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Claire Coutinho MP

Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing

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Caroline Lucas MP

By email: caroline.lucas.mp@parliament.uk

Your ref: ML.SM.C0133.CM.14.4.23

27 April 2023

Dear Caroline,

Thank you for your email of 14 April, addressed to the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, on behalf of your constituents, about British Sign Language (BSL) training provision for the parents of deaf children, and the need for improved communication between deaf people and those who can hear. I am replying as the minister responsible for this policy area.

I would like to begin by assuring you that the government understands the great importance of BSL for bridging barriers to communication between hearing and deaf people. I also appreciate the vital need for families with deaf children to be able to access BSL courses, as early access to language is essential to help children learn and thrive.

Funding is available through the Adult Education Budget (AEB) for qualifications in or focussing on BSL up to and including level 2. These qualifications include, for example, the Level 1 Award in BSL which allows learners to communicate in BSL on a range of topics that involve simple, everyday language use, thereby giving them the basic skills and confidence in production and reception of BSL.

About 60% of the AEB has been devolved to Mayoral Combined Authorities and the Greater London Authority, who determine which provision to fund for learners who live in their areas. The Education and Skills Funding Agency provides the remaining funding for learners who live in non-devolved areas. Where community learning providers offer BSL courses, those providers are responsible for determining the course fees, including levels of fee remission.

For some BSL courses, Advanced Learner Loans (ALLs) are available, and parents can find more information about which qualifications are eligible on the GOV.UK website at: [tinyurl.com/YHZZDUC8](https://www.gov.uk/tinyurl.com/YHZZDUC8). More general information about the provision of ALLs is available on GOV.UK at: [tinyurl.com/377RVM5R](https://www.gov.uk/tinyurl.com/377RVM5R).

Your constituents can access the National Deaf Children's Society website which provides details on how to use sign language in their family life. The website is available at: tinyurl.com/YRW5TA68. Your constituents may also find it useful to access the British Deaf Association website which provides details on how to communicate with people who are deaf and provides the BSL alphabet for beginners. The website is available at: tinyurl.com/ZT7BATAP.

Our recently published special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and alternative provision (AP) improvement plan sets out how we seek to ensure that children with a hearing impairment receive the support they need to succeed. To support the supply of teachers with a mandatory qualification in sensory impairment (MQSI), we have already developed a new approval process to determine providers of MQSIs from the start of the academic year 2023 to 2024.

Further to this, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education are developing an apprenticeship for teachers of sensory impairment. They are working with universities, local authorities, and sector representatives, including the National Deaf Children's Society, the Royal National Institute of Blind People and the British Association of Teachers of Deaf Children and young people to develop the qualification and expect it to be available from 2025.

In addition to this, the department is exploring further options to maximise take up of MQSIs with a view to improving the supply of teachers for children with sensory impairments. Further details are available at: tinyurl.com/YV8H7YJ5.

The department understands the importance of teaching BSL in schools. The passion that many people have in wanting BSL to be included within the national curriculum is recognised. We are committed to providing support for people with hearing impairments and those who are hearing but are reliant on communication with someone with a hearing impairment.

Whilst there are no plans to change the national curriculum for schools to make the teaching of BSL mandatory, for state-funded schools, they may choose to teach BSL in addition to the national curriculum.

The department is working with Ofqual and subject experts to develop subject content for a BSL GCSE. We aim to consult publicly on the draft subject content in the coming months. The intentions are for the GCSE to be first taught in September 2025.

Thank you for writing on this important matter. I hope your constituents will find this reply useful.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Claire Coutinho', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Claire Coutinho MP
Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing