Right to Sign – British Sign Language in schools

March 2017
Our vision is of a world without barriers for every deaf child.
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Acknowledgements

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A special mention to Daisy Picking who was an endless driving force of the project and without her this campaign would not have been possible.

We would like to acknowledge the work of Ed Mortimer and Amy Edwards from the National Children’s Bureau in analysing and producing this report. In addition thank you to Dr Jennifer Gibb for her assistance in setting up the analysis and reporting stage of the project.

Our thanks also extend to the many organisations, in particular the British Deaf Association, who supported the campaign and helped to promote and publicise the survey throughout the UK.

Together you’ve made this campaign possible and we look forward to continuing the joint efforts to improve young people’s right to sign.
Executive summary

This report summarises the findings of a survey of deaf and hearing young people about interest in, and opportunities to learn, British Sign Language (BSL).

The survey clearly engaged a large number of children and young people (2,128) with a genuine interest in and commitment to BSL. There were high levels of engagement with, and support for, learning BSL and a range of positive reasons for wanting to learn. There were high levels of responses from deaf and hearing young people from different age groups and across the four nations of the UK.

- 97% thought BSL should be taught in schools.
- 92% thought BSL should be offered as a GCSE or equivalent.
- 91% wanted to learn more BSL.
- 83% said they would be interested in studying BSL to GCSE level or equivalent.
- 75% knew at least some BSL (84% among those identifying as deaf).
- 44% were, or had been, active learners of BSL (mainly at introductory level and Levels 1 and 2).
- 21% used either BSL or a combination of speech and signing to communicate.

Reasons for learning or wanting to learn BSL included:

- inclusivity – making sure that deaf people were fully integrated in society and not disadvantaged because others couldn't communicate with them effectively
- the importance of communication in general
- being able to communicate with family and friends
- because learning BSL is fun
- being able to use BSL can help people with employment prospects, both directly (e.g. working with people who are deaf) or indirectly (e.g. being able to provide better customer service).
We are calling on the governments of all four countries to introduce BSL to their school curriculum and support deaf and hearing young people’s right to sign.

“I want sign language to be part of my career in my future so I would like to take the qualifications I need in order to get the best job.”

“Allow more of a bridge between hearing and deaf worlds. Basic conversations such as ordering a coffee or asking for directions a lot easier. Also to help remove negative stereotypes and ignorant attitudes of some hearing people.”

“We can break walls of communication and make friends with the deaf community, instead of ignoring them.”

“For me it would count as something I made an effort to do and I think universities would be interested to hear that I learned BSL.”

“It would be widely recognised to be a good qualification by employers, and is more likely to be of interest to students.”

“Because a school is [a] public place to be social. We should learn different ways to be social. It’s also just another way of communication so it should be more well known.”
1. Introduction

Our Young People’s Advisory Board launched a survey in December 2016 to explore young people’s perceptions of learning British Sign Language (BSL).

Our Young People’s Advisory Board represent deaf young people across the UK. They act as ambassadors, lobby decision makers and campaign in the interests of deaf young people.

The survey included questions relating to children and young people’s:

- experience of learning BSL
- views on learning BSL generally
- views on learning BSL at school
- views on other opportunities to learn BSL for free.

The survey was aimed at children and young people aged between 8 and 25 years old and was open between 12 December 2016 and 15 January 2017. The survey was available online and in print, and was promoted through our social media and by supporter organisations.
1.1 Interpretation of findings

Due to the self-selecting nature of the sample, the survey results are likely to be somewhat biased towards those who already had positive views and experiences of BSL. This may be reflected in the responses so findings should be interpreted with this in mind.

The results of this report have been verified and exclude non-responders. In tables and charts, percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number. Where there are no respondents in a category, this is represented by ‘–’. Where the percentage is greater than zero but less than 0.5 it is represented by ‘*’.

We have broken down some responses by country within the UK. Note that the base sizes for some sub-groups are very low so should be treated with caution.
2. Profile of respondents

A total of 2,167 people responded to the survey. Respondents who indicated they worked directly with deaf children, young people or adults were classified as professionals and excluded from the analysis. The findings are therefore based on responses from 2,128 children and young people.

Most children and young people who responded to the survey were hearing (67%), while a third considered themselves to be deaf (which also included hearing loss, hearing impaired and hard of hearing) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Hearing status

![Pie chart showing hearing status with 67% hearing and 33% deaf]

- Deaf (N=708)
- Hearing (N=1420)
2.1 Age

Nearly two-fifths (38%) of respondents were aged 19–25 years old, a quarter (25%) were aged 16–18 and a further quarter (24%) were 12–15 years old. Proportionally fewer 8–11 year olds (13%) responded to the survey (see Table 1).

