

FEATURE

A BSL Bill today, as an Act for a **better** tomorrow?



Just like French, German or now Gaelic – the BSL (Scotland) Bill could mean all children are given the chance to learn and embrace a new language. Learning BSL would mean greater choice in career pathways, and give students the chance to gain qualifications in BSL, say experts. **Andrew Don**, talks to the Bill's sponsor, MSP Mark Griffin and others, about what this Bill might mean for all children

The government will have an obligation to promote BSL and put it on an equal footing with Gaelic if, as widely expected, the Bill becomes law.

Public bodies such as national accreditation and awarding body SQA, Education Scotland, all 32 local authorities, colleges and universities will have to make action plans to show how they are supporting BSL.

The Bill's sponsor, shadow minister for learning, science and Scotland's languages Mark Griffin, told *British Deaf News* that by increasing awareness of BSL throughout Scottish society, his hope was that children





would take an interest in the language and look to learn it at school or college.

He pointed to examples of good practice at Dingwall Academy in Ross-shire, Windsor Park School in Falkirk and the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland.

"The problem is, there is no consistency of such good practice in the

public or private sector," Griffin said.

The proposed legislation is merely an enabler.

"I am under no illusion that this Bill will not solve all of the problems overnight," Griffin admitted.

Any increase in the number of teachers able to communicate using

BSL would be a huge advantage. It would also be a positive step for BSL courses to be available for frontline staff across the public sector, he said.

"I would expect listed authorities to look very closely at the issue of educating staff in BSL within their action plans."

Rachel O'Neill, lecturer in deaf education at the University of Edinburgh's School of Education, said the way the Bill could benefit hearing and d/Deaf children was that there was the possibility of BSL being offered as a modern language in primary and secondary school.

Scotland would need a course in a university to qualify primary and secondary teachers as modern language teachers.

She hoped the Gaelic Language Act and the recently introduced MA in Gaelic (Primary Education) at her own university could be a good model.

"Not all these teachers will be Deaf. They would be fluent BSL users who are qualified to teach

school children.

The Bill may be likely to lead the government to revise the guidance for

“BSL will be a considerable advantage for all children. They would be able to learn a community language which is useful. They could use it in their everyday life, study it at university and hopefully later, then use it at work.”

teachers of deaf children. This means that Level 3 BSL would be needed by teachers working with D/deaf children who sign or who might want to learn to sign.

She also expected the Bill to lead to SQA developing school qualifications in BSL.

Scotland has a policy for primary schools called 1 + 2 Languages which asks schools to introduce primary children to two languages other than their mother tongue.

O'Neill saw this as an ideal opportunity for BSL to be introduced as a taster. "Perhaps a peripatetic BSL teacher might be based in a high school and go around the primary schools to teach BSL to the cluster of primary schools," she said.





Dan Summers, senior policy adviser at Signature, a leading awarding body for qualifications in deaf and deaf-blind communication techniques, said: "Ultimately we think it would be great if all children learnt BSL so deaf BSL users and hearing people are able to communicate.

"As well as helping deaf BSL users be involved in all aspects of society, it would mean hearing people benefiting from the perspective of deaf BSL users.

"But we will be pleased if BSL is introduced as an optional subject, and we are working on that at the moment. We are developing a GCSE that will be piloted in schools in England and perhaps Wales and Northern Ireland.

"While Scotland doesn't use GCSEs, it will be a firm basis for developing other qualifications," Summers said.

The National Deaf Children's Society Scotland's director Heather Gray said currently, a tiny number of children had the opportunity to study BSL at school and none had the opportunity to develop their BSL skills through secondary school because of lack of qualifying routes in senior years through SQA.

"We believe the Bill has the ability to provide the necessary framework to

improve these opportunities to learn BSL at schools and the routes through which pupils can gain qualifications in BSL," she said.

Janis McDonald, chief executive, of the Scottish Council on Deafness said: "Ultimately the Bill should benefit schools education by providing greater awareness, a new open and inclusive culture around BSL and provide wider opportunities to learn, particularly where there is a clear need for communication to be supported."

However, while she would like to see all children learning "at least some BSL", she does not think it would be right to make it compulsory yet.

"I think it is useful to ensure we have the correct building blocks in place and the correct motivations for positive learning."

McDonald believes BSL should be



studied much more widely than in schools and further education. "In my dream world, everyone would learn enough to hold a decent conversation through their education, work, and so on. There should be the opportunity to top up if required. Not everyone comes into regular contact with BSL users but we should be able to communicate on a social level at least."

Mark Griffin (pictured below) has admitted to other MPs he is not waving a magic wand.

"The stepping stone starts with the government, as the Bill gives it a platform to set out its policy priorities.

"At the end of the day, it will be up to the government to choose what resources to put into its policy priorities," he told the Scottish Parliament's education and culture committee just before Christmas.

NDCS Scotland agreed: "It is important that the Scottish government creates momentum and energy around developing local and national plans and that these reflect and build upon key policy priorities such as closing the education attainment gap for all learners, and promoting inclusive and child-centred educational experiences," Gray added. ■