



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

DRAFT

Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

Tuesday 9 December 2025

Session 6



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EQUALITIES, HUMAN RIGHTS AND CIVIL JUSTICE COMMITTEE
29th Meeting 2025, Session 6

CONVENER

*Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con)

*Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP)

*Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)

*Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab)

*Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Lucinda Fass (Scottish Government)

Kate Forbes (Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic)

Kevin McGowan (Scottish Government)

Kit Wyeth (Scottish Government)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Euan Donald

LOCATION

The James Clerk Maxwell Room (CR4)

Scottish Parliament

Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

Tuesday 9 December 2025

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Karen Adam): Good morning, and welcome to the 29th meeting in 2025 of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee. We have no apologies this morning, and we welcome back Paul O’Kane as a member of the committee. I thank Rhoda Grant for her time and input during her short tenure as a committee member.

Under agenda item 1, I ask the committee to agree to take in private agenda item 3, which is consideration of a draft report on the committee’s pre-budget scrutiny for 2026-27. Do members agree to do so?

Members *indicated agreement.*

British Sign Language Inquiry

10:02

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is an evidence session following publication of the committee’s report on the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015, which was published on 26 September. I refer members to papers 1 and 2.

I welcome to the meeting Kate Forbes, Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic. She is accompanied by officials from the Scottish Government: Kevin McGowan, unit head, equality division; Kit Wyeth, interim deputy director, inclusion, attainment and wellbeing division; and Lucinda Fass, additional support for learning policy officer. You are all very welcome this morning. I invite the Deputy First Minister to make an opening statement.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): Good morning. I am delighted to be back to discuss the impact of the 2015 act, the BSL national plan and BSL local plans following the publication of the committee’s inquiry report. As you know, this is a significant year for BSL in Scotland, as it marks 10 years since the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 was passed. In those 10 years, the Scottish Government has produced two national plans alongside local BSL plans produced by listed authorities.

I would like to acknowledge the significant contributions of the deaf and deafblind communities, interpreters, practitioners and representative organisations, whose work has delivered tangible improvements to the daily lives of BSL users. The committee’s inquiry has provided a valuable opportunity to recognise which actions have succeeded, and to identify where further progress is required. That is why I welcome the committee’s scrutiny, because none of us believes that the situation is perfect.

I have met many community members over the past year and they have told me about the practical effects of the 2015 act in their lives and the good that has stemmed from it, but they have also pressed me quite robustly on the challenges that still exist, pointing to areas such as health and education and stressing the importance of embedding BSL language and culture at an early stage of young people’s lives. Over the period that I have been in Government, one of the most inspiring engagements that I have taken part in involved listening to BSL users and understanding their experience and where they want to see further progress.

We remain committed to improving the lives of BSL users in Scotland. The current BSL national

plan concludes in 2029, and at its heart is a clear focus on the accessibility of public services and tackling the systemic barriers that are faced by BSL users in their daily lives. The 10 priority themes in the plan are areas that the deaf and deafblind communities have told us are important to them, such as education, health, justice and culture, but those are wide-ranging sectors covering all aspects of society, and the scale of the task is quite significant. That cannot be an excuse, because dismantling barriers is the right thing to do. It needs to be a priority but it requires that whole-scale change. We have been clear that the six-year plan is not static, so it needs to continue to evolve, learning from and building on the actions within it during its life cycle.

Your committee report has provided us with the opportunity to reflect on the actions that we have set out. It contained 44 recommendations, and we have assessed each recommendation against two key factors. First, the extent to which it aligns with the priority areas and actions in the BSL national plan, and, second, its overall deliverability, which includes a consideration of resource and cost implications. We have accepted, either in part or in full, 40 of the committee's recommendations, which I think is quite a significant majority. We have also agreed to further consider three recommendations, noting that some more detailed analysis is required to determine the cost and the deliverability of the proposals, but we are happy to come back to the committee to give an update on the progress on those three. We declined one recommendation, simply for the reason that it is for the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service and not for the Scottish Government—nothing more profound than that.

In accepting the recommendations, we are reaffirming our commitment to tackling barriers. In doing so, we also recognise the importance of key partners such as listed authorities that are responsible for delivering BSL local plans. That is why we have created a support network for listed authorities, to enable them to share good practice resources and raise challenges. That network will encourage partnership working, improving data collection, fostering connectivity and enabling greater accountability. Lastly, the BSL national plan implementation advisory group also plays a key role in informing actions delivered under the plan, and each partner has taken an active interest in the committee inquiry, with some of their points helping to inform the recommendations.

The second year of the current plan is focused on delivery. We want to work across all portfolios and look for opportunities to strengthen and embed actions for change. BSL users have made it clear to me and to this committee that the BSL act is an important piece of legislation, and that it is important to take that law and implement it in

reality in order to ensure that everybody has the same experience of being able to access services fairly and with equity.

The Convener: Thank you. We will now move on to questions, and I will start off. What was the overall response from the Scottish Government to the recommendations in the report?

