Access to British Sign Language Learning for Families with Deaf Children in England

A report for local authorities
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Deaf children are born with the potential to achieve as much as their hearing peers. I regularly meet bright, capable, deaf children and young people who have accomplished so much. However, despite the introduction of the Newborn Hearing Screening Programme and significant improvements in technology we still see too many deaf children failing to achieve key developmental milestones. As a result, these children end up at a disadvantage when they start school and continue through education into training and employment.

An important factor in a child's development is whether they are able to play a full part in family life and communicate effectively with the people around them. This is why the I-Sign project exists. The Department for Education and the I-Sign consortium want to help parents and carers to acquire the communication skills they need to give deaf children a good start in life. For some families this means learning British Sign Language (BSL).

The forthcoming SEND reforms present us with an opportunity to improve outcomes for deaf children and young people. I realise there will be challenges ahead in implementing the required changes but NDCS and the I-Sign consortium are here to support and guide local authorities and parents of deaf children and young people.

This report has been designed to help you understand the issues that deaf children and their families can face in learning sign language and what you can do to support them. It will complement the work you are doing to develop your local offers and will help you identify gaps in provision. Together we can make a real difference.

Susan Daniels
Chief Executive, NDCS
Executive Summary

This document has been produced by the I-Sign consortium to report on access to British Sign Language (BSL) learning for families with deaf children and to support local authorities in identifying barriers and gaps in provision.

Data was collected between August 2013 and January 2014 from 150 local authorities in England, 158 parents of deaf children and all three BSL qualification awarding bodies in order to build up a national picture of access to BSL learning. The main findings were:

- 59% of local authorities stated that they provide funding or tuition for parents to learn BSL to a basic level (p7)
- 36% of local authorities stated that they provide funding for parents to take accredited BSL courses (p7)
- 39% of local authorities stated that in the next year they will offer classes or tuition specifically aimed at families such as a Family Sign Language course (p8)
- 95% of local authorities stated that they signpost parents to BSL courses provided in the local authority or nearby (p8)
- 81% of local authorities have no written policy around access to BSL learning for families (p9)
- 56% of parents who took BSL Level 1 said they did not need to travel more than five miles to reach their course (p11), suggesting that there is widespread availability of centres offering accredited BSL courses

Cost of courses is the main barrier to parents learning BSL. Level 1 course fees can be highly variable with some parents paying over £400 (p12).

This report identifies examples of good practice from different areas of the country (p15) and provides guidance on producing local offers that contain clear, accessible information about opportunities to learn BSL (p17).

Coming out of this report, key recommendations for local authorities are to:

- ensure that there is access to Family Sign Language courses or equivalent for families with deaf children
- make funding available for parents to take BSL courses up to the appropriate level required for their child to receive rich linguistic input in the early years
- include information about BSL support and courses within local offers
- consider other forms of support such as the lending of BSL learning resources such as books and DVDs
- have a written policy about access to BSL learning for families.

These recommendations are outlined in greater detail on p18.

Note to directors of children's services: enclosed with this report is a sheet that informs you of the provision that was outlined by your local authority in November 2013.
Introduction

This report has been produced through I-Sign, a two-year project funded by the Department for Education. The I-Sign project aims to improve access to British Sign Language (BSL) learning and provision for deaf children and their families by supporting local authorities to implement the forthcoming Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) reforms. The I-Sign project is being delivered by a consortium of organisations including Action on Hearing Loss, British Deaf Association, Exeter Royal Academy for Deaf Education, the National Deaf Children’s Society (NDCS), Signature and University of Central Lancashire.

I-Sign was first developed in 2009 in recognition of the weak infrastructure and lack of support to ensure deaf children born to hearing families acquire full and confident language capacity. A pilot project was funded by the then Department for Children, Schools and Families and included a number of initiatives aimed at improving access to BSL and the quality of teaching provision. These included the development of a Family Sign Language curriculum for parents of very young deaf children and increasing the skills and qualifications of BSL teachers.

In 2011 the I-Sign project was recognised as a success by the Prime Minister, David Cameron who described sign language as “incredibly valuable”. However, significant issues remained and the I-Sign consortium worked together again to set up the current project in 2013.

