

Call for Views – Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee - British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 Inquiry – May 2025

Introduction

Colleges Scotland is the voice of the sector, supporting the delivery of thriving colleges at the heart of a thriving Scotland. When Colleges Thrive, Scotland Thrives. As the membership body, Colleges Scotland represents all 24 colleges in Scotland, which deliver both further education and around 13% of the provision of all higher education in Scotland.

Colleges Scotland welcomes the opportunity to provide views on the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 Inquiry on behalf of the college sector to the Committee.

Key Points

1. What difference has the BSL (Scotland) Act made to BSL users in the past ten years in terms of progress or setbacks?

Whilst the introduction of the Contact Scotland BSL national service is a notable achievement, the overall impact of the BSL (Scotland) Act over the past decade has been limited.

It has been highlighted that the Act has primarily resulted in the generation of additional reports, adding to the bureaucratic burden on organisations such as colleges. It was suggested that there was an opportunity to integrate this into existing public sector Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) reporting mechanisms. Unfortunately, essential resources such as BSL interpreters and BSL teachers remain scarce, hindering the effective support of BSL users in Scotland.

BSL Plans have supported greater awareness of BSL and have improved access to services for BSL users. However, in a rural setting, the lack of resources, such as access to qualified BSL interpreters, is a significant challenge for colleges and affected learners. The scarcity of interpreters can lead to delay and limited availability of services, whilst limited budgets and staffing can hinder the development and delivery of services tailored to the needs of BSL users.

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?

The second National BSL Plan from 2023 outlines commendable ambitions; however, it lacks the necessary infrastructure and strategic planning for effective implementation.

Colleges highlighted that they were not formally consulted during the development of this plan, and as a consequence, sector leads feel that the Plan does not adequately address critical issues, such as the provision of financial resources and the availability of BSL training, BSL interpreters and other BSL professionals, which are essential for improving outcomes for BSL users. These challenges will continue unless the Plan can address these more effectively.

3. How effective have the BSL plans from listed authorities been in improving outcomes for BSL users?

The effectiveness of BSL plans from listed authorities in improving outcomes for BSL users has been mixed. While some authorities have made strides in promoting BSL awareness and accessibility, it has been observed within the college sector that others have struggled to implement meaningful changes due to resource constraints and lack of strategic planning. Overall, the college sector feels that there is a need for more consistent and robust efforts across all authorities to ensure that BSL users receive the support they need.

The challenges faced in implementing meaningful changes has also been noted across engagement with the college sector. Historically, there are very low numbers of BSL users within some college communities. However, colleges are actively engaging with local schools to identify prospective students who use BSL, enabling them to plan and put appropriate support in place in advance.

Enhancing the accessibility of external-facing information, such as college websites and promotional materials, may help attract more BSL users. However, sector leads are mindful that the limited current demand can make it difficult for organisations to prioritise budget allocations for BSL services (e.g. website development, training etc).

4. What reforms do you think are needed to improve outcomes for BSL users?

To improve outcomes for BSL users, the college sector, on the basis of consulting with sector leads, would propose the following changes and reforms:

- **Increased funding:** Allocate more financial resources to support BSL initiatives and services, including better funding for colleges delivering BSL training.
- **Enhanced training opportunities (*which could be delivered through the college sector*):** Invest in and develop comprehensive training programmes for BSL interpreters, including an increase in clear routes to achieving Registered Sign Language Interpreter (RSLI) status. Additionally, establish a recognised BSL teaching qualification to ensure high-quality instruction and a consistent approach across the education sector.
- **Incentivising employment:** Introduce incentives to encourage Deaf BSL users to apply for work, thereby enhancing their participation in the workforce.
- **Strategic planning:** Develop and implement a clear, strategic plan that addresses the infrastructure and resource needs of BSL users.
- **Consultation and collaboration:** Engage with BSL users and relevant organisations to ensure their needs and perspectives are considered in policymaking.
- **Expansion of BSL within schools:** Offer BSL as a language option from early years to secondary schools to normalise its presence and reduce stigma.
- **Expansion of professional workforce:** Consider ways to grow the professional workforce by offering BSL interpretation courses in rural areas.

5. Do you have any other comments?

It has been observed in our consultation that BSL users have experienced consultation fatigue in the past. Therefore, organisations wishing to consult this community should consider more strategic thinking around a joined-up approach to consultation events and engagement with other organisations and charities representing the views of the community. By fostering a more

inclusive and consultative approach, we can better understand and address the challenges faced by BSL users, ultimately leading to more effective and impactful policies and initiatives.

Consultation can be burdensome, particularly when a small group is repeatedly asked to represent a diverse community. Additionally, sharing personal experiences can be both traumatic and stressful, so it is crucial to approach consultation in a mindful and considerate way. Partnering with others, for example local authorities and NHS, to develop regional BSL action plans could help align priorities and resources, while pooling consultation efforts to reduce the risk of survey fatigue.

Colleges Scotland
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