

British Sign Language (BSL) (Wales) Bill:

Engagement findings

20 October 2025



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1. Background

1. The British Sign Language (Wales) Bill ('the Bill' hereafter) is a Member Bill introduced by Mark Isherwood MS on 14 July 2025. The Bill was remitted to the Equality and Social Justice Committee ('the Committee' hereafter).
2. The aim of the Bill is to promote the use of BSL in Wales and imposes various new duties on Welsh Ministers and on certain public bodies.
3. In its meeting on 21 July 2025, the Committee agreed its approach to scrutiny of the Bill.

Objectives

4. The engagement programme aimed to gather the perspectives of Deaf BSL signers to inform the Committee's scrutiny of the Bill. Rather than focusing on lived experiences, the engagement sought views on whether the Bill, as currently drafted, is fit for purpose
5. The following themes were explored:-
 - **Hopes and expectations:** Does the Bill do what you hoped it would do?
 - **Effectiveness and delivery:** Will the Bill work in reality?
 - **Gaps and/or additions:** Is there anything missing from the Bill that you believe should be included?
 - **Giving the BSL community a voice:** The aim of the Bill is to promote the use of BSL in Wales. Do you think it can do this effectively?
 - **Unintended consequences:** Do you think anything bad or unfair might happen because of this Bill, even if not planned?
 - **Timescales:** The Bill says the BSL strategy must be reviewed every 6 years. Is that too long, too short, or about right?
 - **The BSL adviser role:** The Bill talks about a BSL adviser, and persons to be members of a panel to assist the BSL adviser. What kind of person should the adviser be?

Methodology

- 6.** The Citizen Engagement Team proposed a qualitative approach to engagement, comprising focus groups with Deaf BSL signers in Wales.
- 7.** This paper summarises the key themes which emerged from the engagement. The views presented reflect the insights shared by contributors and are not intended to represent the perspectives of all Deaf individuals and BSL signers in Wales.

Contributors

- 8.** The engagement programme involved 54 contributors across six focus groups, held between 16 September and 1 October 2025.
- 9.** Participants were drawn from all five Senedd regions.
- 10.** Contributors were recruited through partnerships with key stakeholders, community groups, and third-sector organisations supporting Deaf people across Wales.
- 11.** While most contributors were Deaf BSL signers, some were hearing BSL signers. The groups included young people, older adults, Deaf BSL signers with sight loss, and individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Format

- 12.** The engagement comprised the following:-
 - Five face-to-face focus groups.
 - One online focus group.
 - One written contribution.
- 13.** The format of the focus groups was largely consistent across the programme of engagement, with some variation to accommodate the needs of contributors. Two BSL interpreters were provided for each focus group.

2. Engagement findings

The following themes emerged from the discussions.

Hopes and expectations

14. Discussions typically began with contributors outlining their hopes and expectations for the Bill and its potential impact.

15. Many expressed hopes that, if enacted, the Bill would lead to:

- greater Deaf awareness;
- more qualified BSL interpreters in Wales;
- better training for public service staff; and
- increased investment in accessible services for the Deaf community.

16. The majority of contributors welcomed the Bill and expressed strong support for its aims, although some shared guarded optimism about whether it would lead to meaningful, long-term change.

"If the Bill doesn't do what we want it to do, we're going to be a very, very angry, disappointed, dejected Deaf community in Wales, because the existing levers are not working. The Equality Act isn't working for us, the accessible standards in health are not working - so pretty much every sector in Wales isn't working. So we want improvements everywhere. We want to see more interpreters, more teachers of sign language and we want to see Deaf people fulfilling their potential. There's people with potential out there who are languishing on benefits when they should be working - they've got skills. I want to see a massive change where you feel included in your community."

17. In particular, there was scepticism from some contributors about government funding and commitment if the Bill passes, particularly given ongoing public service cuts and broader austerity.

"We've fought for things before but they don't really listen. I think it'll come down to - they won't have time to do it, or they won't have interpreters available. . . I think it's to do with money and cuts to the NHS. It's been like this for years and I don't think anything will change."

18. Several contributors emphasised the need for the Bill to lead to practical change and not just symbolic recognition. Some stressed that practical change and sustainable improvements requires government investment.

"We can't take action now, because there isn't that legislation to back it up. At the moment, we've got 'reasonable adjustments' - that doesn't have any teeth because people just say, 'Well we can't afford it'. . . BSL needs to be enshrined in law, and it's something that people have to do. Because that's going to have an impact on professionals, on government, on councils, where they then will have to provide access. That gives Deaf people the power to complain because there is a right in law that they should have that access.."