The I-Sign consortium would like to thank the parents of deaf children who told us about their experiences, the local authorities who provided information about their services and other professionals who contributed.

A booklet for parents of deaf children has also been developed. For copies please phone the NDCS Freephone Helpline on 0808 800 8880 or visit www.i-sign.org.uk.
Using sign language in the early years

The I-Sign project was founded on the recognition that without good language development, no child will achieve their potential. For deaf children language development is often more complex and challenging, as outlined by the Department for Education, which states that: “laying the foundations for early language development is at the heart of high quality early years experience and is an area of development where many disabled children and children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) can require a different approach or additional support”.

At least nine in ten deaf children are born to hearing parents and can face considerable challenges in acquiring the spoken language of their parents, making it difficult to fully participate in family interactions that are crucial to language development.

The introduction of the Newborn Hearing Screening Programme has led to earlier diagnosis of deafness and has had a positive impact on language development, both spoken and signed. Together with advances in cochlear implant technology, it has greatly enhanced the ability of profoundly deaf children to acquire spoken language. However, this does not mean there is no longer a role for sign language. Research has also shown that children with cochlear implants and high-powered hearing aids find sign language helpful in language acquisition, when communicating in situations when an implant cannot be used such as swimming, or for communicating within the Deaf community.

Experts in this field such as Knoors and Marschark, state that whilst communication between hearing parents and children with cochlear implants will now mostly be via spoken language, it is worthwhile for parents to learn and use sign language regularly in order to support auditory perception of speech and contribute to understanding of language.

In the early stages following diagnosis, before a deaf child suitable for cochlear implants receives consistent auditory input, sign language can be an effective method of visual communication. Additionally, there is no evidence that using sign language has any negative impact on outcomes for deaf children fitted with cochlear implants. One recent study found that early exposure to sign language enhanced spoken language acquisition.

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The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that inclusion is a right for all children and that they should have an equal chance to learn and develop, be given the opportunity to communicate in their preferred format and feel strong and confident about their identity.

The incidence of profound and severe deafness is relatively low and consequently, the number of profoundly or severely deaf children in an area can fluctuate from year to year. A lack of demand can sometimes result in services being removed. However, the Equality Act of 2010 places a requirement on public services to make anticipatory adjustments. Parents’ ability to respond to their child’s communication needs is fundamental to emotional and academic progress. Local authorities have an important role in ensuring that their early years provision supports parents of deaf children and children with SEN to develop the skills and knowledge needed for effective communication. Furthermore, Teachers of the Deaf should work with families to help them develop communication in line with Early Support Guidance which supports informed choice.

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Support currently offered by local authorities in England

All local authorities in England were sent a questionnaire in November 2013 about the support they offered families with deaf children to learn British Sign Language. 150 out of 152 local authorities responded, which is sufficient to build up a picture of provision.

The information below is reliant upon the accuracy of data provided by local authorities. There have been incidences where information provided by parents does not correlate with the support outlined by local authorities. This could be for a number of reasons such as fluctuations in levels of support over time, misinterpretation of questions or a lack of awareness about the support offered.

The main statistical findings are outlined below:

**59% of local authorities stated they provide funding or tuition for parents to learn BSL to at least a basic level**

Types of support vary from area to area and may include:

1. Home tuition for families from a Teacher of the Deaf (depending on their level of signing) or a sign language tutor / deaf role model.
2. Family Sign Language or Introduction to BSL classes aimed at families.
3. Funding for places on accredited courses (i.e. BSL Level 1 or 2) from local providers. This option is offered by 36% of local authorities. However, funding does not always cover assessment fees.
4. Setting up free Level 1 or 2 classes for families.

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**Fig 1. BSL levels that local authorities provide support up to.**
The level of learning that local authorities will support or fund parents to reach varies greatly as figure 1 shows. Many authorities fund families to learn a basic level of BSL, the equivalent to an Introduction to Sign Language or Family Sign Language course which is typically taught over 20 hours. A basic course will only give parents the ability to establish the building blocks of communication with pre-lingual deaf children and support their speech with some signs.