Kate Forbes: First, we strongly welcome the very fact that the committee undertook the inquiry. The fact that we have essentially accepted the majority of the recommendations—declining to accept outright only three, because some detailed work is required on them—reflects the welcome of the committee's recommendations by the Scottish Government. As I said in my opening statement, we assessed every recommendation against two key factors.

I can go through the key actions that we will take forward, although it might be a bit more long-winded. We are funding a BSL network for listed authorities to share best practice; providing support to improve local BSL plans; exploring and costing a national BSL tutor plan for Scotland in conjunction with education and BSL partnerships; engaging with key education professionals and BSL stakeholders to develop new and enhanced best practice guidance to support BSL users to become registered teachers; promoting Contact Scotland BSL, which involves the introduction of video relay interpreting, and SignPort, which will help in relation to digital exclusion and rural access; undertaking a review of additional support for learning, which is why we are delighted to have Lucinda Fass with us today, and revising guidance on appropriate qualifications for teachers of the deaf; and considering existing opportunities for pupils to learn BSL within the current programme of curriculum qualifications and assessment reform. Those are the top-level actions that directly stem from the committee's inquiry.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): Good morning, Deputy First Minister. I have rejoined the committee at the concluding stage of this piece of work but was present for previous evidence sessions. In that evidence, we heard many views about the parity of esteem that BSL will be held in alongside Scotland's other languages. Of course, nobody would want to set languages against one another. It is important that we recognise their richness and support them all.

However, we heard a lot of asks for there to be an oversight body for BSL, similar to Bòrd na Gàidhlig, which has an important role in supporting the Gaelic language as well as being able to speak a bit of truth to power and very often compel, if that is the right word, local authorities and others to deliver on Gaelic. You and I spoke about that issue in a previous evidence session, but has your thinking evolved with regard to

whether it might be worth considering establishing a national body for BSL?

Kate Forbes: We said in our response that we are very keen to explore that. We understood from the committee's work that there was a desire for the establishment of a BSL national centre or a national oversight body. You very kindly did not go into excessive detail about what its function or remit would be. We have made a commitment to explore that further, as we think that the idea warrants further consideration. We definitely want to explore it further and understand how it would fit within the Scottish BSL landscape, what its value would be to the BSL community in particular, and then—inevitably—what resources it would require. However, none of those issues are ones that would stop the show. We have made a very simple commitment to explore the issue further and to look at what role and remit such a body might have. If there is a particular appetite from BSL users for that, no one in Government would oppose it.

Paul O'Kane: That is welcome to hear, and I am sure that your position will be welcomed by those in the BSL community who gave evidence. I wonder about timing and the likelihood of action being taken, given that we are in a challenging timeframe, with the end of the parliamentary session approaching. What are the Government's thoughts with regard to starting work on the recommendations before the election and then ensuring that there is a legacy piece? Do you have a view on how that might take shape? Would there be a consultation? I appreciate that it is hard to say, but I think that people will want a bit more detail on what the commitment is.

Kate Forbes: We have started the process, because we had to respond to all the committee's recommendations anyway. We have gone through all of them and established which ones are fairly straightforward to implement and which ones will take a bit more time. The one concerning the establishment of an oversight body falls into the latter category. I am speaking from personal experience, having just come through the Scottish Languages Bill process. I was not in Government when the Education, Children and Young People Committee first started taking evidence on that bill, but I know that the feedback was split 50:50 on whether a commissioner would be better than Bòrd na Gàidhlig. We decided to stick with Bòrd na Gàidhlig but, in the context of an oversight body for BSL, I am conscious that there will be some strong views on whether there should be a board structure or whether another format would be best.

On timescales, it is highly unlikely at this stage that anything new will be introduced prior to the election. My view is that a Government should do

all the work in advance of the election, with a view to an incoming Government being able to pick up the mantle and build something. Those are my thoughts on that.

The team might want to say something about consultation. We will need to flesh out our approach a bit further and will probably undertake more informal consultation before moving to something formal. It would be premature to move straight to formal consultation before the idea has been circulated and people have formulated a view on it.

Paul O'Kane: That is fair. I infer from what you have said that there will be on-going work, even at that informal level, with consultees. That is welcome, and I am sure that this committee will want to reflect that in its legacy reporting.

I will move on to talk about compliance with the 2015 act. We know, from the evidence that we heard, that 62 per cent of listed authorities comply with statutory duties, with regard to BSL translations and their authority plans. What steps is the Government intending to take to improve compliance, which, at 62 per cent, is obviously not where we want it to be?

Kate Forbes: There are two parts to that: the support element and the reporting element. I will bring in one of the team on the reporting element.

I am very keen on robust reporting mechanisms to ensure that everybody is doing what they need to do. Having said that, I also think that better input support is required, so that listed authorities know how to meet their statutory obligations. It is very easy to condemn where an organisation falls short, but what is actually needed is working with organisations to be better. That is where the network comes in.

