



Department for Education

The Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP
Secretary of State for Education

Sara Owen MP
Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee
By email: sarah.owen.mp@parliament.uk

12 October 2025

Dear Sarah,

Thank you for your letter dated 19 September, in which you kindly shared information about the work of the Women and Equalities Committee into British Sign Language (BSL) education for deaf children and their families.

As you will know, this government's ambition is that every child or young person in our country receives the best possible educational experience, one that is academically stretching, where every child or young person feels like they belong, and that sets them up for life and work.

I hope the information provided below will be helpful in addressing the points you raised.

Early Years Language Development

The government recognises the important role the early years (EY) sector plays in early intervention to ensure the right support is put in place for children as soon as possible. To do this, it is critical that EY practitioners are able identify and support children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), including those associated with hearing impairment and deafness.

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework sets the standards and requirements that all EY providers must follow to ensure every child has the best start in life, including those with SEND. It stipulates that providers must have arrangements in place to support children with SEND.

The department has published additional resources, including a free online training module and SEND assessment guidance and further funded training has been provided for 1000 early years Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) to achieve their level 3 Early Years SENCO qualification by the end of FY2025-26, having already funded training for up to 7000 early years SENCOs in previous years. Through our Best Start in Life strategy we will continue improving the system so that all children, regardless of background and / or SEND, can benefit from high-quality early education and childcare, and parents are supported to work.

Supporting children with SEND is central to the EY agenda, we know how much of a difference early intervention makes. To achieve this, we will:

- work with EY educators, including Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs), to embed inclusive practice across all EY teaching and qualifications, so that inclusive practice becomes standard practice
- Increase funding to promote inclusion of children with SEND
- Fund each Best Start Family Hub to have a children and family services professional specifically trained in working to support parents of children with additional needs.

Evidence

On September 25, my department published findings from a series of rapid evidence assessments on what works to identify and support the needs of children and young people with SEND in mainstream and early years settings, including those with sensory and/or physical needs and speech, language and communication needs. You can access the research at the link below:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/identifying-and-supporting-the-needs-of-children-with-send-in-mainstream-settings>

Adult Skills Fund

For adults, a range of qualification in, or focusing on, BSL up to Level 2 are funded through the Adult Skills Fund (ASF). Currently 68% of the ASF is devolved to 12 Strategic Authorities and the Greater London Authority. These authorities are responsible for deciding who to fund, what providers to fund, what provision to fund and how much to pay for it. My department continues to be responsible for the remaining ASF in non-devolved areas.

In non-devolved areas, the Adult Skills Fund targets those on the lowest incomes. Full funding is available for adults who are either unemployed or earn under £25,750 per year, with co-funding options for those earning above this threshold. This ensures the ASF can support more learners to access courses such as the Level 1 Award in BSL, which allows learners to communicate in BSL on a range of topics that involve simple, everyday language use, thereby giving them the basic skills and confidence in BSL.

Additional support is available to help learners overcome barriers to accessing learning. Providers have discretion to help learners meet costs such as transport, accommodation and books. Learning support funding also helps colleges and training providers to meet the additional needs of learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and the costs of reasonable adjustments as set out in the Equality Act 2010.

BSL is also supported under the Tailored Learning strand of the ASF. Tailored Learning is designed both to support learners in employment and to deliver wider common benefits, such as equipping parents and carers to support their child's learning and development. How courses are delivered, and whether fees are charged is at the discretion of providers. This flexibility enables local provision to meet the needs of parent and families of deaf children.

BSL GCSE

We are fully committed to developing a BSL GCSE that benefits both students and the wider deaf community. As you say, Ofqual consulted on its proposed assessment arrangements in spring 2025 and expects to confirm its decision on the qualification rules in autumn 2025.

After this, exam boards will be able to develop detailed specifications. These must be reviewed and accredited by Ofqual before schools and colleges are able to teach them, and schools will also require time to prepare for the introduction of the new qualification before courses can begin to be delivered.

Our focus remains on ensuring that the qualification is of the highest quality, so that the GCSE is reflective of BSL as a language and serves the needs of both students and teachers effectively. BSL is a unique subject, and we want to ensure we take the necessary time and care to get it right. As such, I am unable to give an indication of a first teaching date for the BSL GCSE at this stage.

SEND Reform

More broadly, we are aware of the challenges in the special educational needs and disabilities system and understand how urgently they need to be addressed.

