

Ein Cyf /Our Ref:
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ST/ British Sign Language
7th November 2017
02920 468600



David J Rowlands AM
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff
CF99 1NA

Dear Mr Rowlands,

P-04-628 To improve access to Education and services in British Sign Language

Many thanks for your recent inquiry regarding improved access to education and services in British Sign Language to improve the quality of life for deaf people of all ages and apologies for the time taken to respond. As you know, the WLGA does not hold information on this issue centrally but we have liaised with all 22 local authorities in Wales and sought their views.

Our understanding is that there is a significant amount of support provided by authorities to deaf children and young people but as always there are funding and capacity issues. The lead teachers of the deaf meet on a regular basis, across the regions and also nationally, to share best practice and promote consistency. The Association of Directors of Education ADEW also has a subgroup for Sensory Impairment Services which includes the service leads from all local authorities across Wales and authorities work with the British Association of Teachers of the Deaf (BATOD) through BATOD Wales. In many areas there are also very effective links with the National Deaf Children Society Cymru who can offer family sign language training sessions designed specifically for families with deaf children under five. This is relevant as BSL classes that lead to accreditation tend to focus on adult themed vocabulary and not what is needed for a child. These fora might be better placed to help the Petitions Committee with its inquiry and provide further information about provision. I am happy to provide further contact details if required.

As indicated, I am also aware that there are capacity issues and funding challenges for authorities. The ideal would be to deliver the curriculum and social opportunities using BSL as the medium of teaching, learning and interaction. This would require subject specialists who use and teach through BSL and a much wider deaf peer group and deaf role models to support social and emotional development. Very few authorities are in a position to deliver this level of service. As a consequence, some authorities support requests from deaf young people and their families for specialist residential placements at for example the Exeter Academy for the Deaf; Mary

Steve Thomas CBE
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**Croesawn ohebiaeth yn y Gymraeg a'r Saesneg a byddwn yn ymateb i ohebiaeth yn yr un iaith.
Ni fydd defnyddio'r naill iaith na'r llall yn arwain at oedi.**

**We welcome correspondence in Welsh and English and will respond to correspondence in the same language.
Use of either language will not lead to a delay.**

Hare School; and Hamilton Lodge Brighton. There are again resource implications to this provision and it means children and young people being educated away from their locality.

Other issues of concern raised with us include, access to BSL tutors and funding to support training and competency levels for staff. It takes at least three years to take a member of staff to BSL Level 3, which is the level NDCS would recommend staff working with children who have BSL as a first language require in a school setting. It is argued therefore that there needs to be a long term approach to developing staff skills. It's very difficult to advertise and quickly source a teaching assistant with Level 3 BSL. As a consequence, services tend to look to develop their own capacity internally. The number of qualified BSL tutors able to provide training appears to be problematic at a UK level.

Another concern relates to the importance of using language in a social context is the same for BSL users. If a child is the only BSL or sign user in a school and the only other person who signs is the adult teaching assistant then, it is a challenge to support effective inclusion in all aspects of school life. Providing peer sign language clubs and groups in these contexts is vital, but finding people who can provide them in schools can be difficult. Developing the awareness of BSL thorough afterschool clubs also supports the status of BSL as a language in its own right.

Some authorities have suggested that a specialist school for the Deaf within Wales might be considered to meet the needs of this group of learners and that although this approach might not seem very inclusive, it might be the only way of delivering the curriculum effectively through BSL.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Steve Thomas'.

Steve Thomas CBE
Chief Executive