10:15

The network will recruit expert deaf BSL user consultants who are extremely experienced or have expertise in different areas in relation to the BSL national plan. That could be in areas such as justice—previously this committee has asked me questions on justice—education and health, so that lived experience will come in. They will then be recruited by the network, and the network will help listed authorities share good practice, provide them with support, encourage better partnership working, expand and create opportunities to improve data collection so that reporting is meaningful, and analyse the local BSL plans. It will last for two years, which will allow for evaluation of its effectiveness. It will also broaden the reach of some key organisations who were formed since the 2015 act passed, such as Social Security Scotland, and organisations that do not come

under the act that have voluntarily made their own BSL plans.

Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland will work with the listed authorities and the wider community to produce and publish reports in BSL and in English to evaluate the effectiveness of the network model. I understand from engagement with the ALLIANCE that it is very interested in the approach and is very keen to be involved in the network. It could be transformational in supporting the effectiveness of listed authorities as they support BSL users in Scotland.

Kevin McGowan can come on to the reporting element, but, before we are too robust on the reporting side, I would like to see the network being given a little bit of reprieve until it is embedded and effective.

Kevin McGowan (Scottish Government): We have made the assumption that listed authorities understand their obligations under the 2015 act and that they are actively engaging with the deaf community to help them form their local plans. Some are doing excellent work in that space, and others need guidance and steer. We feel that the peer support from the network would offer that opportunity. The network is a good place for people to discuss how they are collecting data and how they are monitoring and analysing that data within their local context.

The network is also an opportunity to share good practice and what is working well in different parts of the country, and it can help to establish partnership working. It provides the wider opportunity to improve overall reporting and engagement to assist listed authorities. The way that we have set up the structure with the ALLIANCE enables that work to continue over a longer-term piece. Continuous loops of learning will be embedded from the outset.

Paul O'Kane: That is quite comprehensive and I am conscious of time, so I will hand back to you, convener.

The Convener: I will bring in Maggie Chapman to ask her questions.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): In your opening remarks, Deputy First Minister, you talked about the national plan, how it is not static and how it needs to evolve and be built on as we go through. The correspondence that you sent the committee notes comments that we heard during the inquiry, which we highlighted in the report, about how the second national plan appears to be watered down. You partially accept that, but you give the space for building and evolving. Do you want to make any comments on the robustness of the plan? How do we make sure that it actually delivers and does not feel as though it is not as ambitious as it should be?

Kate Forbes: I am aware of some of those comments. It is perhaps difficult for me to be as robust on this area as it is on other areas, because I was not involved in the early formulation of the plan.

I confirm that it is not a static document. It is designed to be responsive to new barriers that emerge for BSL users over its six-year life cycle. I know that BSL users were consulted extensively in the development of the second plan. There was a steering group that included representatives from organisations of the deaf and deafblind communities contributing to that action, and those discussions were very wide ranging.

We are committed to on-going engagement and we have established the implementation advisory group specifically to tackle delivery. You could have a super-ambitious plan that is not implemented, which would not be much use, or you could have a plan that feels less ambitious, but, irrespective of how ambitious or otherwise a plan is, if it is implemented it could be totally transformational. We are constantly engaging with BSL users to reflect their lived experiences, and there are several actions requiring collaborative working, for example in education, health and justice. I think there has been some really exciting progress, particularly in education through the Education (Scotland) Act 2025.

There has been progress, and that is how I see it working. The implementation advisory group is the key driver for identifying solutions to any challenges that emerge that were not necessarily captured in the national plan. Does that answer your question sufficiently?

Maggie Chapman: Yes. You talked about the engagement with BSL users during the development of the plan. That happened, but they were still disappointed when the final plan was developed. They thought that certain conversations had gone further than were reflected in the plan. The implementation advisory group that you talk about is one mechanism of ensuring that we cannot just tweak the plan, but make the next few years as ambitious as possible. We might tick all the boxes, but those boxes have to deliver meaningful change. I accept your point about education.

You highlighted this morning the high-level priorities of engagement and the reviewing of qualification guidance, which was really good to hear.

This may follow on from Paul O'Kane's question. Given the need to support other public bodies, what is the role of engagement between the Government, other public bodies and BSL users? How do you see that triangle working? Where there will be disagreement or frustration

because of resource allocations and so on, what is the role of engagement in making sure that the plan delivers for BSL users?

Kate Forbes: Others might want to come in on that, particularly with regard to education. I see there being an important role. We should be accountable to Parliament, and parliamentary committees should be very robust with Government on where we are not doing enough. We need to channel that robustness to other listed authorities, although like local authorities, they are not directly answerable to Government. I said in response to Paul O'Kane that I want to see the network work well before we get too robust in reporting. However, once the network is established and there is very obvious extensive access to support, there will be absolutely no excuse for not comprehensively delivering the service that listed authorities are statutorily advised to deliver.

