

Dear Lynne Neagle MS, Cabinet Secretary for Education and Jane Hutt MS, Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice,

We are writing to you to express our dismay, despair and disappointment at the devastating news that development of the Made for Wales British Sign Language (BSL) GCSE has been suspended due to "practical challenges".

There has long been strong support for developing a made-for-Wales BSL GCSE – and, until yesterday's announcement was published, we were absolutely delighted that BSL users in Wales would have the opportunity to achieve a GCSE in their own, legally recognised language, just as they can with English and Welsh. In addition to eradicating the inequality of opportunity, the development of the GCSE is a real chance to celebrate deaf culture and history in classrooms and create a more inclusive education system.

Indeed, Qualifications Wales has previously acknowledged a wide range of reasons why a made-for-Wales BSL GCSE is needed, including;

- Raising the profile of BSL in Wales to enable a more inclusive society.
- Giving more young people the opportunity to learn BSL. BSL has been visible on prime-time television programmes which has raised its profile generally and the visibility of positive role models could lead to more people wishing to learn BSL.
- Giving schools time to build capacity to deliver BSL at the higher levels of the progression steps.
- Helping to build a critical mass of BSL users and those who can understand BSL in the workforce of the future.

On 1 October, only a few days ago, the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice said: "I think it is really important that we look at what we are doing in Wales. You know that Welsh Government is making provisions to promote and facilitate the use of BSL and its tactile forms in Wales, and we do think that a more collaborative, inclusive approach will be effective if we can have a positive impact on the BSL signing community of Wales." Yet, less than 24 hours later, the announcement suspending development of the GCSE has delivered the exact opposite.

To be clear, we consider this decision to be a step backwards for equality, inclusivity, and for the BSL community of Wales.

The promises to develop a BSL GCSE, like the campaign calling for its establishment, span years. You will be aware that in October 2018 the then Petitions Committee called for the creation of the GCSE, a call that the Welsh Government agreed to in principle at the time. Communication between the government and Qualifications Wales on this, by our records, goes back to at least 2017. Deaf children and their hearing peers have long been looking forward to having the opportunity to study the GCSE. To receive this news, only a few short months after being told that the GCSE would be delayed, is heartbreaking for them. Given the amount of time and dedication from yourselves, Qualifications Wales and other external organisations, that has already gone into the establishment of the GCSE, it is our strong belief that this effort should not be wasted by scrapping the plans to launch the GCSE.

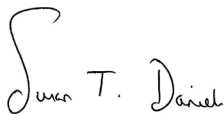
We're also deeply concerned about the message this sends to the people of Wales on the Welsh Government's commitment to support the deaf community and BSL, given it is also the government's intention to reject the upcoming BSL (Wales) Bill. Despite the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice's laudable comments on the floor of the Senedd highlighting the government's support of the language, the rejection of the GCSE and the Bill combined sends completely the opposite message.

In terms of the skills suite qualifications, it is our belief that this is not a sufficient replacement for the GCSE to facilitate wider use of BSL and to build that critical mass of BSL users for the future. The proposed BSL GCSE would have covered elements of deaf awareness, and deaf culture, which we know to be incredibly important context for students studying BSL. Additionally, a GCSE qualification would have unquestionable legitimacy in terms of progression into further and higher education, whereas we are unsure if this new qualification will hold that same standard. In short, the GCSE has the potential to greatly strengthen deaf children's opportunities in terms of post-16 education progression and consequently, their opportunities in later life.

We are keen to work with you to discuss the practical challenges to which Qualifications Wales has referred, and to demonstrate to you how the GCSE could be made a reality. We firmly believe that we can overcome these challenges and ensure the made-for-Wales BSL GCSE becomes a reality for those students in Wales who are so looking forward to taking the course.

We look forward to hearing from you and to meeting you to discuss this further at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely,



Susan Daniels OBE
Chief Executive Officer
National Deaf Children's Society



Lindsay Foster
Executive Director
Signature

CC:

David Jones OBE DL, Chair of Qualifications Wales
Dawn Bowden MS, Minister for Children and Social Care
Jack Sargeant MS, Minister for Culture, Skills and Social Partnership
Tom Giffard MS, Shadow Minister for Education
Cefin Campbell MS, Plaid Cymru Spokesperson for Education
Mark Isherwood MS, Chair of the Cross Party Groups for Deaf Issues and Disability
Buffy Williams MS, Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee
Jenny Rathbone MS, Chair of the Equality and Social Justice Committee