

Overview Report

A questionnaire compiled by Mark McMillan, BSL Officer from Deaf Action, was sent out to thirty-four Further Education and Higher Education institutions in Scotland in June 2020.

The purpose of the questionnaire was to gauge how each institution has progressed with their individual BSL Plan's implementation, and highlight the successes, challenges, and key issues that they have encountered.

Thirty-one FE/HE institutions responded in total. Three institutions did not meet the deadline, so their contributions are not included in this report.

Based on evaluation of the questionnaire's findings from thirty-one FE/HE institutions, this overview report purposes to provide a set of recommendations for all FE/HE institutions to consider in their ongoing implementation of their individual BSL Plans.

Recommendations

Provision of Deaf and BSL Awareness Training

- Twenty-eight institutions reported that they have progressed well towards provision of Deaf and BSL Awareness training to staff, which all institutions should strive to provide.
- Different approaches are being utilised for delivery, with some institutions choosing to deliver training remotely, with others opting to deliver through face to face means. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, institutions should seriously consider remote learning for future delivery of classes.
- Ideally all staff on campus should be offered Deaf and BSL Awareness training, but if targeted delivery is used, priority should be placed on front-line staff who are likely to engage with BSL students, which includes lecturers, reception staff, canteen staff and facilities staff.
- Hearing students that attend same classes as BSL users should be given opportunity to access training as it will help them to feel more confident around BSL users and work more effectively along BSL interpreters.

Provision of BSL Training

- Twenty institutions reported that they have progressed well in their provision of BSL training for staff and students – which should be a key objective in all FE/HE BSL Plans.
- There is a wide variation on how institutions are delivering the training – with some only providing at a Basic BSL level, while others provide up to Level 3. Therefore, it is important to make sure a clear pathway is established for moving up BSL levels, so people starting out at Basic BSL have an opportunity to move up to Level 1, Level 2, Level 3 and further.
- Due to the Covid-19 pandemic's restrictions making BSL training difficult to deliver in person, remote learning is strongly advised until those restrictions are lifted in future.
- To support students and staff in learning BSL – FE/HE institutions should consider setting up an informal group to give them an opportunity to practice their BSL with each other – this may be best done remotely if access to typical social settings such as cafes remain restricted.

Provision of BSL Interpreting

- Thirteen institutions reported that they have improved BSL interpreting provision for their BSL students, with seven of them saying that Graduation Days are provided with BSL interpretation, whilst nine of them said the same for Open Days.
- All institutions should provide BSL interpreting for all Graduation Days and Open Days. It should be noted that BSL interpreting provision is not just for BSL students, but also for other people that attend those events such as family and friends that may be BSL users.

- BSL students attending Freshers' Week and social events should be provided with BSL interpreting if they wish so they can have the same opportunities as hearing peers to network and make new connections.
- There should be clear communication across the institution in all promotional and marketing materials that BSL interpreting can be provided.

Promotion of ContactSCOTLAND BSL

- Sixteen institutions reported that they have promoted this service.
- All institutions' BSL Plans should make this a priority as the Scottish Government funded service is an online BSL-interpreting video relay service (VRS) which enables BSL users to access university and college services that typically take place through telephone.
- The service should be promoted through staff email signatures and on the institution's website particularly on the 'Contact Us' webpage.
- Free training should be arranged with the contactSCOTLAND BSL team to train frontline staff to become better informed on how to use the service correctly.
- Internal communication channels should be used to promote contactSCOTLAND BSL to all staff. Do not assume that the service only needs to be promoted to BSL users.

Making the Application Process BSL Accessible

- Sixteen institutions said they made progress in making the application process more BSL accessible for new BSL students.
- Communication support should be provided to BSL students from pre-entry stage up to interviews – and there should be a system in place which flags this up early on when BSL users start the application process.
- BSL students should be fully supported with applying for funding, such as SAAS and DSA. Some of them may need support with filling out forms – in which Disability & Student Services should be able to provide support with.
- SAAS have a range of BSL videos which details what SAAS funding is and how to apply – institutions can promote those resources to BSL users.
<https://www.saas.gov.uk/bsl-funding-guides>

Making the Institution's Website BSL Accessible

- Fourteen institutions reported positive progress towards making their website more BSL accessible, with some opting to create BSL dedicated webpages, with others choosing to include BSL videos on mainstream webpages.
- This is an area which holds a lot of importance to BSL users, as some of them can find it difficult to access English text content on websites, which results them in missing out on accessing important information.
- BSL videos should be provided on important sections of the website such as Covid-19 updates, Disability Services, EDI Services and information about student events.
- BSL videos should be presented by Deaf BSL users whenever possible, rather than BSL interpreters or Communication Support Workers – as this

empowers BSL users and promotes inclusivity. Deaf organisations can be contacted to ask for support in identifying suitable and qualified Deaf BSL Presenters.

- Institutions should not automatically assume that their own BSL students can present BSL videos as it requires specific skills such as bilingualism in both English and BSL which not all BSL users may possess.