I frequently come across the fact that some people have brilliant experience and some people have really poor experience. In other words, there is a postcode lottery element that is down to local delivery, and not necessarily down to the entirety of a particular part of the public sector. For example, somebody's experience of accessing healthcare might be really superb in one part of the country, whereas it is really poor in another. The problem, therefore, is not health boards per se. The question is whether every health board is recognising its obligation.

Maybe six months ago, I did some engagement with Highland BSL users. We specifically decided to go outside. It was not just that it was close to home, but we decided to go to a rural area. I was blown away by how different the experiences were in a rural area compared with what I have heard in some of the other engagement that I have had. To be honest, most of my engagement has been with organisations that are located in Edinburgh. Those experiences were totally different on even some of the basic elements, such as being able to get an interpreter. There are just fewer interpreters and it is harder to access training.

You asked about listed authorities and support. There is the support, but there is also the recognition of an obligation, and we expect equity across Scotland irrespective of where somebody is. That needs to come through more in our monitoring. The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities might say that it has now implemented X, Y and Z. Fine—great—but does that filter down to every local authority, and even within local authorities, is that filtering down to everybody's experience of engagement? This is where we start making policy in direct response to situations—almost live policy. I would like to know whether we have a means yet of monitoring that intensely local

effect, beyond just people raising their lived experience.

Kevin McGowan: I am in agreement, Deputy First Minister, you will be glad to know. BSL local plans are imperative at the local level. Being able to engage with listed authorities to understand what is happening locally is crucial for us at government level. The network will definitely provide an avenue for that.

To give credit to many of our stakeholders who sit on the implementation advisory group, they are very close to different parts of the system, whether that is at a community level or a listed authority level. They are gathering data and intelligence and feeding that back through the implementation advisory group, and therefore informing the BSL national plan.

The mechanism is there. Could it be strengthened? Absolutely. We need to be careful not to overload deaf and deafblind BSL users with constant consultation fatigue and concentrate on our actions and demonstrate what they are doing for their lives. I take on board the point that you have made.

Maggie Chapman: There is a concern that the plan could have been more ambitious. If the local plans have that ambition, that may be more effective. I do not think there is disagreement about government setting the standards that are expected, but there needs to be an understanding that different public bodies and different listed authorities will need to work through those differently because of geography, rurality and all sorts of different things. It will be interesting to see progress on that in subsequent years.

I will leave it there because I know that others want to come in with questions on specific details.

The Convener: On that point, we took a lot of evidence from people with lived experience, including BSL users and deafblind people. If somebody is not seeing any actions or tangible outcomes from what they have been consulted on, and they are coming up against the same issues time and again, that is where consultation fatigue kicks in. If somebody has been consulted, they are happy enough to keep going when they see that their input has actually contributed to some kind of change. When we see that consultation fatigue, it is important to note that there may just not have been enough change to empower those people, so they might not want to feed back.

We will now have questions from Tess White, please.

10:30

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): Good morning, Deputy First Minister and officials.

My question is about education. Thank you for saying in your address that, as part of the planning, you are costing a national tutor course and will support BSL users to become teachers. Do you have any other thoughts on how to increase the number of deaf BSL users who are qualified to teach BSL-using pupils?

Kate Forbes: Yes. I may bring in Lucinda Fass or somebody else shortly.

There are a number of routes to supporting more trained teachers and tutors—if I can expand it to tutors as well. Right now, qualification accreditation and training for the BSL tutor workforce are delivered by various different bodies. There is a shortage of that workforce across the country, which obviously has a negative impact, so we are looking at whether we could establish a national provision to bring more individuals into the profession and to upskill those who have some proficiency. The different organisations that are involved right now are the British Deaf Association and BSL learning partners such as Signature, Qualifications Scotland and higher education institutions—it is all very piecemeal. The first active step is to bring them together and to ask, “Where are the gaps, and can we do something jointly? Can we do something nationally to bring more individuals into the sector?” That is vital, because, from the engagement that I have had, BSL tutors are absolutely critical.

The point about training teachers in our schools is one thing, but what has struck me in all my conversations is that having BSL tutors who supplement what is happening in our schools can be one of the most transformational experiences. I would just make that small distinction.

In terms of supporting BSL users to become teachers themselves, we are looking at whether the initial teacher education at university could create a specific dedicated course for BSL users. That would take some years of development and approval within a university, followed by General Teaching Council for Scotland accreditation, so it is not a quick approach, but it is being considered just now. It would need to be taken forward through engagement with each of those organisations, so we cannot say unequivocally now that we will do it, but I am keen to look at it.

Those are two direct actions for supplementing the current provision. I do not know whether any of our education officials wants to add to any of that.

Tess White: Thank you. I have a follow-up question. You cannot manage what you do not measure, so do you have a starting position for the number of trained teachers who are deaf BSL users? Do you have a figure for 10 years ago, for five years ago, for now and for the future?