19. Whilst discussions focused on the Bill and its content, many contributors naturally referred to their own lived experiences to illustrate the barriers they face in sectors such as healthcare, education, transport, and employment. They shared how they hoped the Bill could help remove or reduce these barriers.

"Coming here today, I was reflecting on the quote, 'if it's not broke don't fix it', which made me look at Scotland's BSL Act and I did some research on that. Even though it's got so many positives in the Deaf community in Scotland, they're still hitting barriers. . . There's still not enough interpreters, there's still not enough Deaf teachers, still not enough Deaf awareness within the hearing community . . . so with this BSL Bill . . . what are we going to do in Wales to ensure there will be enough interpreters, there will be enough deaf teachers and there will be enough Deaf awareness in the hearing community?"

20. Of the sectors discussed, healthcare was most frequently highlighted, with many expressing hope that this is where the Bill will have a significant and positive impact.

The potential impact of the Bill on healthcare

21. Currently, difficulties communicating with healthcare staff exist from the first point of contact. Contributors highlighted a widespread lack of Deaf awareness in healthcare settings which, at its most serious can endanger lives.

22. Contributors shared several accounts of healthcare staff being unaware of how to book a BSL interpreter, mistakenly believing it to be the patient's responsibility, or claiming that the interpreter had not attended. In such instances, contributors often had to rely on family members or friends to communicate with healthcare professionals, an arrangement widely regarded as inappropriate.

"I think it's to do with money and cuts and maybe a lack of provision of service and the view that Deaf people are hard work and that booking interpreters is annoying and they don't want to help. It's the same with GP services . . . It's quite upsetting. I have complained but it happens often."

23. Contributors hoped the Bill would help address these issues by requiring all healthcare staff who communicate with patients to receive, at minimum, basic BSL training.

24. They also expressed hope that the Bill would lead to improvements in the appointment booking process, not only ensuring that staff know how to book a BSL interpreter confidently, but also streamlining the process itself.

"On my health record it should state I'm Deaf. So when they're sending an appointment letter to me, it should flag up I'm Deaf. So they should be booking interpreters at that stage."

"The NHS app – they must include BSL in that. Even if it was a link in BSL – what does it does and doesn't do. Then the app comes out and guess what, nothing in BSL. It's really frustrating because it feels like every five years you get a consultation on education, or health or something else and then nothing happens."

25. Discussions explored specific areas of the healthcare sector, including care homes. Several contributors highlighted significant gaps in provision for Deaf people within these settings, particularly for those who may be living with conditions such as dementia.

"All care homes must be Deaf friendly. And I'm thinking about myself - if I get older and develop something like that or I'm going into a care home, I think we should be future proofing this. So that people have access throughout their lives for whatever services they need, including when you get older and you might be in a care home."

26. Additionally, some contributors expressed hope that the impact of the Bill would extend beyond Deaf patients themselves, offering support in situations where a Deaf person is supporting a patient. For example, Deaf carers described significant challenges when accessing health services on behalf of those they care for, as they are often told that interpreter provision is only available when the patient, rather than the carer, is Deaf.

"Over the past 20 years, I've been a carer for my parents and in terms of the BSL Bill, I think it needs to cover not just Deaf people but also the family members around those Deaf people that maybe you're caring for. I think the decision around access and how access impacts the people that I care for. So the framework doesn't necessarily need to be for Deaf people, it actually needs to be wider than that so it covers the health and wellbeing of family members. My parents recently passed, the process of that caused many difficulties, many barriers."

"So my son has had health appointments and I have asked for interpreters and they've said, "No sorry, the interpreters are only for the patient, not for the carers." So I really want to reinforce that it's not just about the Deaf individual, it's about the different roles we play in each other's lives."

The potential impact of the Bill on other sectors

27. Many contributors stressed the importance of introducing BSL in schools, not only to support Deaf students, but also to promote Deaf awareness among hearing children. Several shared personal experiences of attending mainstream schools where their education was inaccessible, leaving them feeling let down and unable to fulfil their potential.

"Children need access to BSL. I saw Year 6 pupils struggling with writing, but they picked up signs quickly. It benefits everyone."

28. They hoped the Bill would help address this by restoring pride in Deaf identity, beginning with early education. Some also called for the re-establishment of Deaf schools in Wales and expressed hope that the Bill could eventually support this goal.

"We rely on audiology to explain to parents of new born Deaf children - you have options and one is encouraging BSL to be introduced to the child from the get go, and for the family to be involved. We're heard that audiology are discouraging it still. We're picking up evidence that it's still going on."

