



# British Sign Language (BSL) Local Plan 2024 - 2030



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## Introduction

The Scottish Government wants Scotland to be the best place in the world for British Sign Language (BSL) users to live, learn, work and visit. They want BSL users<sup>1</sup> to be involved in daily and public life and to be able to make informed choices about every part of their lives.

The British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 came into force in October 2015. It promotes the use of BSL in Scotland, primarily by requiring certain authorities to develop BSL plans that outline how they will promote and raise awareness of the language.

## What is BSL?

British Sign Language (BSL) is a language used by many d/Deaf and hard of hearing people in Scotland, with growing numbers of deafblind people who are also reliant on BSL or Tactile BSL as their main form of communication due to sight loss. BSL is also used by hearing people such as BSL/English interpreters, children of Deaf adults, teachers of Deaf children, siblings and parent.

BSL is a vibrant and important language, with its own grammar, syntax and vocabulary and is not a direct translation of English. For many d/Deaf and deafblind people in Scotland, BSL is their first language.

## What are BSL Plans?

BSL plans are documents that set out how listed authorities – authorities who have been listed under the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 - have a requirement to create a plan that will promote and support the use and raise awareness of British Sign Language (BSL) for the services they deliver.

Plans must be published every six years and will set out commitments and actions that aim to improve the accessibility and inclusion of BSL users in our services, activities and communication. Plans should be reflective of the local areas that they serve. The Scottish Government must also publish a National BSL plan, and local plans should take account of national commitments.

The Scottish Government published its second BSL National Plan (2023-2029) in November 2023.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the plan, we refer to 'BSL users'. This covers all people whose first or preferred language is BSL, including those who receive the language in a tactile form due to sight loss and those who may be hearing, and use BSL to communicate with others. We also note that BSL users may be deaf and deafblind, as well as the fact that there are many deaf and deafblind people who do not use BSL. This plan will differentiate where appropriate whether an action is applicable to those who do not use BSL.



## Our Highland Partnership

The Highland Council area covers around a third of the geographical area of Scotland. Highland Council and NHS Highland are the two largest public sector organisations in the region and serve a population of 235,351. Between the two organisations we are responsible for providing a wide range of services including housing, community health care, adult social care, children’s social care, acute hospital care and education services to communities across this area.

According to the 2022 Census, 2.7% of the population (6,188 people) report that they are BSL users. 17.6% of users are under the age of 16, 43.7% are between the ages of 16-64 and 14.3% are over aged 65. There is a higher proportion of BSL users under the age of 16 compared with the under 16 population. Information from the census does not determine whether the BSL user is solely reliant on this as their means of communication. Further information from the Census notes that 93 people within Highland, indicated that their main language was sign language and not English. Not all of these people will be BSL users.

Local information suggests that there are 92 regular users of the Council and NHS’s Communication Support Service – a joint service that provides BSL interpretation for anyone accessing our services or attending appointments.

NHS Highland and Highland Council have reviewed our existing BSL plans, reflected on the goals of the BSL National plan and jointly engaged with the Deaf community to hear feedback about what is important to them. We are committed to working together in partnership to promote and raise awareness of BSL and improve access for BSL users to our services. For 2024-2030, a joint plan has been developed which sets out the commitments and actions for both organisations.

## Highlights of the 2018-2024 Plans

The following sets out a summary of a number of the key deliverables from the last BSL Local Plan. A number of the commitments are ongoing, and these are reflected in the current plan.

### Summary of NHS Highland’s 2018-2024 Plan

The 2018-2024 BSL Plan for Highland contained 34 actions. An appendix has been included in this report to comment of each of these individually. Presented here are a summary of achievements from the 2018-2024 Plan:

- Annual promotion of Deaf Awareness Week
- Updated BSL Interpretation Guidelines, and Near Me BSL Interpretation Guidance available for staff

[www.highland.gov.uk](http://www.highland.gov.uk)

[www.nhshighland.scot.nhs.uk](http://www.nhshighland.scot.nhs.uk)



- Deaf Awareness e-learning was updated and is now mandatory for social care staff. Since this happened in 2019, 897 members of staff have completed the training. Numbers completing the e-learning have increased consistently in the years 2021/2022, 2022/2023 and 2023/2024.
- Deaf Awareness training delivered by See Hear Highland Education & Learning Services (SHHELS) to staff groups.
- Consistent use of Communication Support Services

## Summary of Highland Council's 2018-2024 Plan

The following sets out a summary of a number of the key deliverables from the last BSL Local Plan. A number of the commitments are ongoing, and these are reflected in the current plan.

- Development of the British Sign Language Education Pack for delivery of BSL as part of the 1+2 language programme in schools. The 1+2 Languages Initiative in Scotland aims to ensure that every child has the opportunity to learn a modern language. The Highland Deaf Education Service developed a digital learning & teaching pack as part of the 1+2 languages initiative to encourage and support the learning and teaching of BSL as a mainstream language, without the need for a teacher to be a sign language user. This pack is freely available to all Highland staff, approximately 49 primary schools are currently signed up to use it, and a number of Highland secondary schools offer BSL taster courses using Highland's pack. Over 300 teachers in Highland have been trained to use the pack. All LAs in Scotland and Northern Ireland and 3 in England have now bought the pack, without any promotion.
- Programme of awareness raising on how to access BSL/English interpretation during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Offering SQA BSL qualifications as mainstream subject choice at SCQF levels 3-6. 6 Dingwall Academy pupils have gone on to study BSL at Higher Education level and qualify as BSL/English interpreters, one is currently in training with another due to start in September 2024.
- The Council continues to deliver a Communication Support Service to provide BSL/English interpretation for anyone who needs to access the Council's services or NHS Highland services using a BSL/English interpreter. The service is delivered using an in-house BSL/English interpreter, supplemented by the services of a small, local bank of freelance BSL/English interpreters when required, and a booking service operated by the Council's Service Centre team.

