

Scottish Qualifications Authority submission of 4 March 2022

PE1867/C - Establish a new national qualification for British Sign Language (BSL)

Thank you for your letter, dated 7 February 2022, seeking further information from SQA in relation to petition ref 1867, concerning qualifications in BSL. Your letter mentioned two main areas that you would like SQA to comment on further:

1. How did SQA assess the demand for BSL qualifications, how did SQA establish there was a lack of suitably qualified teachers to deliver BSL qualifications and did this include consultation with the Deaf community and parents of Deaf children?
2. What are SQA's thoughts on what the committee considered was a lack of clarity over 'where leadership for a resolution to the issues identified in the petition might lie'.

Assessing demand

In my previous response to the committee, dated 3 November 2021, I advised that 'there is currently not enough evidence of demand from learners'. In making that statement, our assessment of the demand for BSL qualifications was based on the number of learners that have been entered by schools for our existing range of BSL qualifications. SQA has been offering units and more recently awards in BSL (at various levels), since SQA came into existence in 1997. This evidence of demand is very helpful to us, as we consider uptake statistics relating to old and existing qualifications to be a strong indicator of the likely future demand for new qualifications in the same subject area. Using past, actual uptake statistics also ensures that teaching and centre capacity is accounted for within our calculations.

We often find there are claims made about the likely or potential size of the market for new qualifications that do not turn out to be as accurate as hoped when the qualifications are made available in real-life. This is not deliberate and often simply reflects people's strength of feeling for their given subject area and their hope that others will share their enthusiasm when the qualifications become available. So, while we welcome the views and projections put forward by your stakeholders, we must also be realistic about expectations when it comes to demand.

SQA must account for the public money it spends on developing new qualifications and on the processes and procedures we must follow to quality assure and certificate those qualifications. It can be difficult to balance the most appropriate and most cost-effective type of qualifications with the expectations of those groups of stakeholders with interest in a specific area. In the case of BSL, it was decided that awards would be more appropriate than National Courses, as awards are assessed internally within the centre, rather than through central exams.

Although SQA already has several National Courses in languages, that are part of the main exam diet, the nature of BSL is quite different from the existing languages offered. BSL involves two modes (receiving and giving) compared to Modern Languages, which develop four skills (reading, writing, speaking and talking). Therefore the approach to assessment needs to be unique to BSL and it does not lend itself to our traditional examination approach.

Qualified Teachers

The lack of suitably qualified teachers for the delivery of BSL in schools, and particularly teachers from the Deaf community, has been a well-known issue for several years. Indeed, the issue was acknowledged in the Scottish Government's BSL National Plan 2017 to 2023, through the inclusion of two goals specifically targeting BSL teaching:

- Goal 16 – 'Work with the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) to remove barriers that make it difficult for BSL users to become registered teachers'.
- Goal 17 – 'Undertake additional investigations into the level of BSL held by teachers and support staff working with D/deaf and Deafblind pupils in schools'.

Lack of clarity over Leadership

SQA has responsibility for developing National Qualifications for Senior Phase pupils in Scottish Schools and those qualifications must align to the policy direction laid out by the Scottish Government through the Curriculum for Excellence. The Scottish Government also provides the funding to SQA for the development of new and/or revised National Qualifications. So, the choice and coverage of qualifications in Scottish Schools is a joint exercise involving both the Scottish Government and SQA.

When it comes to the delivery of languages in Primary Schools, the leadership comes directly from the Scottish Government through their 1+2 Languages Policy. SQA has no responsibility for the curriculum or the delivery of subjects and lessons in the Primary Schools sector.

The difficulty in this petition is that the petitioner appears to be looking for a National Qualification in BSL, as a means, to enabling the delivery of BSL in Primary Schools as an L2 language. To explain the petitioners reasoning here, it might help the committee to consider the following quotation, relating to the 1+2 Languages Policy, from the Scottish Government's '1+2 Languages Learning Survey: Report' (23 Mar 2020):

'The first additional language (L2) will be taught from Primary 1 (P1), the second additional language (L3) from Primary 5 (P5) at the latest, both onwards to the end of the broad general education (BGE) in S3. In line with the 2012 recommendations from the Languages Working Group, there is no hierarchy of languages within the 1+2 languages policy. However, the L2 has to be a language available as a National Qualification and is therefore one of: French, Spanish, German, Italian, Gaelic (Learners), Urdu, Mandarin, or Cantonese. The L3 can be any language, including British Sign Language (BSL), community languages (sometimes offered as GCSE qualifications), and Latin (available as National Qualification).

I hope this information helps the committee and please get back to me if there is anything further you would like SQA to clarify or respond to.