

Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee
Tuesday 3 June 2025
15th Meeting, 2025 (Session 6)

British Sign Language Inquiry – Note by the Clerk

Introduction

1. The purpose of this paper is to provide information to help inform the Committee's evidence sessions as part of its British Sign Language (BSL) inquiry with two panels of witnesses as follows—

Panel One

- Alana Harper, Chief Executive Officer, Deaf Links
- Avril Hepner, BSL Scotland Manager, British Deaf Association Scotland
- Dr Hannah Tweed, Scottish Sensory Hub Manager, Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland (the ALLIANCE)

Panel Two

- Professor Jemina Napier, Chair of Intercultural Communication, Heriot-Watt University
- Lucy Clark, deaf domestic abuse researcher, advocate and trainer
- Rachel O'Neill, Moray House School of Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh

Background information

2. At its meeting on 4 February 2025 the Committee agreed to undertake an inquiry into actions taken by the Scottish Government and listed authorities to tackle barriers faced by BSL users in Scotland.
3. The Committee subsequently agreed that the inquiry would take place over a three-week period beginning on 3 June and would focus on—
 - Whether the BSL Act, the current BSL Plan and listed authority plans are improving the lives of BSL users; and
 - What changes could be made in the shorter and longer term to improve the lives of BSL users.
4. The Committee also agreed to issue a call for views running from 3 April to 2 May in response to which 36 submissions were received. All published responses can be accessed on the [Committee's website](#).
5. SPICe researchers have also provided a summary of written evidence and a background briefing which is attached as an annexe to this paper.

British Sign Language (BSL): national plan 2023 to 2029

6. As required by the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2025, the Scottish Government published its second [BSL National Plan](#) covering the period from 2023 to 2029. The plan sets out a range of government actions to tackle barriers faced by BSL users to help make Scotland “the best place in the world for BSL users to live, work, visit and learn.”
7. The plan contains 45 commitments aimed at tackling barriers faced by BSL users by embedding the language across health, education, transport, culture and employment.
8. Noting that ten years has passed since the 2015 Act received Royal Assent, the Committee is keen to consider how effective the plan has been in improving the lives of BSL users and how best to assess the Scottish Government’s progress in delivering the actions set out in it.
9. The key provisions in the 2025 Act are—
 - An obligation on the Scottish Ministers and relevant Scotland wide agencies to prepare a plan setting out a strategy for the promotion of BSL (“the National Plan”). Preparation of the National Plan is to include publication and consultation on a draft plan, ensuring engagement with BSL users and those who represent them.
 - An obligation on listed authorities to prepare a BSL plan – “Authority Plans”. The authority plans should set out the measures to be taken by the listed authorities to use BSL when carrying out its functions. The authority plan should aim to be consistent with the National Plan.
 - In preparation of the authority plan, listed authorities should, as with the National Plan, consult with relevant stakeholders and take account of the representations received from BSL users and those who represent BSL users.
 - The Act also requires that a Progress Report be published by the Scottish Ministers and laid before the Scottish Parliament.
10. The original national plan was published in 2017, spanning six years from 2017 to 2023. A [progress report](#) was published in 2021.

Next steps

11. The Committee expects to take evidence from public bodies listed under the 2015 Act followed by the Deputy First Minister (given that languages, including Gaelic, Scots and BSL fall within her areas of ministerial responsibility) at its meeting on 17 June. It is also expected to engage informally with BSL users on 9 and 10 June to help inform both evidence sessions on 17 June.

Conclusion

12. The Committee is invited to consider the above information in its evidence sessions with both panels of witnesses.

Clerks to the Committee

May 2025

Annexe

British Sign Language Inquiry

Introduction

At its meeting on 4 February 2025 the Committee agreed to undertake an inquiry into actions taken by the Scottish Government and listed authorities to tackle barriers faced by British Sign Language (BSL) users in Scotland.

This paper provides some background on the British Sign Language Act 2015 and its requirement for a National Plan and Authority Plans. It also provides a broad summary of the submissions made to the Committee's call for views.

