

Lynne Neagle AS/MS
Ysgrifennydd y Cabinet dros Addysg
Cabinet Secretary for Education

Jane Hutt AS/MS
Ysgrifennydd y Cabinet dros Gyfiawnder Cymdeithasol, y
Trefnydd a'r Prif Chwip

Ein cyf/Our ref JH/PO/358/24

Jenny Rathbone MS
Chair, Equality and Social Justice Committee



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

29 November 2024

Dear Jenny,

Thank you for your letter dated 11th November in respect of the decision taken by Qualifications Wales to suspend the development of the British Sign Language (BSL) GCSE in Wales.

It is important to clarify that Qualifications Wales is an independent statutory body, established as a regulator through legislation in the Qualifications Wales Act 2015, with their strategic direction set and activities overseen by a publicly appointed board. Qualifications Wales has additional powers to commission new qualifications and to restrict the range of qualifications offered. Qualifications Wales have therefore led the *Qualified for the Future* programme to reform 14-16 qualifications. It is the responsibility of Qualifications Wales, making decisions through their board, to decide whether and when any new qualifications should be introduced. These decisions are not taken by the Welsh Government or Ministers.

Welsh Government remains committed to supporting BSL and to furthering the use, knowledge and expertise of the language in Wales. It is our intention to design and develop policy which delivers the greatest positive impact for the BSL signing community of Wales, making provisions to promote and facilitate the use of BSL and its tactile forms and removing existing language barriers. We believe we can achieve a greater and quicker impact by taking a collaborative and inclusive approach and I thank both the National Deaf Children's Society Cymru and Signature for engaging with officials as they continue to help inform policy developments.

Wales is rightfully proud to be the first part of the UK to include BSL in its curriculum alongside English, Welsh and other languages. We have worked with BSL practitioners and other experts, including members of the Deaf community to develop guidance on designing a curriculum which includes progression in BSL for BSL signers as well as guidance for schools choosing to introduce BSL as a second, third or subsequent language.

Canolfan Cyswllt Cyntaf / First Point of Contact Centre:
0300 0604400

Bae Caerdydd • Cardiff Bay
Caerdydd • Cardiff
CF99 1SN

Gohebiaeth.Lynne.Neagle@llyw.cymru
Correspondence.Lynne.Neagle@gov.wales

Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

In this context, Qualifications Wales took a different approach to developing a made-for-Wales GCSE BSL than for other GCSE subjects that will form the new suite of 14-16 National Qualifications, allowing more time to engage effectively with key stakeholders. Through this research and engagement, they determined that the GCSE should be aimed at learners who are learning BSL for the first time. While this decision would not have precluded deaf learners who primarily communicate via BSL from entering the GCSE (as is the case for learners taking a modern foreign language GCSE in their home language) they were not the target cohort. A similar decision to design the qualification for learners who are learning BSL for the first time has been made in England for the GCSE being developed there.

We know the decision to suspend the development of the BSL GCSE was a difficult one for the Qualifications Wales Board. Qualifications Wales have made clear, however, that their recently confirmed policy on the designation of qualifications outside of the 14-16 National Qualifications suite will continue to allow the existing range of qualifications available to deaf children offered by the awarding body Signature to remain, including those qualifications that are similar to the GCSE. On average, 19 learners per year have taken these qualifications in Wales over each of the last six years.

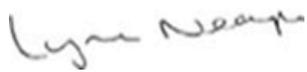
Qualifications Wales will also continue to develop BSL units as part of the new Skills Suite qualification, aimed at learners who are learning BSL for the first time and which will be available from 2027. Through this new qualification, learners will have the opportunity to be able to develop their practical BSL communication skills for social interaction in everyday settings. The BSL units (from entry level to level 2) will offer an engaging way for learners to demonstrate their BSL skills. The units will be more manageable for schools than a full GCSE and lend themselves to peripatetic teaching, making good use of the existing teacher workforce.

This approach will allow Qualifications Wales to monitor the take-up of these units and, over time, consider whether the 14-16 qualifications offer should be further expanded, which could include a made-for-Wales BSL GCSE. Prior to that, Qualifications Wales will be able to make available to Welsh schools and learners the BSL GCSE currently being developed in England by Ofqual, so that a BSL GCSE is available to English and Welsh learners at the same time.

We do, however, understand the disappointment at the decision to suspend the development of made-for-Wales BSL GCSE. During the development process where Qualifications Wales worked with stakeholders including the British Deaf Association, Wales Council for Deaf People, academics in sign language and deaf studies, practitioner representatives and providers of deaf awareness training and BSL support in Wales, they identified a number of complexities and delivery challenges that needed to be addressed to make the new qualification a success. This included the lack of an official online repository or 'dictionary' for BSL in Wales; the lack of a qualified teaching workforce for BSL; and the risk identified through their ongoing engagement with the sector that no, or very few, schools would initially offer the new BSL GCSE, which would make it technically and economically unviable. These are challenges which they judged to present significant risks to the successful delivery of the proposed qualification, and against which Welsh Government was unable to provide sufficient assurance based on its current capacity and resources.

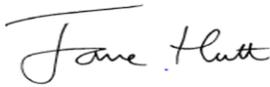
From September 2027, there will be an expanded and enhanced range of 14-16 BSL qualifications available to both hearing and deaf learners, supporting BSL within the Curriculum for Wales and helping to make education in Wales more inclusive. These new qualifications have the potential to spark interest and take-up amongst learners, to foster and demonstrate the demand from schools for BSL qualifications and to help grow the use and understanding of BSL in Wales.

Yours sincerely



Lynne Neagle AS/MS

Ysgrifennydd y Cabinet dros Addysg
Cabinet Secretary for Education



Jane Hutt AS/MS

Ysgrifennydd y Cabinet dros dros Gyfiawnder Cymdeithasol, y Trefnydd a'r Prif Chwip
Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Trefnydd and Chief Whip