Table 1. Age of respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8–11</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12–15</td>
<td>513</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16–18</td>
<td>526</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19–25</td>
<td>811</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,128</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen from Figure 2 below, proportionately there were more responses from deaf than hearing young people in the 8–11 and 12–15 age brackets. Nearly 20% of deaf respondents were aged 8–11, in comparison to 10% of hearing respondents. Similarly, 28% of deaf respondents were aged 12–15 years old, in comparison to 22% of hearing children in the same age group.

For the 16–18 and 19–25 age brackets, the opposite was true; respondents in these categories were proportionately more likely to be hearing. In the 19–25 age bracket, this difference was most pronounced, with 42% being hearing and 30% deaf.
2.2 Country

Over three-quarters of responses (76%) came from children and young people in England, with 11% coming from Scotland, 9% from Wales and 4% from Northern Ireland (see Table 2).

### Table 2. Country of residence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>1,620</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Ireland</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>2,128</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At least a third of respondents in each country were deaf (see Figure 3). The lowest proportion of deaf respondents was in England (32%), and the highest proportion was in Northern Ireland (46%).
Figure 3. Hearing status across different countries

- Deaf (N=708)
- Hearing (N=1420)
3. Views and experiences of British Sign Language

We asked respondents a variety of questions about their use, experience and knowledge of British Sign Language (BSL). The results of these questions are presented below.

**Most respondents used speech to communicate (78%) (see Table 3).** A further 14% used a combination of speech and sign language and 7% used BSL.

--- Table 3. Communication methods used by respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication method</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Using speech</td>
<td>1651</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A combination of speech and sign language</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Sign Language</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sign Supported English (SSE)</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sign language from a different country</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The total numbers are larger than the total number of respondents as participants could select more than one answer.

Unsurprisingly, 91% of hearing respondents used speech to communicate and less than 10% used other forms of communication (see Figure 4). Less than half of deaf respondents (49%) used speech, but it was still the most common form of communication. Just over a quarter of deaf respondents (27%) used a combination of speech and sign language, while less than a fifth (19%) relied solely on BSL.
Figure 4. Communication methods across deaf and hearing respondents

Using speech: Deaf (49%) Hearing (27%)
A combination of speech and sign language: Deaf (7%) Hearing (27%)
British Sign Language (BSL): Deaf (19%) Hearing (1%)
Sign Supported English (SSE): Deaf (4%) Hearing (1%)
Sign language from a different country: Deaf (1%) Hearing (1%)

0 20 40 60 80 100

www.ndcs.org.uk
Freephone Helpline 0808 800 8880 (voice and text)
3.1 Knowledge of BSL

We asked young people whether they knew any BSL. Three-quarters of young people (75%) indicated they knew at least a little bit of BSL (see Table 4) – this included fingerspelling, numbers and greetings. A quarter (25%) did not know any BSL.

--- Table 4. Knowledge of BSL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes, I know a lot</td>
<td>442</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, I know a little bit</td>
<td>1,043</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>487</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unsurprisingly, a higher percentage of deaf children and young people knew a lot of BSL (34% compared to 18% of hearing children and young people), but other interesting differences were revealed (see Figure 5). For example, 15% of deaf children and young people did not know any BSL and nearly three-quarters (72%) of hearing respondents knew a lot or a little BSL.

--- Figure 5. Knowledge of BSL across deaf and hearing respondents

When the data was further broken down by country (see Figure 6), 83% of respondents from Northern Ireland and 75% from England indicated they knew a little or a lot of BSL. This dropped slightly for respondents in Wales and Scotland where 70% of respondents indicated they knew a little or a lot of BSL.
Figure 6. Knowledge of BSL across different countries

- 67% Deaf (N=708)
- 33% Hearing (N=1420)
3.2 Learning BSL

We also asked young people about their experience of learning BSL.

44% of respondents indicated that they had completed/attended/undertaken a course in BSL.

The findings revealed that more deaf than hearing young people had attended a formal BSL course. Nearly half of deaf young people (49%) had attended a course of any level, in comparison to slightly fewer hearing young people (41%).

Of all the young people who said they had undertaken a qualification, the vast majority (84%) had undertaken an introductory, Level 1 or Level 2 qualification (see Table 5). Less than a fifth (16%) had completed a qualification at Level 3 or above.