This level of support is not enough for parents to learn a wide vocabulary or gain a thorough understanding of BSL sentence structure (syntax) so that they can become fluent signers. This may mean that parents report difficulties in keeping pace with their child’s BSL development as they grow older. In addition, parents with a only a basic level of BSL will be ill equipped to support children who do not develop speech or the ability to lipread effectively in their early years, so that they are able to meet language development milestones.

39% of local authorities stated that they would be providing tuition or classes specifically aimed at families within the next year (as of November 2013) A further 14% said they may provide this.

Four years ago, a Family Sign Language (FSL) curriculum was developed by NDCS as part of the previous I-Sign project. This was because traditional BSL courses are orientated around adult life and do not meet the needs of parents of young children.

FSL is a basic BSL course typically taught over 20 hours. It is aimed at parents with deaf children aged between 0-5 and teaches everyday signs that could be used for stories, nursery rhymes and play as well as communication tips for parents.

Over the last four years NDCS has trained 191 professionals in England to teach FSL. Around 50% are deaf which gives the added benefit of exposing families to positive role models. We are aware of at least 43 local authorities that provide FSL tuition or have incorporated the FSL curriculum into their own BSL tuition for parents. A further 15 are considering providing it.

Not all of the courses set up by local authorities and aimed at families are FSL courses. A few local authorities have Level 1 and 2 BSL classes for families or follow their own early years BSL curriculum.

95% of local authorities will signpost parents to BSL courses provided in the local authority or nearby.

This information is often provided verbally to families from their child’s assigned Teacher of the Deaf. Very few local authorities reported providing this information online which means it is up to individual Teachers of the Deaf to decide whether or not parents receive it. The I-Sign consortium believes that the introduction of local offers will give local authorities an opportunity to better inform families about the options available to learn BSL in their area.

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81% of local authorities have no written policy on access to BSL learning for families.

Whilst the majority of local authorities support parents to learn BSL, most stated they did not have a written policy on the issue. However, some authorities said they would be developing policies in preparation for the introduction of their local offers. The I-Sign consortium believes that Hearing Impaired Service staff and families would benefit from having clear policies around the support offered for families to learn BSL.

Those that do have a written policy usually include it within a broader communication policy. For an example of a communication policy visit vsss.virtual-school.org.uk/parent-carer/communication-policy.

Other resources
As well as offering funding and tuition many local authorities offered other services including:

- lending BSL resources to parents including books and DVDs
- groups for families and children to use their BSL together
- family support workers/language aides
- liaising with other organisations who can provide support.
Availability of Accredited BSL courses

Figure 2 summarises the different options available to learn BSL.

Signature is the main awarding body for BSL qualifications and offers courses up to Level 6 standard. More than 200 centres across England are registered to run their BSL courses. See fig 3 for the total number of registered centres at Levels 1 to 3.
Additionally, iBSL and ABC award BSL qualifications up to Level 3 and have 25 and 13 registered centres respectively in England as of August 2013.

Registered centres are widespread across England and there are only six areas that don’t have advertised centres for BSL within the local authority or nearby. This is reflected through data collected from parents of deaf children, with 56% not needing to travel further than 5 miles to their BSL Level 1 class.

However, a significant number (21%) of parents who had not yet taken a BSL course told us that the lack of courses in their area was a factor. This raises questions regarding how well courses are promoted and how often registered centres provide them. In some large rural counties people may have to travel some distance in order to take a BSL course because of the geography of the county.

There are significantly fewer centres that offer Signature Level 2 BSL courses than those offering Level 1. At Level 3 availability of courses becomes more limited with just 54 centres in England advertised on Signature’s online database. This can present families of deaf children who use BSL as their main language with challenges in gaining fluency through BSL tuition.

There are now accredited courses available online via providers such as bslcourses.co.uk. These could provide a solution for those who don’t have a course in their locality or whose working hours do not fit with the times classes are offered. However, the I-Sign consortium believes that it is easier to learn signs face-to-face and that local courses offer the advantage of students being able to practise with their peers.

**Issues reported by parents**

Information was collected from parents of deaf children via an online survey which received 158 responses. It was specifically aimed at those who had learnt BSL in recent years or have thought about doing so.