British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015

The [British Sign Language \(Scotland\) Act 2015](#) (BSL Act) came into force on 23 October 2015. It aims to promote the use and understanding of BSL.

It requires Scottish Ministers and listed authorities to publish plans every six years, showing how they will promote, and facilitate the promotion of the use and understanding of BSL in Scotland. These plans will take account of local circumstances and consider how best to respond to BSL users' needs within local communities, organisations or services.

The key provisions of the BSL Act are:

- An obligation on the Scottish Ministers to prepare a plan setting out a strategy for the promotion of BSL – the National Plan. Preparation of the National Plan is to include publication and consultation on a draft plan, ensuring engagement with BSL users and those who represent BSL users.
- The first National Plan was to be published within two years of the BSL Act coming into force, and thereafter at intervals of no more than six years.
- An obligation on listed authorities to prepare a BSL plan – “Authority Plans”. The authority plans should set out the measures to be taken by the listed authorities to use BSL when carrying out its functions. The authority plan is to aim to be consistent with the relevant National Plan.
- In preparation of the authority plan, listed authorities should, as with the National Plan, consult with relevant stakeholders and take account of the representations received from BSL users and those who represent BSL users.
- The first Authority Plans were required to be published no later than the 12 months following publication of the first National Plan. Subsequent Authority Plans are to be published as soon as is reasonably practicable after each National Plan subsequent to the first applicable National Plan, and no later than six months after.

- The BSL Act also requires that a Progress Report be published by Scottish Ministers and laid before the Scottish Parliament. The first progress report was required within three years of the first National Plan, and further progress reports are to be published at intervals of no more than six years of the most recent progress report.

BSL National plans

First National Plan

The first BSL National Plan was published in October 2017 - [British Sign Language \(BSL\): National Plan 2017 to 2023](#).

It set out ten long-term goals for BSL in Scotland, covering early years and education; training and work; health, mental health and wellbeing; transport; culture and the arts; justice and democracy. The plan included 70 actions to achieve these goals by 2020, for example:

- improving access to a wide range of information and public services in BSL
- investigating the level of BSL of teachers and support staff in schools
- expanding the teaching of BSL as a language to hearing pupils in schools
- improving access to health care and mental health services in BSL.

The first [Progress Report](#) was published in October 2021.

While recognising the long-term ambitions in the National Plan, the first Progress Report highlighted some early successes, including:

- Scotland's Census 2022, for the first time, asked the population if they can use BSL.
 - [Results from Scotland's Census 2022](#) show that 117,300 people can use BSL, 2.2% of people aged 3 and over. Two out of every three BSL users are female (67%). The Annexe to this paper shows the population of BSL users across Scottish local authorities.
- The Scottish Government established an expert advisory group in 2019 to develop plans to promote BSL use in schools.
- A comprehensive review of BSL/English interpreting in Scotland, carried out in 2019 – [Landscape Review – BSL Scotland Act 2015](#). The aim was to inform policy decisions around the implementation of the BSL Act and the first National Plan.
 - The findings from the Landscape Review included concerns:

- about the availability of BSL/English interpreters across Scotland. In some areas there are no locally based interpreters.
- around standards and professionalism come from both inside and outside the interpreting profession.
- around sustainability – although increasing the number of interpreters would be beneficial, the existing workforce, and public money, could be used more effectively.

Second National Plan

In November 2023, the Scottish Government set out its [second National Plan](#) for 2023- 2029 which lays out a range of government actions to tackle barriers faced by BSL users to help make Scotland the best place in the world for BSL users to live, work, visit and learn.

