
Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

Pwyllgor Cydraddoldeb a Chyfiawnder Cymdeithasol | Equality and Social Justice Committee

Bil Iaith Arwyddion Prydain (Cymru) | British Sign Language (Wales) Bill

Ymateb gan Dr Kate Attfield | Evidence from Dr Kate Attfield

What are your views on the general principles of the Bill?

The general principles of the Bill are extremely sensible, and really important.

Please can we change the initial introduction of the Bill, which currently states:

"About the Bill

British Sign Language (BSL) is a language that uses gestures, handshapes, facial expressions and body language to convey meaning and which, in its tactile forms, can also use touch."

The reason why the above description needs to be changed is because it is a condescending, and misleading, description of BSL.

Imagine if you described English like this: 'English is a language that uses mouthing, shouting, moderate sound and whisper, gestures and body language to convey meaning, and which in its tactile forms, can also use touch.' I would suggest that this description does not effectively get across that English is a useful means of communication, that it holds credibility, or that it has any intellectual basis or planned system.

The current description does not convey that signed /gestural attempts of any of Makaton, sign supported English, or total communication are not being included in this category (none of these are independent whole languages, and none equal to the attributes of BSL). There are also over 300 signed languages around the world, which makes this description rather inadequate.

Instead BSL should be introduced like this:

'British Sign Language (BSL) is a signed language that has its own grammar that is different to English and Welsh. This means that BSL has its own syntax, morphology and phonology.'

I'm sure the Welsh general public can cope with difficult terms - if not, they can always look these up.

What are your views on the Bill's key provisions (set out below), in particular are they workable and will they deliver the stated policy intention?

Legislation in this area, with these general principles, is essential. These are an excellent beginning to a sustained strategy that will eventually ensure meaningful acceptance of Deaf people, Deaf people's membership of society, and Deaf people's proactive contribution to societal progress and GDP.

Currently most of society does not recognise that Deaf people exist, or that they have an independent language that is real. So organisations do not tend to consider Deaf people and their language in their general service provision, or in attempting to access Deaf people's contribution for their output. The BSL Bill (and Act) Wales is desperately needed to challenge this backward situation.

I believe that [REDACTED] would make an excellent BSL adviser, specifically appointed for the BSL Bill.

I recommend that the BSL advisory panel specifically advises public organisations about their BSL plans, so that these are in keeping with Deaf people's own priorities for their access, contribution, and ultimately for their citizenship.

What are your views on the Bill's key provisions (set out below), in particular are they workable and will they deliver the stated policy intention?

1 – A duty on Welsh Ministers to promote and facilitate the use of BSL

Yes, depending on several key aspects.

It depends on the quality of the advice given to Welsh Ministers on this.

It also depends on how much long-term funding is invested into this whole area, to make a meaningful and sustained difference to Welsh Deaf people's lives.

A research team will need to thoroughly, and continuously, consult with the Welsh Deaf community and Deaf academics to ascertain what their priorities are in relation to the promoting and facilitating of BSL.

Deaf people (adults and children) need their own BSL linguistics education and training, in order to have a high grammatical command of their own language. This will enable them to access overall education more easily, and subsequently to secure employment that matches their intellectual capacities. This must be Welsh Gov funded; Deaf people largely cannot afford such training and education, as they have had an artificial learning ceiling placed on them, are thereby generally undereducated, and so under-employed, thus not having available money to invest in themselves.

hearing people equally need to be given full opportunities to learn BSL to a fluent level, and also be taught BSL linguistics. Anyone trying to learn BSL currently finds it very difficult to access adequate courses. Professionals who are experts in their own fields need to be able to learn BSL - in order that BSL can become a normal working language of Welsh society. It is also very expensive to learn BSL - perhaps this could be Welsh Gov funded /supported.

Organisations need to incorporate Deaf considerate and BSL policies and practices, and themselves promote and facilitate the use of BSL for existing staff, new employees and customers. They will need expert advice to be able to do this.

Prisons, the police, mental health centres, homelessness services, hospitals and health centres, social services, care experienced children's services and other services involving vulnerable people (as well as other public services) absolutely must be allocated expertise relating to Deaf people, and that is provided in BSL. Deaf people must be able to fully express themselves and converse in their own natural language directly with professionals.

It is not sufficient to presume that any investment can be in hearing BSL interpreters; we need to get past this assumption.

2 - A duty on Welsh Ministers to publish national strategy and guidance

Yes, IF a dedicated team is allocated generous resources, staff support, expertise and funded time to produce these.

3 - A duty on Welsh Ministers to publish BSL guidance

Yes, as above.

4 - A duty on specified public bodies to publish BSL plans

Yes, as above.

5 - The appointment of a BSL adviser

Yes this is a workable solution. And yes they will surely deliver the stated policy intention, IF you support this appointee with generous training, financial investment and staff support.

I recommend [REDACTED]

6 - Reporting duties to be imposed on the public bodies and Welsh Ministers in relation to these duties.

Yes, as above.

How appropriate are the powers in the Bill for Welsh Ministers to make subordinate Legislation?

Definitely appropriate - this is well considered. This will support mechanisms behind the stated principles to work in practice.

Are there any barriers to the implementation of the Bill's provisions and does the Bill take account of them?

I think barriers would be limits on sustainably funding this Bill, and/or a lack of support across the Equality and Social Justice Committee, or even the Welsh Gov itself.

What are your views on the assessment of the financial implications of the Bill as set out in Part 2 of the Explanatory Memorandum?

Are there any other issues that you would like to raise about the Bill and the accompanying Explanatory Memorandum?

I am delighted that this Bill is currently in progress. This is a huge step forward for the whole of Welsh society.

Anything else?

I would like to be involved in the advisory panel (although I do have a full time academic post).