--- Table 5. BSL qualifications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I've done an introduction to BSL course</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I've done BSL Level 1</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I've done BSL Level 2</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I've done BSL Level 3</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I've done BSL Level 4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I've done BSL Level 6</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There were slight differences between the level of qualifications taken by deaf and hearing children and young people (see Figure 7).

33% of hearing children and young people had completed an introductory course in comparison to 25% of deaf children and young people. In contrast, 31% of deaf children and young people had completed a Level 1 course in comparison to 28% of hearing children and young people. 29% of deaf children and young people had completed a Level 2 course, in comparison to 23% of hearing children and young people. For qualifications higher than this, there were a similar number of deaf and hearing young people completing courses.
3.3 Learning more BSL

We also asked young people whether they wanted to learn (more) BSL. Respondents overwhelmingly wanted to learn more BSL, with 91% indicating this was something they wanted. When exploring the data further, age did not appear to play a factor. Differences in the other groups will be discussed below.

Interestingly, there were differences in wanting to learn BSL depending on whether respondents were deaf or hearing (see Figure 8). The vast majority from both groups wanted further learning, with 85% of deaf young people and 94% of hearing young people indicating a desire to learn more. Of the respondents that indicated they did not want to learn more BSL, more were deaf (15%) than hearing (6%). These findings suggest a minority of deaf young people did not see the need to learn more BSL, possibly because they were already proficient.
When considering the country of residence we found further differences, however, interest in learning more BSL remained consistently high across all four nations (see Figure 9). 89% in Northern Ireland, 83% in Wales and 92% of young people in England and Scotland wanted to learn more BSL.
3.4 Learning BSL at school

We asked young people whether they thought BSL should be taught in schools. 

97% of respondents thought BSL should be taught in schools.

Further analysis showed there were no significant differences depending on a respondent’s age, hearing or deafness and country of residence. Indeed, the respondents overwhelmingly thought schools should teach BSL to students.

We also asked respondents why they felt this way. For the most part, their reasons for wanting BSL to be taught in schools focused on communication and ensuring deaf people are included in society. Many respondents likened learning BSL to learning French or Spanish and thought it was equally, if not more, important. Young people said:

“*We can break walls of communication and make friends with the deaf community, instead of ignoring them.*”

“*Because a school is a public place to be social. We should learn different ways to be social. It’s also just another way of communication so it should be more well known.*”

“*Allow more of a bridge between hearing and deaf worlds. Basic conversations such as ordering a coffee or asking for directions a lot easier. Also to help remove negative stereotypes and ignorant attitudes of some hearing people.*”

Young people also cited benefits around the numbers of pupils who would then be able to learn BSL, the advantages of doing this from a young age and the need for this skill in life. Of the 3% who did not believe schools should teach BSL, their reasons centred on time pressures that already exist in the curriculum, the usefulness of BSL for those who are not deaf and personal choice.
92% of respondents also believed that schools should offer a BSL GCSE. Respondents cited similar reasons to those already discussed including the advantages around communication and equality, and likened it to other second language GCSE options within schools. Many also stressed the benefits of the qualification in terms of opening up doors for future careers, but wanted to maintain a degree of personal choice to help them tailor their chosen subjects to their strengths and interests. Respondents indicated they thought it should be a GCSE for a variety of reasons:

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**Figure 10. Do you think secondary schools should offer a BSL GCSE (National 4 or 5 in Scotland)?**

![Circle chart showing 92% Yes and 8% No](image)

- No (N=174)
- Yes (N= 1920)

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*“It would be widely recognised to be a good qualification by employers, and is more likely to be of interest to students.”*

*“BSL is as valid a language as any other. Those who use it or have learned to use it ought to be able to show that skill and dedication through a recognised qualification.”*

Those who did not want schools to offer a GCSE in BSL largely felt that having formal examinations were not the best option and that this would add an unnecessary amount of stress and pressure for students. Therefore, they appeared to not want the examination, rather than not wanting time to learn the skill itself. Respondents said:

*“I think it should just be a skill, not a formal qualification.”*

*“Keep the lessons fun rather than having to learn in a pressured way like it is with GCSEs.”*
Hearing respondents also felt that it would be easier for deaf students to achieve a BSL GCSE. They felt deaf students using BSL in their everyday life would be at an unfair advantage and that they would secure better grades in an exam environment.

Further analysis revealed differences between certain groups. Although overall there appeared to be little variance between age groups, slightly more 19–25 year olds (95%) believed schools should offer BSL as a GCSE (see Figure 11).

