

# Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

3rd Meeting, 2021 (Session 6), 8 September  
2021

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

## Note by the Clerk

<b>Petitioner</b>	Scott Macmillan
<b>Petition summary</b>	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.
<b>Webpage</b>	<a href="https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1867">petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1867</a>

## Introduction

1. This is a new petition that was lodged on 20 May 2021.
2. A SPICe briefing has been prepared to inform the Committee's consideration of the petition and can be found at **Annexe A**.
3. While not a formal requirement, petitioners have the option to collect signatures and comments on their petition. On this occasion, the petitioner elected not to collect this information.
4. The Committee seeks views from the Scottish Government on all new petitions before they are formally considered. A response has been received from the Scottish Government on this petition and is included at **Annexe B** of this paper.
5. The petitioner is calling for the establishment of a National Qualification in British Sign Language (BSL) at SCQF Level 2, to ensure that BSL can be taught as an 'L2' language under the 1+2 Language programme.

6. As an 'L2' language, it could be taught to pupils from Primary 1. At present, it is an 'L3' language. 'L3' languages should be taught no later than from Primary 5.

## **Scottish Government submission**

7. In her written submission, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills highlights advice from Education Scotland which states that, to be eligible as an L2 language, children must be able to study it "at secondary school to the level of a National Qualification".
8. As there are no National Qualifications in place for BSL, it cannot be an 'L2' language.
9. The Cabinet Secretary states that the introduction of new qualifications is a matter for the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA).
10. In creating new qualifications, the SQA would need to consider issues including
  - minimum number of learners,
  - evidence of demand,
  - sufficient availability of GTCS-registered teachers of the subject, and
  - the costs and resources required in order to develop the necessary framework of progression, as well as the qualifications themselves.
11. The Cabinet Secretary highlights that developing an award for BSL at SCQF level 2, in addition to the awards currently available at levels 3-8, would not be sufficient to for BSL to be eligible to be taught as an 'L2' language.

## **Action**

12. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take on this petition.

### **Clerk to the Committee**

# PE1867: ESTABLISH A NEW NATIONAL QUALIFICATION FOR BRITISH SIGN LANGUAGE (BSL)

## 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.

## 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](#)

**Ned Sharratt**  
**Senior Researcher**  
**21 June 2021**

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## Annexe B

# Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills submission of 23 June 2021 PE1867/A

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the aforementioned petition.

The Scottish Government fully recognises the importance of young people learning languages. Our '1+2 approach' to improve language learning in schools aims to ensure that pupils have the opportunity to learn two additional languages from P1 to S3. The first additional language (the 'L2') should be taught from P1 onwards, and a second additional language (the 'L3') should be taught no later than from P5 onwards.

For a language to be eligible as an L2, Education Scotland advises [<https://education.gov.scot/media/1cugpk4v/modlang12-l3-guidance-may19.pdf>] that it "must be a language which children can continue to study at secondary school to the level of a National Qualification". There are currently eight languages that meet this criteria: French, Spanish, German, Italian, Gaelic (for learners), Urdu, Mandarin and Cantonese.

The introduction of new qualifications is a matter for the SQA. In order to establish a new National Qualification, they would first need to consider a number of factors. This can include a minimum number of learners, evidence of demand, and sufficient availability of GTCS-registered teachers of the subject, among others. The SQA would also need to consider the costs and resources required in order to develop the necessary framework of progression, as well as the qualifications themselves.

There are no National Qualifications in place that allow BSL to be taught in the same way as the languages previously mentioned, or for pupils to validate their learning to the same level, which is why it cannot be offered as an L2 by schools at this time. Developing an award for BSL at SCQF level 2, in addition to the existing awards at levels 3-8, would not be sufficient to change this situation.

The current range of awards the SQA offer are relevant qualifications for schools that wish to offer BSL as an L3. The awards have been designed for both hearing and deaf learners to develop their language

skills, which can benefit learners in improving their language fluency and understanding of the Sign Language Community.