

BRITISH SIGN LANGUAGE & LINGUISTIC ACCESS WORKING GROUP

From: The Scottish Executive's British Sign Language & Linguistic Access Working Group

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Response to the Draft Version of a Strategy for Scotland's Languages

1.0 The Scottish Executive's British Sign Language & Linguistic Access Working Group (BSL&LAWG) has prepared this response to the draft version of a Strategy for Scotland's Languages. The group has been meeting since the year 2000 and draws together the leading national voluntary and statutory organisations in Scotland with an interest in and with expertise in linguistic issues for deaf people.

2.0 General Comments

The BSL&LAWG warmly welcome the aspirations of the strategy and the inclusion of BSL within it. The BSL&LAWG considered the strategy from two different perspectives. Firstly, from the point of view of Scottish Deaf people whose first language is British Sign Language (BSL) and secondly, from the point of view of those who cannot hear spoken English and therefore, require access through written English.

3.0 British Sign Language

BSL is an indigenous language of Scotland in the same way that Scots or Gaelic are, but there are a number of key differences:

- BSL is more often the only language used by Deaf people than Scots and Gaelic speakers who usually have English as a second language

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- Deaf people who use BSL are geographically spread throughout Scotland which makes developing, protecting and nurturing the language more difficult than if they were concentrated in specific areas
- 90% of deaf children are born into families where there are no other deaf members, therefore, their families are not familiar with BSL

4.0 Access in English

Those who speak English but cannot hear it need similar consideration to those who do not speak English. This includes access to materials in written English and communication services at interviews. Language service professionals, such as speech to text recorders, note takers or lipspeakers may provide this service.

5.0 We could find no mention of language deprivation and little mention of language impairments in the document.

Language deprivation can occur because of the particular isolation of some Deaf people within their local communities and sometimes isolation within their own families. The research mentioned in the strategy document, *Investigation of Access to Public Services in Scotland Using British Sign Language* found that language deprivation was even more significant for Deaf people living in rural areas and on the Scottish Islands.

Language impairments may be present from birth or develop in adult life and occur in all communities. Their presence may affect linguistic access throughout life or at specific times. One example is of the increasing numbers of older people with dementia and related conditions whose communication skills will diminish and they may revert to their first language, (BSL, Gaelic or Cantonese etc) even if their second language has been previously well established.

6.0 Specific Comments

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Executive Summary

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We fully endorse all of the sentiments expressed in the summary and we would suggest the following additions

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to the bullet points (highlighted in blue) to aid understanding and consistency:

- *That respect for the languages spoken/used in Scotland will be promoted*
- *That the Scots language and BSL will be treated with respect and pride.*

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Introduction

We welcome the acknowledgement of BSL in this section and expect it would be protected and celebrated in the same way as Gaelic and Scots.

Paragraph 3

We would prefer to read:

Scotland has a particular responsibility as a custodian of Gaelic, Scots and BSL. These languages

Paragraph 4

We wonder why BSL is described as a 'real' language when none of the other languages mentioned are described in a similar way.

We would prefer:

BSL is a full and living language and is an important element of our rich cultural heritage.

Enriching education

We believe it is crucial that the language initiatives promoted in Scotland specifically mention BSL as one of Scotland's indigenous languages.

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English

Paragraph 1

We believe it is important that BSL users are included in the group for whom English is not their first language. The paragraph as it stands could be misunderstood. It could read as follows:

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The importance of supporting.....for those for whom English is not their first language, including those whose first language is BSL, or for those.....

This section on English would benefit from an additional paragraph mentioning that a large number of deaf people who require access to services in English. We suggest:

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We also need to recognise there are thousands of people in Scotland who speak and understand English but are unable to use their native language to participate fully in society and who are unable to access service provision because these are based on the ability to hear. To make ensure this large group is able to participate fully in society, face to face communication has to be converted into the written form, for example by a speech to text recorder or electronic notetaker.

