

View this article online at: patient.info/news-and-features/why-a-gcse-in-british-sign-language-could-prove-a-game-changer

Why a GCSE in British Sign Language could prove a game-changer

Imagine being fluent in a language that very few people understand. Now, imagine that language is one of the native languages of your country of birth. Only a small percentage of Britons currently use British Sign Language (BSL), so why would a GCSE qualification be so important?

Around [900,000 adults](#) in the UK are severely or profoundly deaf, yet [according to the RNID](#) only 151,000 people in the UK use British Sign Language, of whom 87,000 are Deaf.

Is British Sign Language a GCSE?

No, British Sign Language is not currently a GCSE. For years, charities and organisations supporting those with hearing loss have been campaigning to introduce a GCSE in [British Sign Language \(BSL\)](#), pushing for the language to be recognised as a 'core subject' rather than an additional language in terms of its status as a qualification.

It is hoped that this will mean that [deaf children](#) will be able to gain a qualification in their 'first language' and that BSL will become more widely taught. Making the language more 'mainstream' in this way, should both raise its profile and increase the number of 'speakers' in all communities.

Ensuring equality of opportunity

In fact, failing to offer a BSL GCSE could be seen as disadvantaging deaf children, according to Simon Want, Policy Advisor at the [National Deaf Children's Society](#).

"BSL is the first or preferred language of many deaf children in the UK and we know that around 1 in 10 deaf children and young people use sign language in their education. A BSL GCSE will give these deaf children the opportunity to achieve a GCSE in their own, legally recognised language. Failing to have the option to study for a BSL GCSE implies it has a lower status than other languages such as Welsh or French," he says.

According to [figures released by the National Deaf Children's Society](#), only 35.1% of deaf children achieved a grade 5 (equivalent to a former high C/low B) in both English and Maths, compared with 55.8% of hearing children.

Having BSL classed as a core subject for pupils would provide deaf children with the opportunity to demonstrate their competence in their first language and may help to rectify this discrepancy.

Benefits of a British Sign Language GCSE

Having BSL available as a GCSE could have much wider benefits.

"We know that many hearing children are interested in learning BSL. Doing so will give them the opportunity to learn a new language and [communicate more effectively](#) with their deaf peers.

"And with more young people aware of BSL, we really hope it could lead to more people choosing interpreting for deaf people as a career. We know there is a shortage of sign language interpreters and a BSL GCSE could really help to start to plug that gap," says Want.

Greater understanding for deaf children

Introducing the GCSE will be an enormous step forward in supporting and ensuring equality for deaf children, but there is more that needs to be done.

"Every deaf child is an individual and the support they receive must work for them. It's vital that deaf children get the right support as early as possible to develop the [language and communication skills](#) that are critical to their future. This support includes expert advice from Teachers of the Deaf to families and teachers, and better deaf awareness in schools," says Want.

"We'd also like to see wider recognition and understanding of the barriers deaf children and young people face every day. A BSL GCSE would be a big step in the right direction and would be a vital move towards genuine equality for deaf people," he adds.

What will be assessed in a BSL GCSE?

While the qualification is yet to be written, it is likely that the GCSE in BSL would be assessed in a number of ways.

"A GCSE in BSL should not be the equivalent of learning a modern foreign language (MFL) but should be in a separate category of its own as a recognised language of English/Scotland and Wales," says Lindsay Foster, executive director of [Signature](#).

"I would expect the assessment to cover productive skills, receptive skills, and conversational skills in the language but it's important also to include knowledge of the cultural history," she adds.

How close are we to a BSL GCSE?

The Government pledged to introduce a BSL GCSE in 2018 and it is hoped that exam boards can soon start writing the content of the qualification, which would be available to schools in around 2024.

"We're currently waiting for the results of public consultations," says Foster.

"We're hoping that all results will be back within six months and from that point it will be up to awarding bodies to write a GCSE."

What barriers might BSL face?

Introducing a new GCSE and having that GCSE widely offered in schools are two different things, and it is likely that the rollout of this new qualification will face some barriers to overcome.

"In terms of barriers, it's important that teachers are appropriately trained to deliver a BSL GCSE and so funding will need to be made available for this. We support the premise that BSL should be taught predominantly by deaf teachers or teachers with a real-life experience of deafness. They are likely to understand the cultural and inclusivity issues and are well placed to educate students and support them with this element of their learning," says Want.

"I think there will be an organic growth of delivery of the GCSE in schools. There will be schools that embrace from day one and schools that take time to come around to a different type of qualification and assessment. My expectation will be the growth will be at a manageable pace and there will be a natural increase in demand for teachers which will naturally expand over time," says Foster.

A step in the right direction

While a GCSE in BSL is by no means the only support required for the deaf community, its introduction would be a big step forward in breaking down barriers and increasing understanding.

"A new GCSE will also raise the profile of BSL and deafness and promote a greater understanding of the barriers deaf children face in schools," says Want. "Breaking down these barriers is absolutely key to making sure deaf children and young people don't get left behind."

In the UK there are 12 million [adults with hearing loss](#) greater than 25 dB HL. This is equivalent to 1 in 5 adults.

It is estimated that there are 151,000 people in the UK who use British Sign Language and, of these, 87,000 are Deaf. In the UK, [more than 40% of people over 50](#) years old have hearing loss, rising to more than 70% of people over the age of 70.

Disclaimer: This article is for information only and should not be used for the diagnosis or treatment of medical conditions. Egton Medical Information Systems Limited has used all reasonable care in compiling the information but makes no warranty as to its accuracy. Consult a doctor or other healthcare professional for diagnosis and treatment of medical conditions. For details see our [conditions](#).

Authored by: Gillian Harvey	Peer Reviewed by: Dr Krishna Vakharia, MRCGP	
Originally Published: 20/11/2023		Document ID: doc_32032

View this article online at: patient.info/news-and-features/why-a-gcse-in-british-sign-language-could-prove-a-game-changer

Discuss Why a GCSE in British Sign Language could prove a game-changer and find more trusted resources at [Patient](https://patient.info).



To find out more visit www.patientaccess.com
or download the app



Follow us

