

# MANIFESTO FOR BRITISH SIGN LANGUAGE



We want the next Government to transform the way British Sign Language (BSL) is accessed in the UK by deaf children, their families and deaf adults.

Deaf children in the United Kingdom have a human right to linguistic and cultural enrichment through the acquisition of BSL (and Irish Sign Language in Northern Ireland). BSL is a rich and dynamic language that is an integral part of our cultural identity.

Sign languages are full languages with their own communities, histories and cultures. The World Federation of the Deaf – with a membership of 136 national Deaf associations – emphasises the importance of fostering a positive linguistic and cultural environment so deaf children can grow up with a profound sense of identity and pride in their Deaf heritages.

## Language acquisition in the first years of life is essential

The evidence shows that children with inadequate access to any form of language experience language deprivation. This has serious life-long consequences for deaf children's language, emotional and cognitive development and their wellbeing.

Currently there is no national programme of early years BSL provision for deaf children in the UK. Experts agree the way forward is clear.

## 1 'Nothing about us without us'? Talk to the UK's only national representative association of BSL and the Deaf community.

With the support of all political parties, the British Sign Language Act passed into law in 2022. Deaf people are not meaningfully consulted or involved in the implementation of the Act. From audiology to health, from education to local authorities, services for Deaf BSL signers are often designed and delivered by non-signing hearing people, resulting in provision that doesn't match our needs.

Deaf people are the experts and must lead on all BSL matters. We should lead the design, development, delivery and evaluation of services. But few get the opportunity to develop the skills that would enable us to take on such roles.

The next UK Government must:

- Commit to the principle of all BSL-related services and policies being led by Deaf BSL signers. This can be a cost neutral way to transform BSL services and Deaf communities across the UK
- Commit to working with Deaf-led representative organisations to create a 10-year plan to upskill Deaf signers into taking on senior leadership, delivery, and evaluation roles in all BSL-related matters
- Undertake an economic assessment of public sector spending on BSL in collaboration with Deaf-led organisations to support more effective commissioning and delivery by Deaf BSL signers
- Commit to a 5-year review of the BSL Act 2022, including transforming the BSL Advisory Board into a statutory body

## 2 Free and immediate BSL support for deaf babies and their families

Even when deaf babies are equal, healthy, and whole they are treated as broken, defective, and in need of repair. Our parents are being unnecessarily traumatised by this experience, with life-long consequences for us, our relationships with parents, our families and our communities.

Parents are told to 'choose' between speech and signing, a binary choice that removes richness, inclusivity and diversity from our lives. Immediate support with learning BSL is a proven clear marker of later success in life academically, personally and socially, and supports improved mental health and reduces risk of self-harm. Yet our families have to pay to learn their child's natural language, our natural language.

The next Government must:

- Reframe the diagnosis pathway to meet current NHS standards of inclusivity and non-discrimination, which includes working with Deaf professionals to provide appropriate non-traumatising day-of-diagnosis support
- Provide Deaf Language Specialists to ensure deaf babies have a strong platform for spoken and signed language acquisition
- Ensure free BSL classes are available to family members of all deaf children; parents are mentored by Deaf professionals to ease the path into community life; and national funding so that all families automatically receive the same support
- Assess and remove barriers that prevent Deaf people entering the Early Years workforce, that prevent us from contributing our time and skills to raising the next generation
- Families would have to pay £4,962,000 a year to get this support, when it should be free

# 3

## Full access to bilingual education in both fluent English and fluent BSL

All deaf children should develop their full potential in all language modalities. This includes signing, speaking, reading and writing. But this is not happening.

To progress well at school, all deaf children should have access to bilingual and bimodal education, appropriately delivered in fluent BSL and fluent English. For many, this will be the first time in their lives they fully understand the teacher and the classroom dialogue.

Most Teachers of the Deaf cannot sign fluently. We do not understand our teachers. We say Deaf children should be allowed to learn directly from their teachers, not via a less-qualified support worker.

The next Government must:

- Implement UNCPRD Art 24 to facilitate in education ‘the learning of sign language and the promotion of the linguistic identity of the deaf community’
- Develop and fund pathways for all Teachers of the Deaf to become fluent signers
- Support the expansion of BSL-medium schools and make them freely available without requiring medical intervention
- Support direct teaching in BSL, not indirect teaching via interpreters and CSWs, for signing students of all ages

# 4

## BSL GCSE to be taught by Deaf BSL signers

Government is investing in a BSL GCSE for all children, both deaf and hearing. That’s good news. It is a dynamic indigenous language that is a core part of Deaf people’s cultural identities and enriches the UK’s linguistic heritage.

But who will teach it? Deaf people face systemic barriers to becoming schoolteachers. Very few hearing schoolteachers are fluent in BSL, and none of them has lived a Deaf life.

This should be a golden opportunity for Deaf people to enter the workforce, to have our language skills appreciated and valued. It’s time to put the principles behind the BSL Act (2022) into practice and promote BSL.

The next Government must:

- Engage with the BDA and members of the BSL GCSE coalition to implement a planned, incremental roll-out of the GCSE, connecting schools and teachers in an efficiently planned programme over a minimum of 10 years
- Invest in developing a sustainable Deaf-led BSL teaching workforce - through working with Deaf-led bodies including the Association of BSL Teachers and Assessors - to ensure frameworks and pathways into BSL GCSE teaching are clear and well-funded



**Founded in 1890 by Deaf people, the British Deaf Association (BDA) is the UK’s only national representative organisation for British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language.**

We are recognised as the UK’s representative by the World Federation of the Deaf, a United Nations consultative organisation; and by the European Union of the Deaf, a member of the Council of Europe.

As a Deaf-led membership charity, led and represented by Deaf people for Deaf people, we campaign and advocate for equal rights to fully participate and contribute to society as equal and valued citizens. BSL and ISL are the first or preferred language of approximately 151,000 people in the UK.

- The United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities says the UK Government must actively involve the BDA in the development and implementation of legislation, policies, and other decision-making processes related to BSL.
- The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples says the UK Government must support Deaf BSL-led organisations to take on shared responsibilities for the allocation of BSL-related resources and policy-making in areas like Education and Healthcare.



The UK’s only national member-led Deaf association. Our Board, Chair, and CEO are all Deaf



Consultative member of the United Nations, represents Deaf people across the world, with 136 national member associations, all Deaf-led. Board, Chair, and CEO are all Deaf



Member of the Council of Europe, represents Deaf people across Europe, with 31 national Deaf associations, all Deaf-led