Over the last year the Ministerial team and I, supported by expert advisers like Tom Rees and Dame Christine Lenehan, have engaged extensively with a wide range of sector partners. We are continuing to engage intensely on the shape of the solutions. This includes recent engagement with parent carers from across England through various parental-led and parental supporting organisations, including the National Network of Parent Carer Forums (NNPCF), Contact, and the Council for Disabled Children (CDC).

We will build a better system which is grounded in evidence, identifies and supports need at the earliest opportunity, and ensures families can secure support swiftly without a fight.

I look forward to working with the Women and Equalities Committee on delivering this vital work.

Thank you for writing to me.

Yours,
Bridget

The Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP
Secretary of State for Education



Women and Equalities Committee

19 September 2025

Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP
Secretary of State for Education
& Minister for Women and Equalities

BY EMAIL

BSL education for Deaf children and their families

Dear Secretary of State,

The Women and Equalities Committee recently held an evidence session on access to British Sign Language with the Chief Executive of the British Deaf Association (BDA) and members of the Government's BSL Advisory Board.¹ This was a rare opportunity for leaders in the Deaf community to engage with us in their native language, which has been legally recognised as a language of Great Britain by the BSL Act 2022.

Part of our session focused on BSL education for Deaf children and their families. Dr Jo Atkinson, member of the BSL Advisory Board and chair of its sub-group on health and social care, warmly welcomed the recent inclusion of sign languages in the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile for the assessment of pre-school children's development. Our witnesses were deeply concerned, however, about inadequate BSL provision for Deaf children in early years, reporting that some children arrive at school age essentially "without language".² This language deprivation was identified as a structural inequality.³ These children will inevitably face severe challenges and high likelihood of experiencing a range of adverse outcomes, including in education, employment and health.⁴

Witnesses reported that many parents of Deaf children continue to receive outdated and erroneous advice that learning BSL will harm their children's speech development. The BDA reported that the research is clear that a bi-lingual, bi-modal (sign and speech) approach is typically the most beneficial for Deaf children's development, wellbeing and life outcomes.⁵ We understand that research conducted by the economic

¹ [Access to British Sign Language](#), 10 September 2025, HC 987

² Q18 [Dr Atkinson]

³ Q18 [Rebecca Mansell]

⁴ Q18 [Dr Atkinson]

⁵ Q18 [Rebecca Mansell]



Women and Equalities Committee

think tank RAND, to be published later this year, will show that a comprehensive national BSL education framework for Deaf children from early years would likely produce a substantial net economic benefit, through reduced spending on a range of interventions in the longer term.⁶

Our witnesses expressed concern about insufficient access to appropriate, funded BSL education for parents, with many spending thousands of pounds to learn to communicate with their Deaf children. Witnesses reported that, where local BSL education support is available, it is not typically tailored to the needs of parents of young Deaf children. Rebecca Mansell of the BDA described a best practice approach to family-centred support, in which, on diagnosis of their child's deafness, parents would consistently receive the best advice on family language acquisition, and access to free, Deaf-led support, ideally delivered in the home.⁷

In the light of this evidence, I would be grateful if you could set out your department's assessment of the latest research on language acquisition for Deaf children and their families, and the adequacy of current support.

We also discussed the delayed implementation of the proposed BSL GCSE. While witnesses acknowledged the complexities of introducing this new qualification, and the importance of getting it right, there was dismay that it had not yet reached the classroom despite being first proposed seven years ago.⁸ I understand that Ofqual is now completing the final stage of its consideration of the assessment rules, after which examination boards will be able to start delivering courses.⁹ I would be grateful for an update on this, and an indication of when you expect the BSL GCSE to start being taught in classrooms.

Thank you for your consideration of these matters and I look forward to your reply, which I would be grateful to receive no later than 9 October. I am copying this letter to Sir Stephen Timms, as minister responsible for the BSL Act and broader policy with regard to disabled people.

Kind regards,

⁶ Q18 [Rebecca Mansell]; see, Liam O'Dell, '[Early years sign language access for deaf children 'likely cost-effective', study finds](#)' (19 July 2025), accessed 18 September 2025

⁷ Q18 [Rebecca Mansell]

⁸ Q20 [Rebecca Mansell]

⁹ [Sign Language: GCSE](#), PQ 64039, answered 9 July 2025



Women and Equalities Committee

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Sarah Owen".

Sarah Owen MP

Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee

CC: Rt Hon Sir Stephen Timms MP, Minister for Social Security and Disability