly by those who care most about its success. In other words Deaf people themselves. Further, if the BSL Bill grassroots campaign has taught us anything, and in particular the wonderful and insightful contributions posted on social network’s by thoughtful and articulate Deaf people, it’s that we have many individuals who are more than up to the task.
Immediately I can think of several individuals with specialist training and experience in areas that the Bill will affect, such as law, education and health. We need to ensure that after this exciting period of engagement is at an end that the grassroots energy and hunger for change is not lost. Steps need to be taken to make sure that those ordinary - yet exceptional - Deaf community members remain involved and are in a position to influence policy when the time comes to imagine new ways of developing and delivering services in a country that has a BSL Act. These hard working activists must be well represented on the National Advisory Group and their views fed into the developing debates around the implementation of the Act.

When the BSL (Scotland) Bill as a law, it will have the potential to create social and economic opportunities for both hearing and Deaf people, by supporting integration and positive attitudes towards our Deaf community. At schools, children could learn BSL and Deaf Awareness at all levels, making it more common for other Deaf people to ‘bump into’ hearing service providers that know BSL and about Deaf culture, like my family have done on occasion, albeit through luck. Bullying and hate crimes committed against Deaf people - an issue that has attracted some attention recently - can also be addressed in a more structured way.

There are economic benefits for both Deaf and hearing people to be gained with a BSL Bill too, which we can begin to consider. For example, children achieving BSL qualifications could find BSL-related jobs when leaving school, in a society that seeks to meet the aims of a BSL Act. Hearing people already work as interpreters, mediators and advocates, but all of these roles are threatened in the current economic and political environment and should be protected and promoted. Deaf people teach BSL and Deaf Awareness to the public, often within educational institutions. However, with access learning support in BSL, they can become the lawyers, the doctors, the bankers and so on that Deaf people would otherwise struggle to engage with in their day to day lives. In the long run, everyone, both hearing and Deaf, should give the opportunity to earn money and pay tax, leaving behind reliance upon state benefits and the harm that this does to the individual and wider communities.

Thank you for reading.

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