The [BSL National Plan 2023-29](#) made 45 commitments aimed at tackling barriers faced by BSL users by embedding the language across health, education, transport, culture and employment. The commitments are set out within ten priority areas:

- **Priority 1: Delivering the BSL National Plan 2023-2029**
 - We will embed the ambition of this plan within other government areas in order to make progress across the system. Our Implementation Advisory Group will provide oversight to this work, championing the voices of those with lived experience.
- **Priority 2: BSL Accessibility**
 - We recognise that BSL communities are underrepresented across organisations and services in Scotland. We want to promote and develop sustainable approaches to ensure that BSL users have access to opportunities and services impacting on their daily lives, ensuring they have information in the right format and at the right time.
- **Priority 3: Children, Young People and their Families**
 - We will embed our commitment to Getting It Right for Every Child to provide all children, young people and their families with the right support at the right time.
- **Priority 4: Access to Employment**
 - We will embed the principles of No One Left Behind, our all-age approach to employability to enable BSL users to consider what route to employment is right for them to enter into the workforce and fulfil their potential.

- **Priority 5: Health and Wellbeing**

- We know person-centred healthcare involves providing access to and delivery of services that are equitable. It is important to ensure that BSL users have the relevant information and services they need to make informed choices on their health.

- **Priority 6: Celebrating BSL Culture**

- We work with partners to ensure BSL users have access to and can participate in the cultural life of Scotland, enabling them to celebrate their own culture and heritage.

- **Priority 7: BSL Data**

- We recognise the need to build an evidence base and gather data on BSL in Scotland, which will help inform our work in delivering this BSL National Plan and inform local plans.

- **Priority 8: Transport**

- We will work with our partners to embed BSL further within our transport system to ensure safe, fair and inclusive access to public transport is available to BSL users.

- **Priority 9: Access to Justice**

- We will take steps to ensure BSL users will have fair and equal access to the civil, criminal and juvenile justice systems in Scotland.

- **Priority 10: Democratic Participation**

- We will deliver actions that will help BSL users participate in democratic and public life in Scotland, recognising that accessibility and information are key drivers in helping to achieve this aim.

The National Plan commits to publishing a progress report in 2026.

Authority Plans

The following public authorities are required to publish Authority Plans under the [Schedule in the BSL Act](#):

- Audit Scotland.
- The Commissioner for Children and Young People in Scotland.
- The Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland.
- A council constituted under section 2 of the Local Government etc. (Scotland) Act 1994.

- A Health Board constituted under section 2(1)(a) of the National Health Service (Scotland) Act 1978.
- The Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator.
- The Police Investigations and Review Commissioner.
- A body which is a “post-16 education body” for the purposes of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005.
- The Scottish Commission for Human Rights.
- The Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service.
- The Scottish Housing Regulator.
- The Scottish Information Commissioner.
- The Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body.
- The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman.
- The Standards Commission for Scotland.

Authority Plans are available to view at: [BSL Scotland Act 2015 – BSL Scotland Act 2015](#)

Summary of submissions to the Call for Views

The Committee ran a call for views between 3 April and 2 May 2025.

It asked five questions:

1. What difference has the BSL (Scotland) Act made to BSL users in the past ten years in terms of progress or setbacks?
2. What are your views on the second National BSL Plan from 2023? Were you consulted on this plan and does it address issues faced by BSL users?
3. How effective have the BSL plans from listed authorities been in improving outcomes for BSL users?
4. What reforms do you think are needed to improve outcomes for BSL users?
5. Do you have any other comments?

36 [responses](#) were received to the call for views:

- 20 were from organisations, of which four are from the third sector, and 16 are public authorities, most of which are listed authorities under the BSL Act.

- 16 were from individuals, of which four are academics/researchers who have published on the subject of BSL.

Impact of the BSL (Scotland) Act (2015)

Overall, there is a shared view that the BSL Act has increased the visibility and recognition of BSL as a language. It has raised public awareness and led to some improvements in local authority services, education and public engagement.

The ALLIANCE and Deaf Links described it as ‘flagship legislation’. North East Sensory Services said it identified how BSL users “should receive the same rights to be included.”

Some, such as the British Deaf Association (BDA Scotland), referred to the increased representation of BSL, for example, the BSL interpreters during Covid-19 briefings, BSL use in the Scottish Parliament, and the appointment of Deaf councillors and Members of the Scottish Youth Parliament.