Raising Deaf awareness

"We have 22 councils in Wales and only 3 of them provide VRS, which is online BSL with interpreters, so what about the other councils? So if you have questions about rubbish, council tax... I live in RCT, there's no VRS service in my local council. And I keep asking them about it."

29. Most contributors hoped that a key impact of the Bill will be to improve Deaf awareness and promote greater understanding of the diversity within the Deaf community, among the hearing population. For example, not all Deaf people lipread. One contributor noted that not everyone is "lip readable", and hearing aids do not fully restore hearing.

30. Whilst there was an understanding amongst some contributors that certain powers are not devolved to Wales, they were nevertheless hopeful that if the Bill becomes law, it would have a widespread impact on non-devolved areas including policing and certain aspects of employment, with Jobcentres mentioned specifically.

Gaps in the Bill

31. Discussion on whether there were any gaps in the Bill predominantly focused on the list of public bodies.

"Section 4 needs to be particularly strong to allow it to have longevity. The list needs to be quite extensive. I think there needs to be a lot of planning and preparation. Who is going to be part of that?"

32. No contributor expressed satisfaction with the current list of public bodies included in the Bill. There were strong views that the list is too limited and should be expanded to explicitly include other key organisations and stakeholders. Some acknowledged that expanding the list might not be possible immediately, but felt it should remain a clear ambition for the future.

"It may be, to get the Bill through, we can't insist on all these organisations being included at this stage but it needs to be an ambition to include them at some point or to review that list. Even if it's a few years down the line. It's got to be there somewhere."

33. Suggested additions included Cadw, Estyn, the Ombudsman, Qualifications Wales, the Welsh Language Commissioner, and "local councils".

"I think the Ombudsman should be on there. They have access in Welsh and English but BSL isn't an option."

"I was disappointed Transport for Wales wasn't included in the list. Our Central Station in Cardiff doesn't have any BSL access that I'm aware of. When they opened up a brand new bus service, Deaf people were involved in the consultation for the design of it. We stressed the importance that BSL information is included in this new flagship central bus station. We went to the pre-opening, because all vulnerable groups went to the bus station before it actually opened, and I was gutted. There was loads of adaptations for people with vision loss, which was great. But nothing with BSL. Again, they've got all these screens, flashing up adverts and lots of information but nothing in BSL. Even if it was basic information, like for example, how to use the bus station, where to get the information, how to contact passenger assist, where the passenger assist point is. . . so really disappointing. This is something that happens a lot – we get consulted, people write these things down, gives us a thumbs up but don't provide the access."

“One of the criticisms of the Bill – it mentions local authorities but doesn’t mention Estyn and Qualifications Wales. So for example Qualifications Wales were developing a made for Wales BSL GCSE which had a lot of excitement in the Deaf community, and then they suddenly dropped it . . . It comes from the fact they haven’t engaged enough with people like BDA and the Wales Council. We understand the concerns were about dialect, but we said don’t worry about dialect – it’s the same with Welsh language and English language.”

“Needs including National parks, NLW, Cadw, Museums, Qualifications Wales, Social Care Wales, Sports Council, Transport for Wales”

34. Some contributors emphasised the importance of ensuring that the Bill’s provisions are enforceable rather than optional. With this in mind, they felt the Bill should clearly outline how individuals can raise a complaint if public bodies fail to meet their obligations. There was a strong call for the inclusion of clear complaints and enforcement mechanisms to ensure accountability and demonstrate that concerns will be taken seriously.

“How do we make sure we’re listened to if we have these complaints we wish to raise? What’s the process within the Bill? There needs to be something within the Bill to say that it’ll be listened to, acted upon. Because we’re so used to banging our heads against a brick wall and nothing changing.”

35. One contributor suggested that a method for ensuring public bodies adhere to the provisions of the Bill could involve a “mystery shopper” approach, whereby Deaf individuals monitor and assess service quality to promote practical accountability.

The BSL Adviser

36. Most contributors strongly supported the appointment of a BSL Adviser, believing that, with the right person appointed, the role could offer essential Deaf-led oversight. However, some expressed disappointment that a BSL Commissioner is no longer proposed, though they were willing to support the adviser model if it helps ensure the Bill is passed.

"If we want to be equal to the Welsh Language, we should really have a Commissioner, but we've kind of agreed to take the option of the Adviser to get the Bill through. I think it's critically important that the Adviser is not just a BSL signer, but is a Deaf BSL signer. If a Deaf BSL signer is not available, then a hearing person with links to Deaf BSL signers would be a second best option."