Kate Forbes: We will need to get back to you on that, because I cannot find the figures quickly. I am pretty sure that we will have some data on that, but it is not at my fingertips.

Tess White: Thank you. If you could come back with that information, that would be appreciated.

I will move on to my second question. We heard about the isolation that some deaf pupils feel when they are in mainstream schools. How might support for deaf pupils in mainstream schools be improved?

Kate Forbes: There are two parts to that. From the teaching perspective, the committee suggested that teaching students should spend some of their teaching placements in deaf schools or hubs, which is a brilliant suggestion for giving them exposure and experience. Some of these decisions are for teaching bodies, but I think that that suggestion has a lot of merit. On the curriculum, inclusion is a central value of education, so it is absolutely critical. I will ask an official to speak about it.

Lucinda Fass (Scottish Government): Mainstreaming is a central pillar of our inclusive approach to education in Scotland, as I am sure you will know. However, we acknowledge that mainstream education may be isolating for some children and young people who are deaf—for example, if there are no other pupils in their school who are deaf.

There is a presumption of mainstreaming, but a number of exceptions can be applied. It would be for the local authority to assess where the child could be educated—whether that could be in a deaf base or a deaf school—and the wishes of the child and the family would be taken into account at the same time. There are also geographical considerations, because in some council areas there might not be an obvious local place for a deaf child to be educated. That is where the teacher of deaf children and young people comes in, and BSL tutors are key to supporting the child within the mainstream environment.

Tess White: Deputy First Minister, on the bandwidth of your team, has BSL and the training and education of BSL users and tutors been factored into the objectives of your officials? What percentage of their time are your officials spending on this?

Kate Forbes: We have two groups of officials here—or maybe we have three, but I think we have two. There are those who are dedicated to BSL in the equalities directorate, who work directly with me, and there are those in the learning directorate, who work directly with Ms Gilruth, not with me, but who are doing a lot. On the BSL side, it is 100 per cent of their time. There are officials who are dedicated to supporting me in the work on

BSL. I am afraid that I cannot answer for those on the education side.

Lucinda Fass: I probably cannot quantify it exactly. However, sensory impairment education falls into my role and I work closely with equalities colleagues. The additional support for learning policy brief is large and there are lots of things in it, but sensory impairment education forms a part of it.

Tess White: In my head, I am thinking around 10 per cent. Would you say that that is a high figure?

Lucinda Fass: I would not want to quantify it, because we cover so many policies.

Tess White: But it is in there somewhere.

Lucinda Fass: It is in there, and, because of the recent work on the consultation, I have been working actively on it.

Kit Wyeth (Scottish Government): There is a team that deals with additional support for learning in its broadest sense, and I suppose that the priorities in its work fluctuate—sometimes things are nearer the top and they are lower down from time to time. However, as Lucinda Fass said, we have staff dedicated specifically to working on sensory impairment within education.

Tess White: That goes back to my point that you cannot manage what you do not measure, so having it as part of your mainstreaming work is important.

I have one final question, Deputy First Minister. Do you or your officials have any thoughts on the idea of piloting BSL learning opportunities for all pupils in Scotland?

Kate Forbes: Yes. In the mainstream curriculum, BSL can be taught in schools as an additional language within the one-plus-two approach. The 2023 one-plus-two languages survey of local authorities showed that 11 per cent of primary schools were teaching BSL as an L3 language. I do not have with me the data for high schools, but the exposure in primary schools is probably the most important.

At the moment, Education Scotland is leading on the delivery of the curriculum improvement cycle, which will ensure that the curriculum is forward looking. All eight curricular areas, including languages, will be considered, and Education Scotland has confirmed that BSL is included in the draft curriculum improvement cycle documents that the languages team has produced. Scottish Qualifications Authority awards in BSL are offered as well, and BSL is referenced in the languages evidence paper that will be published in January.

My view is that, on paper, there is access and provision, but I hear constantly that the issue is the number of teachers and tutors, as well as teachers' confidence in teaching BSL in primary and secondary schools. The other challenge that I have heard about is the balance that needs to be struck between ensuring that there is a pipeline of teachers who are proficient in BSL to support BSL-using children and using the same resource to expose non-BSL users to BSL. Does that make sense? I think that that is the tension that we have, which could be overcome by having more BSL tutors and teachers—full stop. Then we could spread them more thinly across the BSL users who need them as their primary source of teaching as well as across those who do not need them as their primary source of teaching but whose lives would be enriched, and who could enrich other people's lives, if they had access to BSL. That is one of the tensions in all of this.

The Convener: Thank you. I am pleased to hear that there will be that consideration. I think that you said in your opening statement that BSL may be embedded in the languages curriculum—is that the one-plus-two languages programme? That is excellent to hear, because a lot of the isolation of deaf children in mainstream schools is because their peers cannot communicate with them. When we think about additional needs support provision, although deaf children can have more than one additional support need, it is more often than not just a language difference—that is it. Although I know that it is multifaceted, I think that focusing on that will make an enormous difference.