Listed authorities provided a range of examples that have helped to improve access to services for BSL users, such as through better access to interpreter support in range of settings. Further examples include the creation of a Deaf Dementia toolkit (Stirling Council), Deaf Awareness training for teaching staff (Dundee City Council), and an improved recruitment process to support candidates requiring BSL (Aberdeenshire Council).

In particular, [Contact Scotland BSL](#), which provides live BSL video interpreting 24hours/7 days a week, was widely praised for improving access. The ALLIANCE said this was a major success, calling it a “massive lifesaver” and “internationally recognised good practice.” Deaf Links said:

“It enables thousands of people every year to access public services, providing independence and empowerment via online interpreting Video Relay Services, Braille displays, and speech synthesizers. It operates 24 hours a day, 365 days a year and is universally accessible and free at point of use. It handles on average between 3,000 – 4,000 calls every month, with high satisfaction rates among users. It is one of the key successes of the BSL (Scotland) Act 2015 and is held up internationally as an example of good practice.”

Despite its success, Contact Scotland BSL has faced closure twice, most recently in 2024. Deaf Links said this demonstrates the “fragility of progress.” In addition, Rob Wilks (legal academic at UWE Bristol) said that there has been no formal evaluation of Contact Scotland BSL to assess whether the service meets the needs of BSL signers or whether its quality and cultural appropriateness align with user expectations.

In terms of challenges or setbacks, several responses suggested that the lack of enforceability in the BSL Act has led to inconsistent implementation across Scotland.

A common theme was the limited funding and resources available to support the aims of the BSL Act, especially for interpreter provision and BSL education. Rachel O'Neill (Moray House) said that a lack of investment in improving the BSL skills of the education workforce, has meant little change in past ten years.

Colleges Scotland said that access to BSL interpreters and BSL teachers remains scarce and hinders the support available to BSL users. The challenge is even greater in rural settings.

Aberdeenshire Council said that:

“Within the North East region; which covers Aberdeenshire & Aberdeen City and Moray, there are only 3 BSL interpreters available across the region, this makes engagement and communication difficult at times especially with the local deaf community.”

Professor Napier (Heriot-Watt) said that while there had been some progress under the Access to Justice actions in the National Plan, several issues that would improve access for BSL users in the legal system have not been addressed. Deaf women in particular experience barriers in seeking support when they report domestic abuse.

Views on the Second National BSL Plan (2023–2029)

There were mixed views on the second National BSL Plan. Many responses suggested that the plan recognises key issues for BSL users, such as education, employment and health.

However, there are concerns that it lacks focus, does not have measurable goals, timelines or accountability.

Many of the submissions were involved in the consultation on the second National Plan. This included some of the academics who responded to the Committee's call for views.

Rachel O'Neill (Moray House) was consulted, and her research (with Dr Rob Wilks UWE Bristol) was incorporated into the draft. However, they were disappointed to see their recommendations were watered down or removed in the final version. Similarly, Gabrielle Hodge (University of Edinburgh) was disappointed with the published plan compared with the draft version.

BDA Scotland were commissioned to consult with the Deaf community on the draft plan and welcomed the opportunity. They also acknowledge the Scottish Government's ongoing commitment to BSL.

However, BDA Scotland viewed it as less comprehensive than the first plan. It had missing or weakened commitments, including: support for young Deaf people around transitions; support for Deaf parents; the 1+2 BSL language programme for schools was removed; a lack of focus on specific groups such as Deaf older people and LGBTIQ+ BSL users; and, little progress on employment support.

Deaf Links shared views from the Tayside Deaf Community who were consulted on the second National Plan (with facilitation from BDA Scotland). They raised a number of issues, including: the need for better data collection and for it to be disaggregated; workplaces to be more Deaf/BSL aware; and, more opportunities for BSL users to access arts and culture. In terms of education, Deaf Links said that shortages in translator, interpreter and tutor positions need to be addressed, including investment in accredited training for Deaf BSL users to become tutors of BSL at all levels:

“...this has been a major issue for the past 30 years, as there is a dearth of appropriately trained Deaf BSL Tutors in Scotland. If this is not addressed, there will never be sufficient numbers of BSL interpreters, adequately trained Teachers of The Deaf, hearing people fluent in BSL, BSL training for parents and families of Deaf children or the ability to introduce BSL as one of the 1 + 2 languages in schools.”