![Fig. 3 Number of registered Signature centres in England advertised on Signature's online database (as of August 2013)](image)
Approximately 40% of parents who responded had not learnt BSL. Reasons for not taking a course are outlined in figure 4 with cost being the most common factor. The survey showed there was a lot of variation in what parents had to pay to take BSL Level 1 with some paying less than £100 and others up to £400. This suggests that something of a ‘postcode lottery’ is operating. The cost for two parents to attend a course can be prohibitive, particularly if they need to pay for childcare on top of this. Although the maximum amount that parents said they had paid was £400, some Level 1 BSL courses at a further education college can cost over £500. For example, at London’s City Lit the 2013 course fee was £596.

Other reasons given for not learning BSL included there being no courses available in the area or courses not being held at a suitable time.

![Figure 4. Reasons reported by parents for not having taken a BSL course](image)

Only 43% of parents who took Level 1 said they received any financial support to pay for course fees. This is higher than the percentage of local authorities that said they offered funding (36%) but is likely to be due to a few parents reporting that they received financial support from a charitable trust rather than the local authority.

41% of parents had not heard of Family Sign Language (FSL). This is unsurprising given that it is not available in many areas. Of those who said they were familiar with FSL less than half had taken a course. 67% of those who had taken a course stated it was free of charge. Others had paid between £10 and £40.

**Comments from parents:**

“I spent over £1,000 learning BSL. My funding application was turned down because my husband works. My two daughters are severely deaf. Nobody seems to be able to tell me... how I can get help with teaching them BSL.”

“I would love to learn BSL level one but it is the cost of it.”
“The provision to learn BSL for families is not good... Our child has an implant but we want him to be bilingual in BSL and spoken English. This is proving completely out of reach... as there is nowhere near enough support for families to learn BSL at a rate in which children would usually have access to a full language. At this time local deaf adults go out to people’s houses and teach them signing basics, but the council are looking at cutting all of these services.”

“Our LA are very anti-signing, I think this is a real shame as they offer lots of other support but learning BSL would have been a much greater support for us than many of the other resources. It was hard for me to find a course and expensive.”

“Would really love to learn more signs as my daughter also has learning difficulties, so sign is likely to be her primary communication. When I have asked her SALT or TOD for details on courses in our area they have just told me to google it, and the nearest centre I’ve found is 80 miles away.”

“Extremely difficult to find a local course offering suitable times. Plus very expensive at £400 per course. Tried to get LA to fund but they could not. It shouldn’t be that hard to have the opportunity to learn BSL in order to communicate with my deaf child.”

“I am currently trying to get onto a BSL Level 1 course at a suitable time (evenings) but have found them all booked up by the time I’ve sorted the finance (£320 with 20% discount) to get on the course. I am still trying to resolve the situation, and fingers crossed something will come of it, and I’ll get on the course, but to say this is frustrating, with the effort I’ve been putting in to get on the course, is a major understatement.”

“It was VERY difficult to find any kind of sign language course in our area. I had to make a lot of phone calls and do some bullying to get us on a SignAlong course.”

“I cannot find anyone doing a Level 2 course this year. Apparently (sic) there has to be a certain amount of people before course can go ahead.”

“Was given no help via the borough so had to pay myself and get a private tutor once a week which is expensive.”

“Without Genie Networks it would have been impossible for us to learn BSL in our area as it is only run from colleges where the time constraints do not fit in with a family and the cost is prohibitively high. Our course is run on a weekend and funded and we are very lucky.”

“I found it difficult to find a local college running BSL Level 2. I ended up going on a privately run course but this was expensive”
Highlighting good practice

The following examples highlight good practice within four local authorities. Each of them has outsourced all or some of their provision to local providers. This has the potential to increase sustainability as staff costs are reduced and several local authorities can use one provider. Also, links can be made with other services and support can be obtained from the provider.

**Norfolk Council**

Through the Virtual Sensory Support Service, the council provides a range of support backed up by a communication policy. It runs a Level 1 BSL course in the evenings that is free for parents and children are able to join where appropriate. There is funding available for parents who wish to take the Level 2 course.

For the early years, communication is facilitated through signing support in the home provided via language aides who are deaf role models. This is a commissioned service from local charity, Deaf Connexions. Additionally, staff have been trained in the Family Sign Language curriculum via an NDCS Training the Trainer course. A Family Sign Language group meets every fortnight at the Deaf Resource Base.

