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The voice for Youth Deaf youth in Wales

William Powell AM
Chair – Petitions Committee

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Dear Mr Powell

Deffo! Petition – Access to BSL for All

Many thanks for forwarding the response from the Minister, Huw Lewis in relation to the petition submitted by ourselves. I have pleasure in enclosing our response.

Improve access for families to learn BSL: When a child is diagnosed as being Deaf/hard of hearing parents should be offered free/subsidised BSL lessons (BSL level one costs approximately £300 per person). By using speech alone, Deaf children struggle/fail to develop communication skills missing important milestones. Learning other languages through BSL (English/Welsh) will improve the child's understanding and comprehension.

We are aware of the availability of BSL courses within adult learning; although our understanding is that this provision is reducing in-line with funding cuts. We would respectfully highlight that the Minister's response does not address the fact that there is currently a lack of provision for Deaf children and young people under the age of 16 to learn BSL without incurring high costs.

We have knowledge of a parent seeking BSL provision, who has had to access this through the support of a local charity, rather than any local authority provision. The charity has also sought to link with local colleges to access funding, for this individual and others in their peer group and this has been rejected, without any signposting to alternative provision.

Equally it is important that provision of BSL is an appropriate format, parents wish to learn BSL with their child and siblings, and this is not feasible under the provision that we are aware of, or that referenced by the Minister in relation to adult learning. We must remember it is not just the Deaf child who needs to learn BSL; it is also, at a minimum their immediate support group.

We note the Minister's comment that requests for free/subsidised BSL lessons is for local authorities to consider, however we would suggest that there should be a requirement for this to be provided as opposed to considered for example we have contacted one local authority and inquiry for the BSL courses where families and Deaf Children can learn, their response was not as far as they are aware of this is available within their authority.

The situation and outlook for Deaf people is challenging. Cuts to funding and service provision have resulted in the removal of specialist advocacy services for Deaf young people and their families, and the suspension of the Deaf youth service. For example, 42 trained Deaf youth workers in Wales, only one is presently in part-time employment with a local authority.

There is clearly a lack of support for Deaf young people and their families, and whilst there is pressure and a policy direction for these Deaf young people to access mainstream services, we are failing to provide the basic steps to make this possible and sustainable for the young people.

It is worth recognising that Deaf children are diagnosed as Deaf at an early age; deafness is seen as a disability under the medical model, being in the environment with medical practitioners rather than a

language minority group. Most families are given options by health professionals in ways to improve their hearing by providing equipment- hearing aids, cochlea implants, speech therapy and other medical related aids to adapt into their childhood but nothing to offer social, networking and language support.

Few practitioners suggest liaising with D/deaf professionals where families can meet with other parents who are going through similar cases, to meet with Deaf peers for support making a decision based on a person centred approach. This could initiate a lifetime of support for their Child by having 'contact' with Deaf peers. Deaf young people need to learn in sign language first, before learning English, in same way as Welsh students are taught Welsh first then English and then other subjects once they understand the basic structure of language. This is exactly how it should be for Deaf children and will lead to better outcomes and life-chances for this group.

Introduce BSL to the National Curriculum: Deaf children and young people who are taught BSL at an early age will have better access to their education and an improved wellbeing. BSL should be available in schools and taught by qualified deaf teachers, for all to learn, as this would achieve better access for all in society. We believe that BSL should be offered as a language for all learners as a qualification. GCSE Welsh (and other modern languages) are not always offered to Deaf students: this also needs to be improved.

The current situation as outlined by the Minister is failing Children and Deaf young people.

The majority of Deaf children in mainstream school provision, and by association their peers, do not have access to BSL in school. They are taught SSE (Sign Supported English). This follows the English language structure and is different from BSL. BSL makes use of space, movement of hands, body and face as visual indicators. It has its own structure, grammar, syntax etc. and was recognised as a legal language in its own right by the UK Government on 18th March 2003.

Children who learn SSE find that this language learning does not transfer to the external environment. When they leave school, the wider deaf community utilises BSL, and Deaf young people find themselves having to re-learn a language in order to be able to interact with their own community. This is a risk to the quality of BSL, and a duplication of resource and investment, which should be addressed through the provision of BSL in school, delivered by qualified Deaf practitioners at early ages.

If BSL were included on the national curriculum the use of BSL would extend, Deaf young people would be able to interact as equals with their peers in social, economic and learning networks. Equally importantly is that in the long-term business and public services would be in a position to engage with the Deaf population.

Improving access to education in BSL for Deaf children and young people: currently they have limited access to Education in BSL, and often experience under qualified support. There is a massive gap in the education of Deaf children, as many are wrongly treated as having a learning disability. This has a negative impact on their development in life, reducing independence with poor education, resulting in under-employment. They need adequately qualified Communication Support Workers available in school.

The Minister's response does not re-assure, nor make any comment in relation to the quality of provision, which exists, within schools for Deaf children.

The recent survey report, CRIDE 2015 confirms that there are at least 48,125 Deaf children in the UK, with approximately 2,880 of these in Wales. 90% of Deaf children are educated in mainstream education settings. This means there is the potential for a Deaf child to be alone in a class / school without access to Deaf peers. Given under present arrangements support is often offered by Communication Support Workers (CSW) who are trained at below level 2 in BSL. We believe that a level 3 qualifications in BSL is appropriate given that we are asking young people to use this as their first language. This lack of

appropriately skilled workers is further compounded with evidence suggesting that many Teachers of the Deaf are being replaced by teaching assistants.

Deaf young people whom are BSL users have to be regarded as having limited access to BSL. Many Teachers of the Deaf (TOD) do not have a BSL qualification, and this needs to be addressed to ensure that Deaf children and young people have the opportunity to access their life chances.

The CRIDE report (2014) confirms this concern in relation to Teachers of the Deaf. There are currently 67 qualified TOD by 38% of these are due to retire within 15 years, leading to a capacity crunch in this provision to meet the future needs. This has the potential to further negatively impact on a poor situation. It is fact that the average TOD contact is 3 hours a week, significantly less than the recommended 270 hours per year and also highlights that the number of Deaf young people in Wales not receiving support from a speech therapist is increasing on a year-by-year basis.

The CRIDE report goes further highlighting that only 13% of Deaf pupils have designated BSL lessons, only 27% receive 1-2-1 tuition and 40% of respondents feel that they have access to Deaf role models.

This data appears to evidence that SEN provision is not working appropriately to ensure access to BSL. Deffo! feel from observations that local authorities are making decisions in relation to the support of Deaf young people based on the supply and provision that is available, rather than on the demands of Deaf young people and there should be a requirement on local authorities to meet this unmet demand.

Making services and resources accessible in BSL for Deaf young people: enabling BSL users to access information in their preferred language via digital resources to service in Education, Health Care, Social Services and public transport, giving them equality to access as an equivalent to Welsh Language access.

The Minister's comments in respect of this are noted.

Evidence received by Deffo! highlights that many Deaf young people fail to access services with the reasonable adjustment that they are entitled to under the Equalities Act 2010. A recent survey by the BBC indicates that this is as high as 90% in respect of health provision within GP surgeries.

Deffo! believe that the solution to ensuring parity of access for Deaf young people is linked to appropriate addressing of the prior points and creating an environment in which high quality BSL is available throughout Wales.

I hope that this information is useful in respect of consideration of this petition.

Yours sincerely

Cathie Robins Talbot

Deffo! Principal Petitioner