

Scottish Government submission of 14 March 2022

PE1867/D - Establish a new national qualification for British Sign Language (BSL)

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a further response regarding this petition, following its consideration by the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on 2 February 2022.

Your committee has written to ascertain what qualifications must be in place to provide students with the opportunity to learn BSL, or any other additional language, from Primary 1 onward, and I am happy to offer clarification on this point.

It is clear that the petitioner wants more children to learn BSL from a young age, identifies the 1+2 languages policy as a means of achieving this, and sees a lack of the right qualification as an impediment. There is some confusion over what qualifications are required, and I hope to put this confusion to rest.

I also want to highlight at the outset two wider points in relation to the petition I would like to elaborate on, and that I hope will assist your committee in its deliberations:

- The steps that the petitioner is seeking are not necessarily *required* to attain the outcomes they are seeking.
- Furthermore these steps are also not necessarily *sufficient* to lead to these outcomes.

I will return to these points after offering the clarification the committee has sought.

The 1+2 languages policy

Firstly I feel it would be helpful to clarify the terms of the 1+2 languages policy, and its position within the Curriculum for Excellence. The aim of the policy is that pupils will have an entitlement to learn at least two additional languages at school (called the L2 and L3) during the Broad General Education from P1 to S3.

- The L2 is the first additional language. This should be taught consistently from P1, and follow a continuous framework of progression. The advice from Education Scotland is that, for a language to be eligible as an L2, it must be one “which children can continue to study at secondary school to

the level of a [National Qualification](#)” (i.e. National 5, Higher, Advanced Higher).

There are currently eight languages that meet this criteria in terms of qualifications. These are French, Spanish, German, Italian, Gaelic (for learners), Urdu, Mandarin and Cantonese.

- The L3 is the second additional language. This should be taught from P5 *at the latest*, although schools can begin teaching from as early as P1. Any language can be taught as an L3 (including those listed as being L2-eligible), as there are no requirements for qualifications to be in place.

Some schools use the L3 as an opportunity for pupils to learn about a variety of languages and cultures. As such, learners may not be taught the same language continuously, and this is in line with Education Scotland guidance.

In keeping with the Curriculum for Excellence, schools have broad discretion in delivering this entitlement. It is for schools to decide which languages to offer, and there is nothing to prevent them from exceeding the terms of the policy, e.g. by teaching an L3 earlier than P5. Of course, any school doing so would be expected to teaching an L2 as well in order to be delivering the entitlement correctly.

Current status of BSL within the 1+2 policy

As there is currently no National 5, Higher or Advanced Higher qualifications, BSL can currently only be taught as an L3. As explained above, this does not prevent schools from teaching it from as early as P1. We appreciate that similarities between the terminology of the 1+2 policy and SQA qualifications may cause some confusion. We believe the petitioner could be under the impression that ‘L2’ is equivalent to ‘SCQF level 2’, and that this is required for a language to be taught from P1. We hope that this point has been clarified, but for a better picture of the relationship between SCQF levels and the National Qualifications the [SCQF website](#) provides detailed information.

For BSL to become eligible as an L2, qualifications would have to be offered as set out above. The intention behind this is to ensure that pupils have the opportunity to focus on a language as they progress through primary and secondary school, and receive appropriate academic recognition for it. The SQA in their submission to the committee has set out the requirements for these qualifications to be developed, and the various factors that would need to be resolved.

Future expectations for BSL

As I set out above, it appears that the petitioner wants BSL to be offered more widely from an early age.

The Scottish Government share the petitioner's vision for BSL to become more widely taught in schools. As part of the Scottish Government's work to drive forward implementation of the 1+2 policy, we are working with Education Scotland, Scotland National Centre for Languages and other partners to promote BSL in schools and develop support material for teachers. I am pleased to report that we are seeing a substantial increase in the number of primary schools providing BSL as an L3, with 113 teaching it in 2020-21 up from 32 in 2018-19. This is why the Scottish Government does not believe the steps being sought by the petitioner are required at this time.

Based on past experience, qualifications being in place does not necessarily lead to the language being offered as an L2 by schools. An L2 should be taught continuously from P1 to S3 so the secondary school of a cluster must provide it. This can be a limiting factor. In contrast, primary schools can offer BSL as an L3 even if the secondary school does not. Ultimately, in keeping with the non-statutory status of the curriculum in Scotland, it remains the choice of schools to decide which language to teach and they will consider a range of factors in making that choice. This includes the confidence of their teaching staff, coordination with the teaching offer at the local secondary school, staff availability and sustainability, and demand or perceived demand from pupils and their parents / carers. It is for these reasons that we do not believe that the steps being sought by the petitioner are necessarily sufficient to support increased take up of BSL.

BSL may be taught as an L2 in the future, however this will require careful work beyond the development of qualifications. At this time we are focused on exploring with our partners what solutions may be implemented to build on an already positive trend.