37. Contributors discussed the qualities and background the BSL Adviser should possess. The majority felt the Adviser should be fluent in BSL, with many stating that they should ideally be Deaf, or at the very least, have a strong connections to and lived experience of Deaf culture, like a CODA (Child of Deaf Adults).

"The Adviser needs to be politically aware and understand Deaf history, oppression, and the differences in North and South Wales."

"Definitely a sign language user. They need to be profoundly Deaf...well, maybe not even Deaf but if they're hearing but they are proficient with sign language. They need to be able to communicate with Deaf people but they also need to know the culture."

38. Contributors highlighted the importance of appointing someone who can fairly represent the needs of Deaf people across all parts of Wales, particularly in Mid and North Wales and other rural areas, where services are often limited.

39. Some emphasised that the Adviser should already have strong relationships with key stakeholders, such as the British Deaf Association and the Wales Council for Deaf People. Others felt the Adviser should also have a solid understanding of both the political landscape and the practical challenges facing the Deaf community in Wales

40. Although membership of the advisory panel was discussed to a lesser extent, contributors emphasised the importance of ensuring that the panel comprises Deaf BSL signers. One contributor expressed support for a panel with broad, rotating representation from across Wales.

Timelines

41. There was concern from contributors about the proposed minimum six-year review cycle for the national BSL strategy. Many contributors felt that six years was too long between reviews, particularly given the changing needs of the Deaf

community and the potential for shifts in political leadership or policy direction. A majority favoured a shorter initial review period to ensure the strategy remains effective in its early stages.

“So my personal view is that the timescales are ok but not at the start, and I would like the first review to be earlier and then maybe after that to go on the six year cycle. Because this is new, I think we don't want to leave things go six years before we review and find out things are not working because the Deaf community needs action sooner rather than later.”

42. Whilst some contributors acknowledged the logic of a longer review cycle once the strategy is established but emphasised the importance of early evaluation to identify and address issues promptly.

“Six years is too long. Things change fast, especially for the Deaf community.”

43. Others highlighted the advantages of aligning with existing reporting frameworks, such as the Well-being of Future Generations Act, to streamline monitoring processes and avoid duplication. Contributors expressed a clear desire for timely accountability.

Access to interpreters and interpreter training

44. Interpreter availability remains a significant issue, particularly in less urban areas where services are scarce and travel costs and lack of local interpreters present barriers, particularly for face-to-face interpreting.

45. Several contributors hoped that the Bill would result in clear, accessible procedures on how to book interpreters across public services.

46. Some hearing BSL signers taking part in the focus groups expressed a strong desire to become qualified BSL interpreters, which were often motivated by personal connections to the Deaf community. However, some highlighted significant barriers to accessing training. These included a lack of flexible and affordable BSL courses, especially beyond Level 2; limited local provision of training that first around family and employment responsibilities; and minimal funding support.

47. Despite these challenges, there was a strong sense of determination to continue training and support the Deaf community. Contributors hoped the Bill would help increase the number of opportunities to qualify.

"I want to help the Deaf community because I've experienced the barriers myself – but it's expensive and hard to access the information and support I need to get into that role."

48. There is concern about the quality and standards of BSL teaching. For example, some institutions offer free courses but with instructors who lack adequate qualifications, which undermines the value of learning and competes unfairly with qualified teachers.

"I think it's important to talk about the quality of the language that's being used. So for example, I taught BSL in Ceredigion and I'm a qualified BSL teacher. I have Level 6, I've used the language all my life. The university however, employed a BSL teacher that was level 2 and was from England. They paid them to provide, what was supposed to be a free service, which means I can't compete with that. However, the quality of that teaching just wasn't there."

Impact on mental health and isolation

49. Contributors highlighted a clear link between limited access to communication support and negative impacts on mental health and social wellbeing. They hoped that greater accessibility in public services, enabled by the Bill, would lead to positive knock-on effects for mental health.

50. Limited access to interpreters and Deaf-friendly environments was seen as reinforcing social exclusion. This was an issue contributors hoped the Bill would address through improved interpreter provision and greater inclusion.

51. Barriers to informal education and social activities also contribute to isolation, while existing mental health services are often inaccessible or poorly promoted.

"Deaf people have higher rates of mental health issues, but mental health services aren't tailored to us."

Final reflections

52. Despite frustrations, participants remained hopeful that the BSL Bill could lead to lasting change if implemented effectively. They saw it as an opportunity for Deaf people to feel recognised, respected, and included.

“The Bill would make us feel respected and valued. But without proper funding, planning, and Deaf-led leadership, it won’t go far enough.”