Further and Higher Education Institutions BSL Plans Review & Recommendations (October 2021)

Period covered: 01/07/2017 to 01/07/2021

A report under this section is to include, by reference to relevant plans:

An account of measures taken and outcomes attained

- Update covering the period between 31/07/2020 to 31/07/2021
- A series of recommendations

A) An account of measures taken and outcomes attained

This report follows on from the interim report which was released in September 2020 which includes findings and recommendations prior to August 2020.

A second questionnaire compiled by Mark McMillan, BSL Officer from Deaf Action, was distributed to thirty-five Further Education and Higher Education institutions in Scotland in April 2021.

The purpose of the questionnaire was to gauge how each institution has progressed with their individual BSL Plan's implementation since August 2020, and highlight the successes, challenges, and key issues that they have encountered.

Based on evaluation of the second questionnaire's findings from FE/HE institutions, this overview report provides a set of new and updated recommendations for all FE/HE institutions to consider in moving their individual BSL Plans further forward.

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

Recommendations

<u>Provision of Deaf and BSL Awareness Training</u>

- 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.

Since August 2020

- Eleven institutions reported that their staff have continued to access Deaf and BSL Awareness training, with the majority being provided through online platforms due to Covid-19 restrictions preventing this being delivered in person.
- Seven institutions disclosed that they were unable to provide Deaf and BSL Awareness training due to their Covid-19 response taking priority.
- A further three institutions saying that they felt the training could not be delivered sufficiently through online platforms, so they wanted to wait until in-person classes are allowed to return.
- Eight institutions said they will commit to reintroducing Deaf and BSL awareness training in the new academic year.
- Understandably, many institutions have found it difficult to progress with their Deaf and BSL Awareness training due to the impact of Covid-19, but now as restrictions are starting to ease, provision should be made a high priority for the new academic year.
- Online platforms are continuing to improve in terms of accessibility, so it is highly recommended that this route should be used if face to face provision continues to be restricted.

<u>Provision of BSL Training</u>

- 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 (introductory) BSL level, with others providing 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 opportunity to move up to Level 1, 2, 3 and upwards.
- Due to the Covid-19 pandemic's restrictions making BSL training difficult to deliver in person, delivery through remote learning is strongly recommended until 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 skills with each other – it may be best to do this remotely if access to usual social settings such as cafes remain restricted.

Since August 2020

- Five institutions reported that their staff have continued to attend BSL classes, delivered through online platforms due to Covid-19 restrictions.
- Two institutions disclosed that they will be setting up a new BSL course for staff to enroll in the new academic year.
- Front-line staff should be specifically targeted for learning BSL, especially those that work in services with high levels of student engagement, such as student services, disability services, facilities, accommodation and catering.

<u>Provision of BSL Interpreting at Events</u>

- Thirteen institutions reported that they have improved BSL interpreting provision for their BSL students regarding to events, 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, it is also for other people that attend those events such as family and friends that may be BSL users themselves.
- BSL students attending Freshers' Week and social events should be provided with access to BSL interpreting if they want this so they can have the same opportunities as hearing peers to network and make new connections.
- There should be clear and consistent communication across the institution in all promotional and marketing materials that BSL interpreting can be provided for events.

Since August 2020

- Four more institutions said that they provide BSL interpreting at their Graduation Day and Open Day events.
- Some reported examples of good practice relating to interpreting for events include:
  - Three institutions said that they are currently looking at developing resources which details best practice, job descriptions and roles and responsibilities for BSL interpreters – as well how to arrange and book accredited BSL interpreters for events.
  - Due to many events having to be delivered online due to Covid-19, many institutions ensure that BSL interpreting is being provided online too.
  - Two institutions are considering establishing an in-house BSL interpreting service which will cover a wide range of events.
  - One institution reported that they have provided BSL interpreting for over twenty online events since August 2020, which is highly commendable.
  - One institution said they will develop an 'Accessible Events Policy' checklist for staff to use when arranging and booking BSL interpreting provision.