Making Student Association Activities BSL Accessible

- Eleven institutions fed back that they have forwarded actions in making their Student Association activities more BSL accessible.
- BSL interpreting should be provided on request at all Student Association activities and events – and all promotional and marketing materials should make this clear.
- Deaf & BSL awareness training should be provided to Student Association members, as well BSL training if possible.
- Election manifestos should be produced in BSL videos so BSL users can fully access them.

Provision of Subtitles on the Institution's Website

- Seven institutions said that they have made good progress towards providing subtitles on their website videos.
- It is important to acknowledge that videos with subtitles may still provide problematic for some BSL users with poor English literacy skills to access – so it is essential that the videos are translated in BSL too. Subtitles on their own do not make a video BSL accessible.

Collecting Data on BSL Users

- Eleven institutions said they have made progress on collecting and capturing data on BSL users.
- It is important that BSL users are identified from the application stage so they can be approached and signposted to the right support early on.
- Application forms should clearly ask what the student's preferred language is, and present BSL as an option. If BSL is selected, then the data should be sent to relevant services to follow up on.
- BSL students are more likely to disclose that they are Deaf and use BSL if appropriate language is used on the forms such as 'deaf' and 'hard of hearing' – negative terms such as 'hearing impairment', and 'deaf mute' should be avoided.

BSL Working Group

- Four institutions reported that they succeeded in their objectives of setting up BSL Working Groups to help progress their BSL Plan actions.
- All institutions should seriously consider setting up a BSL Working Group as it is an effective tool for enabling cross-working across different teams to progress the BSL Plan and can help to gain buy-in and support from senior level management.

- BSL Working Groups should meet regularly every six to eight weeks to review BSL Plan progress regularly – and during the Covid19 pandemic, meetings can be carried out remotely.
- An effective BSL Working Group should have a good mix of members from different services across the institution, especially from the Disability & EDI services, and include both staff and students, particularly those that use BSL. External BSL users should be encouraged to join too.
- A BSL Working Group can help to reinforce across the institution that the BSL Plan is a shared responsibility, and it needs input from a range of services and teams to make it a success, instead of it being assumed that the BSL Lead Officer is responsible for everything.
- Terms of Reference should be created for the BSL Working Group, which can help to give them a clear purpose and structure – and they should report to an appropriate team, such as the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committees for example.

Promotion of Access to Work

- Five institutions mentioned that they have made progress in supporting BSL students to become better informed about the Access to Work scheme.
- Access to Work's BSL resources at <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLC0aQWFFHARzJYt8cED-WX1g5jD0mApTv> can be shared to BSL students.

Recruitment

- Three institutions reported progress being made relating to recruitment. A particularly positive action has seen an institution recruit a BSL Development Officer to help progress their BSL Plan, who is a Deaf BSL user.
- Another institution reported that their number of employed Deaf staff has increased to four Deaf BSL lecturers, which reflects very well on their own BSL Plan.
- A different institution released a recent job advert in BSL, which is a key step towards increasing the number of BSL staff.

Teaching Materials in BSL

- All institutions should ensure that audio-visual materials used in teaching are made BSL accessible. Consideration should be especially placed on online video content – as BSL students may not have BSL interpreting access at home to translate the videos.
- Procedures should be put in place to ensure that BSL interpreters are always provided with support materials beforehand – and be given opportunity to discuss areas of concern that may present with the content, for example how to sign technical language terms.

- As blended learning has become the new norm, all institutions should make sure that the platforms they use are BSL accessible, and that it works well with BSL interpreters in particular. Many BSL students have commented that they prefer Zoom over other video conferencing services due to the video feeds being smoother and clearer in watching their BSL interpreters – and vice versa.

BSL Accessibility with Mental Health Services

- All institutions should ensure that their student mental health services such as counselling are provided with BSL interpreting on request – and make sure this provision is promoted widely. It is important to note that some BSL students may prefer to use a BSL interpreter that isn't directly involved in their education – so they can retain anonymity and feel comfortable with sharing personal and sensitive information.

Health & Safety

- Although not directly related to BSL, it is important to make sure flashing lights and accessible fire alarm systems are installed in University and college premises, especially in halls of residence and toilets.
- Some institutions choose to provide Deaf BSL users with pagers to alert them of fire alarms.

Promoting the BSL Plan

- Twenty-two institutions promoted their BSL plan through their website – with most of them delivering through their Disability Services and Equality, Diversity & Inclusion webpages, with some also promoting through social media.
- Feedback from the institutions show that engagement with BSL students on their BSL plans has been very low – with many of them stating a lack of enrolled BSL students being a key factor.
- Institutions should consider using a number of channels to promote their BSL Plans instead of just using their website. This could include promoting on staff and student intranets, social media feeds, newsletters, ezines, posters around the campus, through their Student Association, and sharing regular BSL Working Group updates.

Networking with BSL Lead Officers

- It was fed back from a few institutions that they would like to have opportunity to link up with other BSL Lead Officers to provide and receive support, and share examples of good practice, challenges and learning points. To do this, all BSL Lead Officers can join the HEI/FEI BSL Plan Peer Network, which has been set up by a BSL Lead Officer. It can be accessed through Microsoft Teams. Fourteen BSL Lead Officers have joined up so far. A link to join will be emailed to all BSL Lead Officers from the BSL Officer.