

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

4th Meeting, 2023 (Session 6), Wednesday 8
March 2023

PE1867: Establish a new national qualification for British Sign Language (BSL)

Lodged on 20 May 2021

Petitioner Scott Macmillan

**Petition
summary** 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.

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1867>

Introduction

1. The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on [9 November 2022](#). At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. The Committee has received a response from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills which is set out in **Annexe C**.
4. Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the petition's [webpage](#).
5. Further background information about this petition can be found in the [SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.
6. The Scottish Government's initial position on this petition can be found on the petition's [webpage](#).

Action

The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

Clerk to the Committee

Annexe A

PE1867: Establish a new national qualification for British Sign Language

Petitioner

Scott Macmillan

Date lodged

20 May 2021

Petition summary

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.

Previous action

I have contacted Collette Stevenson MSP who is supportive of my petition.

Background information

Currently there is no SQA British Sign Language (BSL) at SCQF Level 2 unlike French, Spanish, German, Italian, Gaelic (for learners), Urdu, Mandarin and Cantonese.

As a result, BSL cannot be taught from Primary 1 as an "L2" language. It is currently an "L3" language which means it can only be taught from Primary 5 onwards. A BSL SCQF Level 2 qualification would allow for pupils to be taught signs while they are learning English, minimising the barrier of communication between hearing and non-hearing children and adults.

The Scottish Government BSL National Plan, established in 2017, encourages more students to learn BSL in schools. However, I do not think it takes enough action to support this. I think that establishing this new qualification would lead to a higher uptake of children learning BSL, in both Primary and Secondary education.

Annexe B

Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE1867 on 9th November 2022

The Convener: PE1867, which was lodged by Scott Macmillan, is on establishing a new national qualification for British Sign Language. I highlight that consideration of the petition will, as we have discussed, be available to watch on the Scottish Parliament's BSL channel.

The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to encourage the Scottish Qualifications Authority to establish a national qualification in British Sign Language at Scottish credit and qualifications framework level 2. We last considered the petition at our meeting on 4 May, when we agreed to write to the Scottish Sensory Hub. We now have responses from the National Deaf Children's Society and the Scottish Sensory Hub.

The National Deaf Children's Society stated its hope that BSL can be afforded similar support and status to that which the Gaelic language has received. It also highlighted that, without a national qualification, we are unlikely to see sufficient numbers of teachers choosing to develop their skills in teaching BSL.

The Scottish Sensory Hub noted that students currently

“earn more university entrance points for spoken language qualifications than ... for BSL”,

which it suggests results in students “reluctantly” opting for

“spoken language courses ... to maximise university entry opportunities.”

That is despite the increasing number of people who wish to take up BSL.

The Scottish Sensory Hub highlighted that the

“development of BSL qualification pathways and ... increased BSL fluency amongst the general population”

could have a positive impact on the wellbeing of deaf individuals and their sense of connectedness in everyday life. Any exposure that we have had to BSL has visibly demonstrated that to colleagues and the Parliament.

Do members have any suggestions for action?

Alexander Stewart: We should write to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills to seek an update on the development of the next BSL plan and explore how

BSL national qualifications could be developed. In writing to the cabinet secretary, the committee might wish to highlight the development of general certificates of secondary education in BSL in other parts of the United Kingdom; ask 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 levels; and seek information on what further considerations the Scottish Government has given to affording BSL qualifications that are equivalent with other spoken languages as part of the uptake of BSL qualifications.

The Convener: Thank you, Mr Stewart. That was a comprehensive series of suggestions. If colleagues do not have anything to add, are we content to do what has been suggested?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Annexe C

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	GP3L43	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.