I want to put across some of the lived experience that we heard, Deputy First Minister. A young student told us that they were going to sit a higher exam, but the person they had in to support them was an interpreter who was only at level 1 or 2 BSL. If you can imagine, it is like sitting higher maths and the person who is supporting you only has primary school level mathematics. That was not the fault of the child or their ability. That is completely down to the lack of language provision. When we talk about what we can do to close the attainment gap, looking at those types of issues is important.

That is why we look at the Gaelic language model as something that is so fantastic and something that we are incredibly proud of. It is something that we should be aspiring to as well because, as we know, language is not just about education. It is also about the culture that is wrapped around language, which is so vital to a person's wellbeing.

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): Good morning, Deputy First Minister. During one of our evidence sessions, we heard

about the challenges that deaf people experience while trying to access mental health services. I am aware of the BSL resource through the NHS 24 mental health hub; you might want to expand on that in your response. What more is being done to improve access to mental health services for deaf people, and are you aware of any good examples of joint work that is being done with third sector partners?

10:45

Kate Forbes: The bottom line is that we expect health boards and public sector employees to ensure that they are meeting all their public sector equality duties and to ensure that the care that they provide is safe, effective, inclusive and high quality, in line with their statutory service provision. Therefore, there is an expectation that BSL users should be able to access mental health care and support in the same way that non-BSL users can. That is a non-negotiable now.

The question then follows: why are people's experiences not equitable? There are a number of responses to that. First, there is the mental health and wellbeing workforce action plan. That is aligning all the equalities activity across the health and social care workforce. That workforce has its own delivery plan and action plan, which highlights work to embed inclusive practices across the health and social care workforce and so on. That brings together senior leaders from key sectors and organisations to develop a shared understanding of the critical areas where education and training will support the wider ambition of the mental health strategy. It is also looking at how to raise awareness, uptake and accessibility of existing reliable mental health training resources. That is what is being done right now under the mental health and wellbeing workforce action plan.

All that said, a lot of the issues come back to the same core problem, which is the root of any question that the committee might ask me. That is about access to interpreters and ensuring that there is proficiency, which goes to the convener's point about someone being able to access an interpreter but that interpreter not being proficient—I think you said that they were only at level 1. It is about being able to access proficient interpreters.

We recently launched the SignPort app, which basically enables you to book an interpreter and be confident that an interpreter will be there, so that you do not turn up to the general practitioner or another service and find that you are unable to communicate. I can talk a lot about the mental health-specific inclusivity work, but sometimes that can overcomplicate the core issue, which is whether you can access an interpreter when you

need one, irrespective of the service that you are trying to access. We have done a lot with the SignPort app and Contact Scotland BSL has just relaunched on 1 December. However, ultimately, if you train more interpreters, there will be more interpreters there. If you do more training, they will be more proficient, and I think that a lot of that is resolved through investment in training.

Marie McNair: Absolutely.

Have the emergency services been alerted to the need to ensure that there is support in place for deaf callers? That question follows on quite nicely.

Kate Forbes: Yes. The Scottish Ambulance Service is currently working with the British Deaf Association to look at what facilities it currently has in place for BSL patients and service users and how it can improve and develop in that area. The Ambulance Service is looking at ways that it can make improvements in the way that it engages and communicates about its service. The service is promoting how to be deaf aware to staff using Royal National Institute for Deaf People Scotland guidance, and there has been an increase in BSL users accessing the service via Contact Scotland and 999 BSL. Patients who are deaf, hard of hearing or have speech difficulties can use the SMS text service to contact the Ambulance Service in an emergency. The SMS text service is available to all, but users need to register for it in advance. Then, with partners at Police Scotland and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, the Ambulance Service has linked with TapSOS, which is an organisation that has developed an app for use in emergencies. That is helpful for members of the public who are deaf or hard of hearing or have difficulty with speech. That is the current provision of support that is available.

Marie McNair: It is a really vulnerable time for anyone when they are accessing emergency services and, obviously, communication is key, so it is good to hear that. Thank you.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): Good morning, Deputy First Minister, and good morning to your team.

We heard some concerning evidence about the support that is available to deaf survivors of domestic abuse. A couple of weeks ago, I attended an event that was hosted by East Dunbartonshire Women's Aid entitled "Empowering deaf women to report domestic abuse". We were told that words such as "consent" and "coercion" were foreign for many deaf women, with many thinking that domestic abuse is normal behaviour. Unfortunately, we cannot understand the full extent of the problem as data collection is poor. That is why I have put a provision in my Prevention of Domestic Abuse

(Scotland) Bill that places a duty on the police and on charities to collect demographic data on survivors of domestic abuse, such as disability status, which has received strong backing from organisations and survivors. Do you agree that better data collection is key to understanding the full extent of the problem and that better monitoring of offenders will prevent potential victims from becoming victims in the first place?