When looking at the data across the different countries (see Figure 12), the vast majority of respondents in each country wanted schools to offer BSL as a GCSE. These figures ranged from 96% (Northern Ireland), to 93% (Scotland and England) and 82% (Wales).
To further understand if there was an appetite for a BSL GCSE, we asked respondents whether they would be interested in studying for this qualification if their school offered it. 83% of respondents indicated that they would be interested in studying for a GCSE or equivalent in BSL. Respondents who expressed an interest gave similar reasons as to why they thought schools should teach BSL and why schools should offer a GCSE in BSL. Indeed, communication, increased knowledge/skills and career prospects featured heavily in young people’s reasoning. Having a qualification in the skill also helped to legitimise it and was seen to be of particular benefit for university and employment prospects:

“For me it would count as something I made an effort to do and I think universities would be interested to hear that I learned BSL.”

“I want sign language to be part of my career in my future so I would like to take the qualifications I need in order to get the best job.”

“So I can be qualified to be a professional signer and be able to communicate with others easily.”

Respondents who were not interested in studying for a GCSE in BSL were split into two categories. The first was those who did not think schools should offer a BSL GCSE and therefore did not want to take it; the second was those who did think schools should offer it, though they personally did not want to take it up. As such, personal choice played a large part in young people’s rationales.

“Although it would be a beneficial subject, I would not take it to exam level as I need to take other subjects which will help with my chosen career path.”

“There are other subjects that are of higher priority for me, and the stress of learning it and studying for the exams would not be worth it.”

We further analysed the data to explore any differences between groups. Interestingly, slightly more hearing young people (87%) were interested in studying for a GCSE in BSL, in comparison to 81% of their deaf peers (see Figure 13). Nonetheless, these findings continue to show the positivity felt towards BSL as a qualification with over 80% of respondents expressing an interest in study.
There also appeared to be differences between respondents in different countries of the UK (see Figure 14). In Wales, two-thirds (67%) of respondents expressed an interest; this rose to 82% in Scotland and almost 90% in England and Northern Ireland.
4. Existing opportunities for learning British Sign Language

We asked young people if they knew of any opportunities to learn BSL. Respondents shared their experiences of where they had learnt BSL for free or places where they knew they could learn.

Many respondents did not know of anywhere they were able to learn BSL for free and expressed frustration with this. Some mentioned that learning BSL was expensive and that this acted as a significant barrier. However, some respondents mentioned organisations such as colleges or community centres which offered courses at a reduced cost.

Respondents also cited a number of places that taught BSL for free:

- schools including learning in lessons and lunchtime or at after-school clubs
- colleges and universities
- online resources such as YouTube tutorials, resources from BSL websites and apps
- Brownies, Scouts and Cub groups for basic skills
- youth clubs
- community centres
- local libraries
- individual contacts such as friends or parents.

Deaf young people, or people with a deaf family member, also mentioned deaf clubs run by third sector organisations.

Respondents believed that through access to free learning resources, more people would use BSL. Consequently, they thought it was important there were more free opportunities to learn BSL.
5. Conclusion

Schools are a microcosm of our society. They set the groundwork for young people to learn, develop and build skills for the future. But British Sign Language (BSL) is notably absent as a formal school qualification.

The results of this research show an overwhelming desire among deaf and hearing young people to learn BSL and to have the option to engage with the deaf community. Respondents viewed BSL in an incredibly positive light and the number of young people interested in learning or having the option to learn was extremely high across all ages and countries.

The desire to learn contrasts with the high cost of learning and difficulties in accessing BSL courses. Ensuring that BSL is widely available at schools will give young people greater access and this research suggests that numbers interested in taking the GCSE would be slightly higher amongst hearing young people.

This research will form the evidence for the Right to Sign campaign, led by deaf young people, to challenge the governments of all four countries to introduce a BSL GCSE or Scottish National 4/5 at schools.

For more information about this campaign go to www.buzz.org.uk.

About the National Deaf Children’s Society

The National Deaf Children’s Society is the leading charity dedicated to creating a world without barriers for deaf children and young people. We help deaf children thrive by providing impartial practical and emotional support to them and their families, and by challenging governments and society to meet their needs.

To find out more about our work go to www.ndcs.org.uk.
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National Deaf Children’s Society’s Freephone Helpline: 0808 800 8880 (voice and text)

Email: helpline@ndcs.org.uk

www.ndcs.org.uk