The need for better data collection on BSL users was mentioned by several responses. The ALLIANCE described data gathering as “transformative” when applied to progressing human rights and social justice:

“If a BSL language plan does not have an efficient data collection process, individuals will continue to face huge barriers of isolation and loneliness, poorer health and wellbeing, and constrained, disconnected, and restricted lifestyles. It is crucial BSL data includes disaggregated data to reveal inequalities which may be concealed within aggregated data.”

There are broad concerns that the National Plan is not supported with funding or resources to help implement the aims. For example, the Scottish Courts and Tribunal Service said that it would benefit from more consideration of the budgetary constraints faced by public authorities. It also said that the National Plan does not address the challenges relating to the availability and accessibility of qualified interpreters. Similar views were shared by others including NHS Forth Valley and Social Work Scotland.

Professor Napier said that the National Plan makes no reference to services for Deaf women who experience domestic abuse. It does not address the specific support that may be required, for example, the need for BSL interpreters who understand domestic abuse.

Effectiveness of local BSL Plans

Some of the listed authorities said they had made progress though training, accessible websites and community engagement (Dundee City Council, Aberdeenshire Council, NHS Forth Valley, West Lothian Council, Stirling Council).

Dundee City Council said it undertook extensive engagement and consultation over a six-month period involving local and national partners. This led to improved outcomes for BSL users in Dundee as all actions and commitments have been shaped by those with direct lived experiences of BSL:

“A key example of service improvement as a result, has been the updating and development of the Council’s website with increasing levels of information and supports available in BSL.”

NHS Forth Valley commented on the benefits of co-developing its BSL plan:

“In our experience of co-developing a joint BSL plan across NHS and local authority partners, we have seen that collaboration improves both the quality and the impact of actions. BSL users have consistently told us that separate systems across public services can be confusing and exhausting to navigate. Integrated, user-focused planning has real potential to reduce duplication and improve outcomes.”

On the other hand, Argyll and Bute Council said it did not think its plan had achieved much. It has struggled with resources and said that:

“We don’t have a clearly identifiable BSL community, so we struggled to meet the consultation requirements when developing our local BSL plan.”

Some responses to the call for views said that many of the authority plans are high-level and lack sufficient detail. Rob Wilks (UWE Bristol) said there was a lack of consistent monitoring and accountability which means the impact of the plans remains unclear. Rachel O’Neill (Moray House) said that local plans did not address key issues about Deaf children in the classroom.

BDA Scotland describe positive changes in a range of settings, such as in some health boards and local authorities, but there is inconsistency across Scotland, a lack of accountability, and limited funding to support the plans.

In 2024, the ALLIANCE analysed the second round of local BSL plans from all listed authorities and public bodies, which showed only 62% were compliant with the BSL Act:

“Plans were due by 6 May 2024. By 22 August 2024 (more than three months after the legal deadline), 72% of listed authorities had published plans in English – and only 62% had published in BSL (as required by the Act). That only 62% were compliant with the Act is concerning – and does not indicate that listed authorities are prioritising work to improve outcomes for BSL users.”

Deaf Links also referred to this research. The assessment showed that only 49% of listed authorities included material on ‘access to justice’. Commenting on democratic participation, Deaf Links said that engagement with politicians is often dependent on when there is an election:

“It has been the experience of BSL users in Tayside and Deaf Links Advocacy Service supporting them, that politicians are happy to meet with them and provide interpreters to do so when there is an election looming and politicians (at all levels) want the Deaf Community’s vote! It has been a completely different story when BSL users have requested to meet with their elected representatives on issues they wish to raise, with excuses made and

Deaf/Deafblind people fobbed off with letters written in complex English which they cannot understand.”