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 traditionally take place through telephone.
- The service should be promoted through use of staff email signatures and on the institution's website especially on the 'Contact Us' webpage.
- Free training should be arranged with the contactSCOTLAND BSL team to help train frontline staff to become better informed on how to use the service correctly and appropriately.
- Internal communication channels should be used to promote contactSCOTLAND BSL to all staff. It should not be assumed that the service only needs to be promoted to BSL users.

Since August 2020

- Ten more institutions promote contactSCOTLAND BSL using staff email signatures and on the 'Contact Us' section on their website.
- Eight institutions reported that they have undergone contactSCOTLAND BSL training. All training was provided online, due to Covid-19 restrictions.

- All institutions that have yet to take part in contactSCOTLAND BSL training are strongly advised to arrange for this to be provided in the new academic year. This can be arranged by emailing the service at info@contactscotland-bsl.org or calling at 0333 344 7712.
- Special consideration for training should be made for front-line staff who traditionally provide telephone services to students, such as student services, disability services, facilities and reception.

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 disclosure 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**.

Since August 2020

- Eight institutions reported that their data capture systems have been updated to indicate BSL under 'Languages' rather than 'Disability', which may help some BSL users to feel more comfortable in disclosing. This will also challenge existing assumptions and stereotypes in relation to BSL users as being perceived 'disabled'.
- A small number of institutions disappointingly still refer to Deaf people as having 'hearing impairments' in their reporting towards the questionnaire – this may be reflective of what terms are used in their data capture systems.

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 has a series of BSL videos which details what SAAS funding is and how to apply – institutions should promote those resources to BSL users, especially prospective BSL students - https://www.saas.gov.uk/bsl-funding-guides

Since August 2020

- Four more institutions confirmed that they promote provision of BSL interpreting support for the pre-application stage towards all prospective BSL students.
- One institution said that they will run a summer school service in the new academic year for Deaf BSL users and other deaf students, which will include providing support on how to write a UCAS statement, and access pre-entry relating information on university academic and social life.

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 and social 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.

Since August 2020

- Twelve institutions say they have progressed in making their website BSL accessible, but they are still in planning and pre-production stages.

- Five institutions reported that new BSL videos have been incorporated on their websites, with some opting to focus on presenting information about their disability services and equality, diversity and inclusion services.
- Four institutions stated that they have not been able to make much headway in making their website BSL accessible due to their Covid-19 response taking priority, but they intend to return focus in the new academic year.
- Two institutions say they have been unable to make progress due to being unable to meet the financial demands and pressures that come from BSL filming production.
- To fully meet prospective BSL students and BSL students' needs, it is imperative that institutions provide BSL videos on their website to cover a range of important sections on their website, and not only stop at covering the disability services and equality, diversity and inclusion services webpages.

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.

Since August 2020

- Seven institutions reported that they have continued to make progress in making their Student Association activities more BSL accessible. Examples of reported good practice from institutions include:
  - Translating all the college's 2021/23 Student Association election materials in BSL, which culminated in the election of a new Student President who is a Deaf BSL user.
  - Delivering Deaf and BSL Awareness training as part of the Student Association's induction programme.
  - Providing BSL interpreting for all Student Association activities, including Freshers Week.

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 non-bilingual BSL users to access – so it is essential that the videos are translated in BSL too. Subtitles on their own does not make a video BSL accessible.

Since August 2020

- A further institution reported that they now routinely caption all their videos that are released on their website.

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 can be a highly 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 are BSL users. External BSL users should be encouraged to join too, especially former BSL students.
- The existence of 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 the assumption that the BSL Lead Officer is responsible for everything.
- It is a good idea to create a Terms of Reference 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.

Since August 2020
- Six more institutions reported that they have gone on to successfully set up their own BSL Working Groups.
- Six further institutions said they have plans in place to do this in the new academic year.
- A small number of institutions said that their BSL Working Groups have been unable to meet due to the impact of Covid-19, which has consequently delayed progress of their own BSL Plans.

- It is strongly advised those BSL Working Groups meet using online platforms such as Zoom or Teams.

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 and Deaf BSL staff.