Kate Forbes: I agree with that. I also attended an event last week, which was hosted by the convener, specifically on this issue. It was about the Sign LOUD initiative, which has been funded for a year by the British Academy. That is a joint project between Heriot-Watt University and the University of Edinburgh that is looking at the connection between domestic abuse and the deaf community, and how language barriers compound the challenges that are faced by women and children experiencing domestic abuse.

The project team presented a report to me with quite comprehensive recommendations, and I gave them total reassurance that we would take those recommendations away and report back before the election on what we could do on that. Some of the research that they presented was extremely startling. Deaf women are two to three times more likely to experience domestic abuse. It has a disproportionate effect on the children, too, when they are exposed, sometimes because of the requirement for them to interpret on behalf of their mother. There are huge barriers.

We attended the event last week with members from the equally safe team in the Scottish Government, as well as the BSL team. That is another example of where there are teams in the Scottish Government that are not operating in silos but are trying to work together more closely.

However, I do not disagree with anything that you have just said. I will not go into the detail about all the things that we are currently doing, because there is excellent work going on right now. The delivering equally safe fund is providing Deaf Links with funding this year. That is a project that is integrated with Scottish Women's Aid that is supporting the delivery of the advocacy service for deaf women in the violence against women advocacy service. There is work like that going on, but it is hard to disagree with what Pam Gosal has just said or what Sign LOUD presented last week on the additional steps that are required to be taken.

Pam Gosal: Thank you. As you have mentioned women's aid organisations, I will go on to my supplementary and then go back to my other question. Deaf women are entitled to access services in the way that suits them best but, unfortunately, there is a lack of funding across Scotland for women's aid services to have

independent domestic abuse advocates who are skilled in BSL. Staff do not always have those skills and need to rely on having access to an interpreter, which may delay access to appropriate support. What action is the Scottish Government taking to ensure that women's aid organisations are provided with the funding that they need to hire more independent domestic abuse advocates who are skilled in BSL?

Kate Forbes: I think that the answer is in the project that I just mentioned. Dundee Women's Aid, Angus Women's Aid and Perthshire Women's Aid are working with Deaf Links. That is the organisation that we have provided funding to through the delivering equally safe fund. That is all about providing an advocacy service for deaf women. It provides local basic needs assistance through advocacy support in BSL and specialist support for deaf women who are experiencing gender-based violence, so it is an example. The challenge that you would put to me—and rightly so—is that, although that is great to hear for Dundee Women's Aid, Angus Women's Aid and Perthshire Women's Aid, what about all the other women's aid services? Let me take that away and understand how successful that model has been and see whether it is could be rolled out.

Pam Gosal: That was actually one of the organisations at the East Dunbartonshire Women's Aid event. It went through the project that it is doing, so I was going to ask you: what about all the others?

I have also mentioned many times that funding is only for a certain amount of time, but obviously the organisations have to bring in specialists. It is important that we look at multiyear funding so that they can keep the specialists on year after year. I hope that the Deputy First Minister will look at that as well.

I come to my last question. We were told that finding an interpreter is always at the forefront of deaf women's minds. That can be even more challenging when they are at their most vulnerable after experiencing domestic abuse. Many interpreters do not feel confident taking on domestic abuse cases, and many times deaf survivors feel more comfortable speaking with someone whose first language is BSL. What guidance will be issued to Police Scotland to ensure interpreters are provided when deaf complainants make statements?

Kate Forbes: Let me flag again SignPort, which was developed through CivTech Scotland. I do not know whether you have come across CivTech: it is an alternative approach to procurement and it starts with lived experience rather than with a contract. SignPort is an app that allows BSL users quickly to find and book an interpreter and to have that reassurance. I was at an event a few weeks

ago where it was tested by a roomful of BSL users, and I think that it could be transformational in finding an interpreter.

I referenced the police briefly in my response to Marie McNair on emergency services. I do not have anything about specific training at my fingertips, so unless anybody else wants to come in, we can come back to you.

Kevin McGowan: I will highlight that these are operational matters for Police Scotland, but Police Scotland has an equalities team in place that is connected to our stakeholders in the BSL landscape. Police Scotland is actively pursuing the issues, but we can take away the question and expand on that information further if that would be helpful.

Kate Forbes: We can perhaps ask Police Scotland to come back to you.

Pam Gosal: That would be really helpful. I ask because, when I started the three years of work on my bill, I came across a survivor who had a speech disability. Her carers were with her, and they told me that they had contacted the police to say that she was being domestically abused but, when the police came to the house, she was not speaking. The man was speaking—the perpetrator—and the police took the perpetrator's word to say that she was drunk. Basically, because no data was being recorded on disability, the police did not know how to act.

We know that about 64,000 crimes have been reported to Police Scotland. The police have no data on any ethnic background or any disability, and it is very hard for services to be provided if there is no data. Bless them, the women's aid and other great organisations are doing a great job. They are probably collecting more data than the Scottish Government, and then they have to provide the Scottish Government with evidence to say that there is a service that is needed. It should be the other way round as well—it should go both ways.

