The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

Kate Forbes MSP
Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic
Scottish Government

5 March 2026

Dear Kate

Further to last year's post-legislative scrutiny of the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015, the Committee took evidence this week on the following report:

- Sign Loud: Perspectives of Deaf mothers and signing practitioners on domestic abuse, communication issues and the impact on Deaf families

Following what was an informative and constructive evidence session, the Committee agreed to write to you with the questions and observations outlined below.

The Committee strongly supports investment in the Gaelic language and welcomes the recent announcement of additional funding to further promote it. However, we note our previous conclusion that the same parity of esteem has not been extended to BSL. It became apparent through our evidence session that relatively small sums would make a transformative difference to the projects discussed with witnesses yet it appears that spend on BSL is lagging behind that for Gaelic despite both languages having similar numbers of users in Scotland. It is worth reiterating our point that "Deaf children cannot simply 'choose' another language in order to get on in society."

For example, our witnesses spoke of a the BSL Gender Based Violence IDAA service run by Deaf Links and Women's Aid groups in Dundee, Angus and Perthshire. The Committee strongly supports such initiatives and would be keen for them to be expanded on wherever possible. Of course, any such expansion would require commensurate resource.

We note that the promotion of Gaelic is coordinated through a national body (Bòrd na Gàidhlig), yet no such equivalent exists for BSL. Last year's report invited the Scottish Government to consider suggestions "that a national body along the lines of Bòrd na Gàidhlig or a "National BSL Centre of Excellence" would help bring greater oversight and clarity on financial investment in BSL along with greater parity of esteem with Gaelic and other minority languages." We note the Scottish Government responded that it "would not want to divert resources from community organisations to fund the Committee's idea for a national body" but would urge further consideration of how best to coordinate and maximise investment in BSL across the country.

Contact: Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP. Email EHRCJ.committee@parliament.scot. We welcome calls through Relay UK and in BSL through Contact Scotland BSL.

Committee members were particularly concerned by suggestions that hearing children of Deaf mothers continue to be used as translators when engaging with emergency services. This is not acceptable at the best of times but must be hugely challenging and traumatising for all concerned in cases where domestic abuse is a factor. It must not continue.

Witnesses also told us of negative experiences Deaf women had encountered when engaging with services intended to provide support and advice such as Citizens Advice Bureaux and the Scottish Legal Aid Board. We were told that the responsibility for arranging interpretation often falls on Deaf people themselves. The Committee agrees with our witnesses that this is not acceptable and that these services and others should take responsibility for arranging interpreters to enable clear communication with all service users including Deaf people. We further recognise that such services need adequate resource to be accessible to all and call for them to be adequately resourced in order to achieve this.

Last year's report highlighted that some Deaf women face a lack of educational resources which leaves them more vulnerable to domestic abuse with some not knowing about their rights, acceptable behaviour and the meaning of consent. We also discussed initiatives seeking to educate young men on related topics including consent, domestic abuse and coercive control, and misogyny more generally. It is essential that any such initiatives can speak to their target audience in their own language, including through BSL, but this does not appear to be happening at scale.

It is vital that universal service providers understand the needs of all of their service users, including BSL users and people with experience of domestic abuse. This should not be an "either/or" position. We strongly support calls from our witnesses that such requirements should be mainstreamed rather than being left to specialist services which may have experience in one particular field but not others. We reiterate our previous recommendation that the Scottish Government should "increase the numbers of suitably trained Deaf experts (and failing that, BSL interpreters for IDAAs) to provide support and advice to survivors." We welcome your commitment to "facilitate a meeting between BSL stakeholders, members of the community, and these bodies (Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service or Victim Support Scotland) to capture areas for improvement in this area" and would welcome an update on progress.

Our witnesses also discussed some issues around the collection of data relating to women with experience of domestic abuse and the Committee notes that such data collection fails to distinguish BSL users from people with disabilities. BSL users identify as people using a minority language and it is imperative that this is accurately recorded rather than them being "lumped in" with disability. We also emphasise the importance of ensuring that data relating to other protected characteristics, including race, is accurately recorded to better inform future policy development.

We recognise that our report was only published last autumn and that many of our recommendations are expected to bring benefits over the longer term. Nonetheless, we urge the Scottish Government to progress those recommendations it has accepted as swiftly as possible in order to continue to address barriers and improve outcomes for all BSL users in Scotland.

I recognise that dissolution is fast approaching, but it would be helpful if you could respond to this letter by the time of our final scheduled meeting of the session on 24 March.

Yours sincerely

Karen Adam MSP
Convener