English as an Additional Language

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We believe this section should include reference to deaf children and adults who acquire English as a second language.

Paragraph 1

We would want to emphasise the need to include deaf children in the category of those acquiring English as a second language. This presupposes that the necessary support and expertise is in place for them to develop their first language but this is not always the case and the new framework needs to address this gap urgently.

Paragraph 2

It is important to recognise that many Deaf adults wish to improve their use of written English and support for them to do this has to be improved. To date provision has been ad hoc and uncoordinated.

British Sign Language

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We would refer to our earlier point and ask for the description 'real' be removed.

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We would wish to make the same point about BSL as was made about Scots speakers in paragraph 2 under the heading Scots. We would ask for a similar comment to be added to the end of the first paragraph under British Sign Language. It could read:

It is important for the confidence of those who use BSL that we recognise and respect it as a distinct language.

Paragraph 7 under BSL

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We note a typing error on the penultimate line perhaps it could read:

To help us to do this we have appointed a Project Manager to work with our BSL and Linguistic Access Working Group to develop a detailed plan for improving linguistic access for Deaf, deafblind and hard of hearing people in Scotland. The Project Manager will also be developing a work programme with our BSL And Linguistic Access Working Group to address priorities which have already been identified.

Other Minority/Community languages

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We need to recognise that amongst existing minority ethnic communities and amongst new migrants and refugees there will be those who are also deaf and some may use the indigenous language of their birth country. Extra measures may have to be taken to ensure they can access public services and gain information. These could include:

- the translation of written English into their first language
- the provision of spoken language interpreters who are trained in deaf awareness
- the provision of two language interpreters (e.g. one for the spoken language of the individual/family and one for sign language)
- support to convert from their indigenous sign language to BSL

Language Learning

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We fully endorse all the initiatives mentioned in this section to

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promote language learning in Scotland and especially in schools. We would want to ensure that the initiatives and funding streams mentioned fully include BSL and we feel it is critical that BSL is included as a language subject in Scotland's schools. It is important to note that for many deaf children BSL is not only a language subject but it is the means by which all of their education is delivered.

Language Plans

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Public bodies and organisations may need assistance to identify the extent of BSL usage in the areas they cover. They should have consulted with deaf people when responding to the Disability Equality Duty in 2006 and they may need to consult with these groups again. To ensure they reach the more isolated individuals and groups (for example, people who are both deaf and blind) they would probably need to enlist the advice of specialist voluntary organisations. The BSL&LAWG has many such organisations amongst its membership and would be happy to offer advice.

The Principles

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As mentioned earlier we would wish the same promotion and protection of BSL as for Gaelic and Scots. There is not the same commitment to BSL as for Gaelic as there is no Act (although many in our field think there should be) so we would suggest the inclusion of BSL on the same basis as Scots.

The Scots language and British Sign Language will be treated with respect and pride.

It is important for Scottish public bodies to ensure that Scots and BSL are recognised as a valid means of communication and cultural expression. The use of Scots and BSL should be encouraged in the school curriculum and its valuable role in promoting self-confidence and pride amongst those who speak/use it. The Executive will continue to support policies which encourage the promotion of Scots and BSL culture and of Scots

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language / BSL and literature in schools where appropriate. Public bodies will also be encouraged to explore opportunities to promote and develop the Scots language and BSL.

There will be fair and equal linguistic access to information and services. 15

We would insert after the second sentence:

This includes access to public bodies through written English and transcribed English, for example using an electronic note taker for interviews.

Language learning and acquisition will be promoted. 16

We would wish to see added:

In support of this the Scottish Executive expects all Scottish schools to offer modern language teaching (including for BSL) between the years P6 to S4, providing a range of languages and encouraging uptake at National Qualification level.

Respect for the languages spoken/used in Scotland will be promoted.

We fully endorse this statement and feel that whilst BSL is becoming more visible it remains under recognised and consequently, so too are the needs of the BSL community.

Ends