That is why I mentioned the issue, because I heard at first hand from somebody who, because of their disability, could not get across that they were being domestically abused. It was no fault of the police, because at that time the police did not know and it was not something they collected. They still do not collect that data, so it is important to highlight the issue for you to take away and to understand where it comes from.

Kate Forbes: Thank you. We will.

11:00

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): Good morning, Deputy First Minister. I have a couple of questions, and I am conscious of the time.

One question is on issues of data and disaggregating data, and I will come back to you for your thoughts on that one. One of the other key issues relates to education, health and justice. It was suggested that better support for BSL users would include people who encourage BSL users to take up roles in those areas. How can we encourage that to happen in the future? The issue is a little about the data, but probably more on encouraging BSL users into the roles where they can make a real impact.

Kate Forbes: Data is part of the national plan, and it is clear that, if we have good, strong data, we can make better decisions, particularly on public policy.

We have some useful data that comes from the census, which provides quite detailed insights into the characteristics and outcomes of BSL users. As you will know, 2.16 per cent of the Scottish population are BSL users. It also reports on whether BSL is the main language used at home by BSL users. We can do quite a good intersectional analysis of equality characteristics and outcomes for BSL users across a range of areas like health and housing. That allows us to begin to understand where there is still an evidence gap and how to address that with existing or new quantitative or qualitative evidence.

The equality evidence strategy is looking at making improvements to the availability and analysis of equality data. That is being carried forward at the moment, but it is interesting that there is quite a lot of data already.

On encouraging BSL users into roles, one of the most obvious is teaching—BSL users becoming teachers themselves because of the shortage of teachers—but, across the board, ensuring support in education allows BSL users to achieve their potential.

One of my earliest engagements with the BSL community was with Deaf Action—I cannot remember the street but it was in Edinburgh. I was struck by the fact that, because there was early provision of education for BSL users a couple of centuries ago, Scotland led the way across history, pioneering a lot of initiatives and transforming the deaf and deafblind community. In my little history lesson, I was told that it comes back to the fact that there was early provision of education. In other words, the provision of education early on equipped BSL users with the tools they needed to achieve whatever they wanted to achieve and, true enough, they went on to achieve everything they wanted to achieve. Essentially, they led the way globally with new opportunities, transformation and so on.

The idea is that education comes first and that, if everybody has an experience through education where their needs are met and they are able to communicate effectively, the world truly is their oyster in doing whatever they want to do. Teachers are therefore an area that we need to focus on. Teachers are at the root of everything—of a great experience in school, of sufficient provision at school and ultimately of everything that goes on in our economy and all the other public and private sector roles. All those opportunities are opened up with good education.

Paul McLennan: On the specific point of encouraging BSL users to take up the roles, do we monitor that at the moment, or is that something we can monitor or target? We can encourage it, but how do we evaluate that in five or 10 years' time, if we are asking whether something has been raised? Are we making sure we are accomplishing that going forward?

Kate Forbes: Do you mean BSL users going on to positive destinations when they leave school?

Paul McLennan: The question is about taking up roles in the sectors. As you said, education seems to be one, but we are talking about 2 per cent of the population. I have spoken to constituents before about some of the issues they have with healthcare, for example, so I am interested in making sure that there is representation across all the sectors. Are we looking back and evaluating that, or could we consider doing that going forward?

Kate Forbes: We probably have variations of data on that. There will be comprehensive data for school leavers and, for example, on what a school leaver goes on to do. We also have the census data, which I think gives data on employment too. We would then have an intersectional dataset on BSL users and employment. I do not think that we go out every year and collect data on what jobs BSL users are in, but I suggest that we probably already have the kind of data that we could use to build a strong picture.

Kit Wyeth: The positive destination data on school leavers is broken down by certain characteristics, but I do not know whether that includes BSL. We can certainly come back on that.

Paul McLennan: It is not a major point, but I think it is important that we pick it up. If you could come back to us, that would be great.

The Convener: That brings us to the close of this session.

I thank the Deputy First Minister and her officials for joining us today and for giving us a bit of hope. I notice that the door is cracked open and there are considerations of having a similar language

model to Gaelic. I am sure that I, and others, will be pushing at that door. It would not just give hope to a lot of deaf people and support the deaf community; if we look at the economic case—particularly with educational attainment and employment—Scotland as a whole would benefit, so I am pleased to hear about it.

I want to end on a note of the lived experience of one wee deaf boy in Scotland, who told his teacher that he did not want to learn sign language because when he grew up he was going to be hearing. He did not have any deaf role models around him, because of the isolation in the mainstream in school. For me, that has stuck out as an experience. I think that we should be looking to build on the recommendations for people like that wee boy.

Thank you all for your time. We will now go into private session.

11:07

Meeting continued in private until 11:30.

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