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The voice for Youth Deaf Youth in Wales

Date 13th March 2017

Mike Hedges AM
Chair- Petition Committee

Dear Mr Hedges

Deffo! Petition- Access to BSL for All

Further to the recent response from Alun Davies, the Minister for Lifelong Learning and Welsh Language, please see our thoughts below:

We welcome his view on our petition and his comments on the items relating to the British Sign Language in Wales. We feel strongly that within Wales we have come a long way since BSL was recognised by the Welsh Government 13 years ago in 2004. We now want to move forward with BSL in Education, there is still a long way to go.

We are delighted to learn that the plenary has discussed the GCSE qualification in BSL and that it would be considered, however this does not resolve our major concern. It is vital for families of Deaf Children of all ages to access BSL from early years in schools and ultimately to be able to progress to a GCSE qualification in BSL. We believe that BSL should be compulsory in mainstream education and that Local Authorities should provide this to complement the SEN statement for each child. Many families experience barriers in gaining full access to education in their sign language for their child. We want to see the current provision strengthened to maximise the support available, without restricting hours of support - for example, 2 hours' speech therapy, 5 hours with communication supports workers, 3 hours with Teacher for the Deaf.

We welcome the changes proposed in the ALN consultation for the education of children with special needs (additional learning needs), however there is nothing in that consultation that addresses our community's needs and it does not specifically outline the concerns raised in our petition, that we want children across all ages to have opportunity to learn BSL in schools. Many families are still fighting their Local Authority to secure access to the limited availability of support available for BSL education. We were looking forward to ensuring that Deaf families are involved in this consultation but unfortunately this is now not happening and we are anxious to be involved in the consultation as recommended by the former petition committee before the successful report was launched which never happened.

Even though the Minister of Lifelong Learning and Welsh Language stated that the Welsh Government have recognised BSL since 2004 as a language in its own right, today, we still have no power to legislate for the language, as confirmed by petition committee member, Bethan Jenkins in requesting that the previous petition was referred to the Education Department for review.

We seek confirmation that the BSL will be accessible to all school age children and be put on the national curriculum. GCSE level will of course will complement comprehensive school learning, but we are also concerned about pre and primary education who must not be left

behind in the process. We want BSL to be put on the national curriculum for ALL ages to learn, (both Deaf and non-Deaf young people). Early learning will help Deaf Children to address confidence issues and the wider barriers they face to education. Deaf pupils are potentially isolated in mainstream settings and do not often have a natural 'peer 'group. This will also ensure better awareness for hearing peers and build cohesive school communities.

Further-more we seek to address the shortfall of BSL classes for families of Deaf children. English language provision is offered free of charge to people from other countries who wish to live in this country (rightly so) but we still do not offer the same courtesy to the families of Deaf Children who face significant barriers in communicating with their children. The medical profession still recommend that parents of Deaf children today should NOT sign with their children as they will not learn to speak. In various research, it has been proven that using sign language with babies/children not only helps with anxiety issues but also aids the language acquisition, and in turn improves their chance to fulfil their lives in society, as such the provision of accessible BSL within schools will contribute to the successful, cohesive and sustainable Wales to which we all aspire.

Yours sincerely,

Cathie Robins-Talbot
Deffo! Principal Petitioner