

## Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

**Petition Number:** [PE1867](#)

**Main Petitioner:** Scott Macmillan

**Subject:** Establish a new national qualification for British Sign Language (BSL)

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to encourage the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) to establish a National Qualification in British Sign Language (BSL) at SCQF Level 2.

### Introduction

The petitioner links two elements of the policy surrounding the teaching of languages. These elements are qualifications developed and delivered by the SQA and the 1+2 language policy.

The focus of the petition is on the learning of BSL. BSL's position in schools is a topic which is addressed in the [Scottish Government's British Sign Language \(BSL\): National Plan 2017 to 2023](#).

This petitioner also lodged [PE1777](#) in December 2019 which was closed in December 2020.

### BSL qualifications

Pupils in schools will tend to attempt to gain qualifications in senior phase, that is S4 to S6.

Schools are at liberty to enter pupils in a wide variety of qualifications. In practice many of these qualifications will be produced by the SQA. The SQA also develops qualifications for colleges and other learning centres.

The SQA has a range of qualifications in BSL. There are awards in BSL (SCQF Levels 3-6<sup>1</sup>) and standalone BSL National Units (SCQF levels 3–6). Uptake of these awards is relatively low and it is not clear how many, if any, entries to these awards are for school pupils.

The awards are comparable under the SCQF framework to National 3-5 qualifications both in terms of level and size, as measured by SCQF points. The SCQF levels relate to the difficulty or complexity of the qualifications. The framework can be found here: <https://scqf.org.uk/about-the-framework/interactive-framework/>

An example of a qualification not aimed at schools is the SQA's British Sign Language Studies SCQF level 8. Level 8 is at a level of an HND, although the course is smaller than an HND. The SQA has also developed Higher National BSL Units (SCQF levels 6 and 7).

The Scottish Government is keen to broaden the offer in Senior Phase to beyond only National Qualifications and to include opportunities to take other qualifications, including awards. National Qualifications are a suite of qualifications in a range of topics. These are the numbered Nationals (e.g. National 5) as well as Highers and Advanced Highers.

## 1+2 language policy

Following the 2012 report of the [Languages Working Group](#), the Scottish Government pledged to enable and encourage every child to learn two additional languages: this is known as the 1+2 approach.

The 1+2 approach aims to offer all pupils in Scottish schools the opportunity to learn a first additional language from Primary 1 (L2), and a second additional language from Primary 5 (L3). It is expected that this will continue until they reach their third year of secondary education.

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<sup>1</sup> The SQA's website states that there are awards up to level 6, however, only awards up to level 5 were listed on its website: <https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/90359.html>

A letter from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, Shirley-Anne Somerville MSP, to the Public Petitions Committee dated 15 June 2021 quoted guidance from Education Scotland. [Education Scotland's guidance](#) which is focused on L3, but refers to the L2 in passing, states—

“The [2012] 1+2 report does not stipulate which language should be studied for L2 or L3. There are more restrictions on the choice of L2 since it must be a language which children can continue to study at secondary school to the level of a National Qualification.”

It is not clear whether the quote above is itself placing restrictions on local authorities or referring to restrictions in the policy agreed elsewhere. It would be unusual for Education Scotland to unilaterally develop policy and instruct local authorities and schools in this way. It is also unclear what, if any, consequences there would be if a local authority or school cluster (a secondary school and its feeder primary schools) chose to take a different approach.

The languages that would meet the criterion to be taught as L2 are: French, Spanish, German, Italian, Gaelic (for learners), Urdu, Mandarin and Cantonese. It is not clear how only offering these languages at L2 would ensure that there would be continuity of teaching from P1 to S3 and an option to continue to a certificated course. It is unlikely that a secondary school would be able to offer all of those language courses in senior phase. The take-up of some of these languages is low; for example, Chinese Languages had 257 entries at National 5 in 2020, of which 115 came from independent schools<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, schools are not limited to offering National Qualifications or indeed SQA qualifications in Senior Phase.

## National Plan

The British Sign Language (BSL): National Plan 2017 to 2023 sets out the Scottish Government's long-term goal for BSL in schools.

“Children and young people who use BSL will get the support they need at all stages of their learning, so that they can reach their full potential; parents who use BSL will have the

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<sup>2</sup> Schools and Education Authority spreadsheets.  
<https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/94723.html>

same opportunities as other parents to be fully involved in their child’s education; and more pupils will be able to learn BSL at school.”

Action 23 of the plan stated the Scottish Government would—

“Instruct Scotland’s National Centre for Languages ( SCILT) to lead a programme of work to support BSL learning for hearing pupils. This will include, but will not be limited to:

- a) making sure that education authorities and schools know that BSL can be part of the language offer in schools under the 1+2 language policy.
- b) Gathering detailed information on where and how BSL is being offered in schools as part of the 1+2 language policy, and update this information regularly.
- c) Gathering and sharing examples of good practice in teaching BSL to hearing pupils as part of 1+2, and make sure there is guidance to support this.”

The Scottish Government’s 2019 [1+2 language learning survey](#) was published in March 2020. It found that schools across 10 local authorities reported that they delivered BSL as an L3. This represented a doubling of local authorities from the previous survey. A survey was not carried out in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, however one is currently underway for 2021 and is expected to report on its findings later in the year.

An expert advisory group was established by the Scottish Government in 2019 to develop a delivery plan for growing the provision of BSL in schools, with SCILT chairing the group. The group was unable to report to government in 2020 due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. This also led to the work of the group being postponed, and it last met in January 2020. The Scottish Government is currently exploring options for resuming this work. Furthermore [an update on progress on the BSL plan as a whole is expected in October 2021](#).

## Key Organisations

### [SCILT](#)

The Scottish Government

Education Scotland

SQA

[Association of Directors of Education Scotland \(ADES\)](#)

[Deaf Scotland](#)

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**21 June 2021**

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Published by the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe),  
The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP  
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