

# Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills submission of 5 December 2022

## PE1867/I: Establish a new national qualification for British Sign Language

Thank you for the opportunity to provide an update on the British Sign Language (BSL) Plan and BSL qualifications.

### BSL Plan

The Scottish Government has a commitment to promote the use and understanding of British Sign Language (BSL) as a full and proper language across the Scottish public sector, and has a BSL National Plan in place for 2017 to 2023 with 70 actions across ten long-term ambitions.

Our long-term aim is to make Scotland the best place in the world for people who sign to live, work, visit and learn. This means that people whose primary language is BSL will be fully involved in all areas of daily and public life in Scotland.

We will develop a new BSL National Plan for 2023 and will undertake engagement and consultation to inform priorities.

The Scottish Government published the British Sign Language (BSL) Progress Report on 27th October 2021, as an update on progress being made towards implementing the 2017-2023 BSL National Plan. It shows progress on a range of fronts, including education, BSL/English interpreting, and public life.

The progress report can be accessed at:

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/british-sign-language-progress-report/>.

It outlines how Scottish Government has funded BSL Partnership organisations to engage with and support public bodies in developing their BSL plans, and notes important developments such as the decision that Scotland's next census, in 2022, would ask 'can you use BSL?' for the first time.

### Qualifications

The petitioner has sought a new National Qualification at SCQF Level 2. Qualifications at National 1 and 2 levels in Scotland are normally used by candidates with learning difficulties. The main Awarding Body in the UK for BSL qualifications is Signature, and Signature use the English

levelling framework. Level 2 on the English levelling framework equates to Level 5 on the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF).

Within the BSL National Plan 2017 – 2023 there was an action in relation to the qualifications:

**Action No. 19** Work with the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) to develop an initial suite of awards in BSL, which will form the basis for any future development of BSL qualifications up to Level 6 of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF).

Since the plan was published, SQA has developed BSL Awards at SCQF Levels 3 to 6. The BSL Awards have been designed to appeal to both hearing and deaf learners, and helps learners to develop their language skills and enables them to communicate with BSL users in various contexts. Learners also develop their understanding of how sign languages work, and how they differ from spoken and written languages.

The Awards helps learners develop the following language competences: receptive skills, productive skills, conversation skills and knowledge of sign linguistics.

Achievement of these Awards is nationally recognised, and they are available through schools, colleges, community organisations and volunteer-involving organisations. Delivery of the Awards is still at an early stage but, as can be seen in the table below, uptake is increasing.

Entries for BSL Awards per academic year							
Title	SCQF	Code	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
British Sign Language	3	GP3L 43	N/A	0	22	22	81
British Sign Language	4	GP3M 44	N/A	0	5	8	57
British Sign Language	5	GR7M 45	N/A	N/A	N/A	3	5
British Sign Language	6	GT2X 46	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Total			N/A	0	27	33	143

As well as the Awards in BSL, there are also stand-alone BSL National Units (SCQF Levels 3–6), Higher National BSL units (SCQF Levels 6 and 7) and a Professional Development Award (PDA) in BSL Studies (SCQF Level 8).

Teaching of BSL and the 1+2 Languages Policy

You have asked what steps the Scottish Government is taking to ensure that schools have the opportunity to teach BSL from Primary 1 to Higher and Advanced Higher level, as well as affording BSL equivalence with other spoken language qualifications.

I believe officials have previously set out some of the below for the Committee, but I will restate that the Scottish Government shares the petitioner's vision for BSL to become more widely taught in schools. As part of the Scottish Government's work to drive forward implementation of the 1+2 policy, officials are working with Education Scotland, Scotland's National Centre for Languages, and other partners to promote BSL in schools and develop support material for teachers.

The aim of the 1+2 Languages policy is that pupils will have an entitlement to learn at least two additional languages at school (called the L2 and L3) during the Broad General Education (BGE) from P1 to S3.

- The L2 should be taught consistently from P1 and follow a continuous framework of progression. The L2, must be a language which children can continue to study at secondary school to the level of a National Qualification (i.e. National 5, Higher, Advanced Higher).

There are currently eight languages that meet this criteria: French, Spanish, German, Italian, Gaelic (for learners), Urdu, Mandarin, and Cantonese.

- The L3 should be taught from P5 at the latest. Any language can be taught as an L3 (including the L2-eligible languages), as there are no requirements for qualifications to be in place.

Some schools use the L3 as an opportunity for pupils to learn about a variety of languages and cultures. As such, learners may not be taught the same language continuously as an L3 during the BGE.

In keeping with the Curriculum for Excellence, schools have broad discretion in delivering this entitlement. It is for schools to decide which languages to offer, within the terms of the policy, but there is nothing to prevent them from exceeding the terms of the policy, e.g. by teaching an L3 alongside the L2 earlier than P5.

I am pleased to report that we are seeing a substantial increase in the number of primary schools providing BSL as an L3, with 113 teaching it in 2020-21 up from 32 in 2018-19. This is why the Scottish Government does not believe the steps being sought by the petitioner are required at

this time. The next survey collecting this information is expected to take place next year.

Based on past experience, qualifications being in place does not necessarily lead to the language being offered as an L2 by schools. An L2 should be taught continuously from P1 to S3 so the secondary school of a cluster must provide it. This can be a limiting factor. In contrast, primary schools can offer BSL as an L3 even if the secondary school does not.

Ultimately, in keeping with the non-statutory status of the curriculum in Scotland, it remains the choice of schools to decide which language to teach and they will consider a range of factors in making that choice. This includes the confidence of their teaching staff, coordination with the teaching offer at the local secondary school, staff availability and sustainability, and demand or perceived demand from pupils and their parents / carers. It is for these reasons that we do not believe that the steps being sought by the petitioner are necessarily sufficient to support increased take up of BSL.

BSL may be taught as an L2 in the future, however this will require careful work beyond the development of qualifications. At this time, we are focused on exploring with our partners what solutions may be implemented to build on an already positive trend.

I hope that the above is helpful in setting out the position in relation to availability of BSL qualifications, and promotion and delivery of BSL in schools.