Suggested reforms to improve outcomes for BSL users

There were common themes among the responses to the call for views on how to improve outcomes for BSL users. These included:

- Greater accountability, with some suggesting the legal enforceability of BSL plans (ALLIANCE, NHS Forth Valley, Heriot-Watt, Deaf Links).
- Sustainable funding for interpreter training, BSL education, and Deaf-led services (Scottish Funding Council, NHS Grampian, NHS Forth Valley, Social Work Scotland, Aberdeenshire Council, Colleges Scotland, BDA).
- Mandatory Deaf awareness and BSL training for frontline public service staff (ALLIANCE, NHS Forth Valley, Deaf Links).
- Expand BSL Education in schools and for families of Deaf children ((Heriot-Watt, Deaf Links, BDA).
- Improve data collection on BSL users and service outcomes (ALLIANCE, BDA).
- Support for Deaf professionals and leadership roles in policy-making.(NHS Forth Valley, Heriot-Watt, BDA).
- Address Access to Justice by training police, legal professionals, and ensuring interpreter availability (ALLIANCE, Professor Napier).

Further comments

There were a number of other issues raised, including that listed authorities should improve their actions on transport and commitments on access to arts and culture in their BSL plans. Some of the responses suggested there would be benefits to sharing good practice between listed authorities.

Deaf Links and the Tayside Deaf Community, and the ALLIANCE call for the following measures:

- The Scottish Government and listed authorities should undertake Equality and Human Rights Impact Assessments for all decisions affecting Deaf and Deafblind people.
- There must be meaningful engagement with Deaf and Deafblind BSL users at local and national level.
- A parliamentary inquiry into sensory support cuts: “Without urgent intervention, the ongoing erosion of support risks deepening inequality and marginalisation for one of Scotland’s most underrepresented communities.”

BSL users across Scottish local authorities, Scotland Census 2022

Council	All people aged 3 and over	BSL User	Not a BSL user	% that are BSL users
Aberdeen City	217,756	5,404	212,355	2.48
Aberdeenshire	256,378	5,398	250,980	2.11
Angus	111,587	2,512	109,075	2.25
Argyll and Bute	84,097	2,137	81,961	2.54
City of Edinburgh	501,268	10,325	490,942	2.06
Clackmannanshire	50,404	1,209	49,192	2.40
Dumfries and Galloway	142,503	2,907	139,596	2.04
Dundee City	144,799	3,778	141,021	2.61
East Ayrshire	116,962	3,054	113,905	2.61
East Dunbartonshire	106,057	1,734	104,323	1.63
East Lothian	109,095	2,176	106,919	1.99
East Renfrewshire	94,174	1,504	92,672	1.60
Falkirk	154,078	3,768	150,310	2.45
Fife	362,139	7,947	354,192	2.19
Glasgow City	603,203	14,164	589,036	2.35
Highland	229,631	6,188	223,443	2.69
Inverclyde	76,544	1,870	74,677	2.44
Midlothian	93,257	2,082	91,175	2.23
Moray	90,787	2,224	88,563	2.45
Na h-Eileanan Siar	25,563	523	25,040	2.05
North Ayrshire	130,130	3,528	126,605	2.71
North Lanarkshire	331,130	6,644	324,486	2.01
Orkney Islands	21,400	564	20,840	2.64
Perth and Kinross	147,257	2,959	144,298	2.01
Renfrewshire	178,873	3,493	175,379	1.95
Scottish Borders	114,114	2,365	111,749	2.07
Shetland Islands	22,408	776	21,632	3.46
South Ayrshire	109,034	2,322	106,712	2.13
South Lanarkshire	317,755	6,417	311,338	2.02
Stirling	90,447	1,805	88,642	2.00
West Dunbartonshire	86,076	1,635	84,439	1.90
West Lothian	175,963	3,916	172,049	2.23
Scotland	5,294,869	117,328	5,177,546	2.22

Source: [Scotland's Census 2022 - National Records of Scotland Table UV211 - British Sign Language \(BSL\) skills All people aged 3 and over. Council Area 2019 by BSL user indicator by Individuals](#)