**Buckinghamshire Council**

The authority commissions a local charity, Young Deaf Activities (YDA) which runs a Home Communication Club which provides families with 10 free BSL lessons in the home. The charity is funded per family referred to them, up to a maximum of 16 families per year. The lessons are tailored around the family’s needs and are open to all family members.

Further lessons can be delivered and a family can be re-referred to the local authority to cover the costs. If re-referral is not successful the family will need to pay £20.55 per hour plus mileage. The charity also delivers other services including parent support groups and youth groups which the Home Communication Club can link up to.

**Suffolk Council**

Suffolk Council’s Children and Young People’s Sensory and Communication Service has a close relationship with Enable Support Services, an organisation that provides Family Sign Language tuition and classes as well as language aides who support BSL development within the family. Funding is available (50% of course fees) to support parents with the cost of courses up to Level 3.

**Trafford Council**

Parents have access to free BSL courses from local charity, Genie Networks, ranging from private Family Sign Language sessions to Level 2. Trafford is currently an SEND pathfinder and is open to the use of personal budgets for parents to access other BSL courses (if a Genie Networks course is not suitable) where relevant outcomes have been agreed within Education Health and Care plans.
SEN and Disability Reform Guidance

Local offers
The development of local offers provides an opportunity for local authorities to better communicate information about local BSL support to families with deaf children.

The draft SEN Code of Practice states that local authorities are expected to involve parents in consultations around the local offer. The I-Sign project will give guidance to parents of deaf children who use BSL about how they can get involved in the development and reviews of local offers.

Within the categories set out in the draft SEN Code of Practice, the I-Sign consortium recommends information is provided about the following:

Early years provision
- Access to Family Sign Language tuition/classes or equivalent
- Availability of BSL support from visiting Teachers of the Deaf or language aides/deaf role models
- specialist bilingual nursery/childcare provision
- access to BSL resources such as DVDs, books and websites
- support from speech and language therapists

Other education provision
- Local BSL courses and details of financial support available, linking to personal budgets as appropriate

Social care provision
- Relevant BSL support provided through social services

Information, advice and support
- Local groups or organisations who can provide further information or support around BSL

NDCS has also published general guidance for local authorities about local offers at www.ndcs.org.uk/professional_support/news/develop_local_offer.html.
**Personal budgets**
The Department for Education has stated that local authorities should be identifying services that could be made available through personal budgets. The I-Sign consortium recommends that, in relation to BSL provision, local authorities consider the use of personal budgets for families with children where learning BSL has been identified as an outcome within an Education Health and Care plan.

**Joint commissioning**
The draft SEN Code of Practice states that local authorities should consider the benefits that come from strategic planning and commissioning across groups of authorities or at a regional level, particularly for low incidence needs such as deafness. This is particularly the case where the numbers of children or young people living locally are not sufficient to make a service sustainable. Regional commissioning can be a more effective way of ensuring value for money.

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Recommendations

The I-Sign consortium makes the following recommendations for local authorities to implement:

1. Ensure families with deaf children can access Family Sign Language training or the equivalent within the first year after diagnosis. With a view to improving sustainability we encourage this service to be outsourced to external providers and working in partnership with other local authorities so that costs can be shared. With profound and severe deafness being low incidence there are considerable advantages to a service being delivered across several authorities. Somerset, North Somerset, South Gloucestershire and Bristol are an example of local authorities working in partnership.

2. Funding to be made available to support parents to take courses up to the required BSL level to gain the fluency they will need to provide rich linguistic input during a child’s early years and to keep pace with their child’s BSL development. For some children this may mean Level 3 standard. Once the forthcoming SEND reforms have been implemented, personal budgets could be used as an avenue of funding for children who have received an Education Health and Care Plan.

3. To include information about BSL courses and the support available to parents within local offers. This can include signposting to online resources.

4. To consider other forms of support such as the lending of resources (e.g. BSL videos and books) and setting up of family groups for parents to meet and practise with their children.

5. To develop a written policy on access to BSL learning for families with deaf children. This should also be referred to within the local offer and can be part of a wider policy around meeting communication needs.