Since August 2020

- Four institutions reported back to say that they actively promote Access to Work's BSL resources through their website and disability services.
- Two institutions reflected that their BSL Plan had stated that providing Access to Work support was to be provided to students only, but they have now amended this to include Deaf BSL staff too, as they need to understand and use the Access to Work scheme to bring in communication support.
- One institution reported that they now advertise vacancies along with promotion of the Access to Work scheme.

Recruitment & BSL

- 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.

Since August 2020

- One institution has stated that they intend to make their vacancies accessible by using BSL videos, and information about their HR department will be made BSL accessible too.

<u>Teaching Materials in BSL</u>

- 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. 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.

Since August 2020

- Eight institutions reported positive developments in making their teaching materials more BSL accessible, in which its importance has been amplified due to the move to blended learning because of Covid-19. Examples of reported good practice from them include:
    - Ensuring that both BSL interpreting and notetaking support are provided for all BSL students to fully access online learning.
    - Carrying out regular meetings with BSL students to assess and review that their BSL needs are being met with online learning.
    - Providing flexibility by supplying alternative online learning platforms for BSL students if the institution's default platform turns out to be inaccessible – which is particularly vital when video feeds present in substandard quality which can make BSL interpreting very difficult or impossible to watch.
    - Ensuring that BSL students and BSL interpreters have capacity to pin each other on online platforms.
    - Looking at timetabling to make sure that BSL interpreting can be provided on campus when required, and that BSL interpreters and notetakers are counted in when decisions are made on room capacity, social distancing and adherence to Covid-19 rules.
    - Carrying out Equality Impact Assessments on the impact of blended learning and remote working for BSL students and Deaf BSL staff, which was completed in conjunction with staff and student equality networks.

<u>Captioning in Teaching Materials</u>

Since August 2020

- Eight institutions highlighted that providing access to captioning in teaching materials has proved to be particularly vital for BSL students since the shift to remote learning due to Covid-19.
- Although captioning does not meet BSL needs on its own, many bilingual BSL students value being able to access both BSL interpreting and captioning in their online learning experiences. Examples of reported good practice from the institutions include:
    o Providing captioning for both live and recorded classes.
    o Holding regular reviews to assess the accuracy of captions in teaching materials as experiences can be variable for BSL students, especially if auto-captioning features are used which can be notorious for their poor accuracy.
    o Developing support and guidance information for teaching and support staff in relation to the Digital Accessibility Regulations, which states that all 'time-based media' (video and audio) must either provide a transcript or captioning or both.

<u>BSL Accessibility with Mental Health Services</u>

- 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.

Since August 2020

- Four institutions reported that their mental health services have had to be delivered online due to Covid-19 restrictions. However, despite this change, their BSL students have still been able to access their mental health services by using online BSL interpreting.
- One institution reported that they struggled to source a BSL-using counsellor on request of one of their BSL students, who did not want to use a BSL interpreter or Communication Support Worker to facilitate communication.
- Deaf Action run a fully BSL accessible counselling service which students can be signposted to, which includes receiving support from a Deaf BSL counsellor. See https://www.deafaction.org/services/bsl-health-wellbeing-support
- All institutions should review whether their employment counselling services are accessible for BSL staff.

<u>Making Key Communications BSL Accessible</u>

Since August 2020

- One institution reported that they arrange for key emails to be translated in form of BSL videos which are then released at the same time as the written versions. A deaf translator was employed to undertake this work.
- All institutions should consider providing this to their BSL students and Deaf BSL staff as it is an example of excellent inclusive practice which gives BSL equal respect to the English language.

<u>Health & Safety</u>

- Although not directly relating to BSL, it is important to make sure flashing lights and accessible fire alarm systems are installed in the institution's premises, especially in halls of residence and toilets.
- Some institutions choose to provide Deaf BSL users with pagers to alert them in case of fire alarms including drills.

Since August 2020

- Two institutions reported that they regularly share BSL accessible Covid-19 updates on their websites, which are also circulated to staff and students via email.
- All institutions should take a similar approach as it is important that BSL students are provided equal access to essential information about Covid-19. BSL videos can be signposted and shared from:
  - <u>NHS Inform</u>
  - <u>British Deaf Association's COVID-19 page</u>

<u>Promoting the BSL Plan</u>

- Twenty-two institutions promoted their BSL plan through their website – with most of them advertising 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 to engage with being a key factor.
- Institutions should consider using a mix of channels to promote their BSL Plans instead of just relying on their website.

- This could include promoting through staff and student intranets, social media feeds, newsletters, ezines, posters around the campus, through their Student Association, and sharing regular BSL Working Group updates.

Since August 2020

- Seventeen institutions reported that they have continued to promote their BSL Plan to students and staff.
- Four institutions said that the Covid-19 pandemic has put their BSL Plan promotional activities on hold.
- Seven institutions took opportunity to promote their BSL plan during the BSL Awareness and Deaf Awareness weeks.
- Four institutions fed back that the holding of one-to-one meetings with BSL students has been a very effective way of gathering feedback. Those meetings were done online due to Covid-19 restrictions preventing meetings from being held on campus.
- One institution commented that they tried to set up a Microsoft Teams network for BSL students to give feedback, but engagement was very low. A likely factor behind this is due to the route not being BSL accessible, which may have resulted in non-bilingual BSL users facing barriers.
- Institutions that use a varied range of platforms in promoting their BSL Plan tend to enjoy more success in receiving feedback then those who solely rely on advertising through their website.
- Institutions should consider reported examples of good practice:
  - Regular one-to-one meetings were held with BSL students on Zoom, which invited them to share their thoughts on the BSL Plan.
  - The BSL Plan was promoted to the Student Association, including new Student Association officers after their appointments.
  - Customised workshops taking place on Zoom were delivered to staff groups, which helped to make aware of their responsibilities under the BSL (Scotland) Act, and what their BSL Plan involves.
  - Posts promoting the BSL Plan were shared on the staff intranet, an equality, diversity and inclusion blog, and Yammer.
  - A BSL Lead Officer delivered an online presentation to staff during Deaf Awareness week highlighting their BSL Plan, and what was being done institutionally to ensure that the plan's objectives are met by 2024. After the presentation, staff members were invited to join the BSL Working Group.
  - An online questionnaire was emailed out to all BSL students – which presented the questions in BSL in form of BSL videos.
  - The BSL Plan was promoted on the new student portal, along with subsequent updates or revisions.
  - Students and prospective students were able to access updates on the BSL Plan through social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, in which positive feedback from a few prospective BSL students was received.

- o Constructive feedback was received from student members of the BSL Act Working Group, who are themselves BSL users.
- o Offering food or vouchers for attendance at events and meetings that seek feedback from BSL students and BSL using staff has proven to be a good incentive.

Engaging with BSL Students on their Learning Requirements

Since August 2020

- All institutions should seek to receive regular feedback from BSL students about their support that they get to meet their BSL needs. Some important areas to seek feedback include discussing their learning and teaching experiences, provision of BSL interpreting, accessibility of remote learning, and how they partake in student and social events.
- Two institutions said they hold focus groups annually to receive feedback from BSL students on all aspects of their learning and teaching.
- One institution reported that all their BSL students attend regular review meetings with their tutors, which looks at all aspects of their BSL needs.
- For some institutions, they have found it more difficult to engage with BSL students due to some of them suffering from 'online fatigue', which is caused by using online platforms more than usual. This can leave them reluctant to attend yet more online meetings if they are not directly related to their study. If this transpires, it may be best to wait until campus-based meetings can offered again as they may be keener to re-engage by then.

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 is accessed through Microsoft Teams.
- Fourteen BSL Lead Officers have joined up so far. An invite to join will be emailed to all remaining BSL Lead Officers from the BSL Officer.

Since August 2020

- An invite was emailed to all remaining BSL Lead Officers advising them to join the HEI/FEI BSL Plan Peer Network.
- Since then, the number of members in the network has gone up to twenty-two BSL Lead Officers, with an increase of eight.
- Engagement between BSL Lead Officers however has remained quite low which may be due to some institutions not using Microsoft Teams often.
- Online meetings between BSL Lead Officers may be a more effective way to communicate and collaborate.
- It is advised that a BSL Lead Officer takes initiative to organise regular meetings on Teams/Zoom every two or three months in which all BSL Lead Officers are invited to.