[www.highland.gov.uk](http://www.highland.gov.uk)

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Although some BSL users still have a preference for a face-to-face BSL/English interpreter, as a result of adjustments made during the COVID-19 pandemic there continues to be an increase in the number of appointments that now take place online using Teams or NearMe. We also continue to encourage BSL users to use Contact Scotland BSL to contact the Council. Throughout Covid, we worked proactively, including in partnership with NHS Highland to provide information to local BSL users on COVID-19 vaccination and testing, including producing local BSL [videoclips](#).

- A Deaf Awareness module developed by See Hear Highland Education & Learning Services (SHHELS) is now available on the Council's e-learning platform.
- The work of the Highland Deaf Education Service has been recognised nationally when in 2023 it was the only Scottish organisation shortlisted in the Signature Hall of Fame Awards in Manchester. These awards were a one-off celebration for people and organisations who have contributed most to developing communication with Deaf people over the last 40 years.
- In 2023 Highland's 1+2 BSL pack won NASEN (National Association of Special, Educational Needs) for Innovation in the Field of Inclusion.
- Creation of new [accessibility pages](#) on the Election pages in order to promote accessibility and involvement in elections for BSL users. This has included promotion of the Access to Elected Office Fund to encourage and support BSL users to stand for selection or election.
- Through the development of the Inverness Castle Experience, innovative technical solutions have been incorporated into the design and interpretation process to deliver a positive experience for BSL users.



## Engagement and Feedback

NHS Highland and Highland Council have taken several steps to developing the new BSL Local Plan for Highland. This has included:

**Reviewing the new BSL National Plan** – the new national plan has been reviewed to consider the national priorities against the current local priorities. The National and Local Plans were discussed to contrast and compare progress across Scotland by The Alliance, as part of See Hear Leads meeting. Feedback from the national BDA event has been considered as part of the development of this plan.

**Revisit current plans and goals** – both NHS Highland and Highland Council's current local plans have been reviewed internally within each organisation and along with partners, including University of the Highlands and Islands and the BDA. For NHS Highland this has also included liaison with Argyll and Bute Council and Argyll and Bute Integrated Joint Board.

### Engagement with the Deaf Community

Two engagement events have been held with the BSL/Deaf Community, one in January and a further event in July. Both events were supported by the British Deaf Association and were held jointly. The first event focused on hearing from the Deaf community about current issues and challenges. The second provided a further opportunity to highlight some of the difficulties experienced in accessing services but also to share and receive feedback on the content of the draft BSL plan.

Key issues highlighted included:

- The need for greater awareness amongst staff of the need to book interpreters for enabling access to services/appointments and not relying on family members to interpret for BSL users.
- The importance of regular engagement with the Deaf community in order to better understand some of the challenges faced by individuals but also to support feedback from the community to shape services.
- The need to improve the online information available in BSL about Council and NHS services.
- Concerns about the lack of availability of training courses in BSL and the corresponding lack of interpreters.
- Questions about how to share concerns about services.
- The lack of awareness amongst some service providers that an individual has BSL communication needs.

These comments have informed the draft plan for 2024-2030.

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## Summary of 2024-2030 Plan

The 2024-30 plan contains a range of actions and commitments which are grouped around 8 themes: BSL Accessibility, Children, Young people and their Families, Access to Employment, Health and Wellbeing, Celebrating BSL Culture, BSL Data, Access to Services (including Transport) and Democratic Participation.

A summary of the key actions and commitments is outlined below. A number of these are ongoing commitments brought forward from the 2018-2024 plan.

- **BSL Accessibility** - We will continue to promote and support the use of BSL and to provide and promote the Communication Support Service for BSL users. Alongside this we will work with partners to raise awareness of the need for fully funded BSL training courses. The plan includes new actions around capturing communication needs at first contact as well as improving BSL content and accessibility on our websites. Quarterly engagement sessions with the Highland BSL community will support and inform this work.
- **Children, Young People and their Families** - We will continue to signpost or provide BSL resources for families and staff to better meet the needs of children and young people and ensure access to Communication Support Services when required. We promote the use of the BSL 1+2 pack and provide training in the use of the pack in Highland. We will work to develop a second BSL 1+2 pack and continue to offer SQA National Awards in BSL in Dingwall Academy. Key public protection information will be provided in BSL and work undertaken to ensure Care Experienced children and young people have access to BSL support.
- **Access to Employment** - We will continue to raise awareness of the Access to Work scheme. We will create pathways to support BSL users transition to positive destinations and work with employees to create more opportunities for BSL users.
- **Health and Wellbeing** – We will continue to provide and promote BSL mental health services and scope the options to reduce loneliness and isolation for deaf BSL users. We will increase the reach of deaf awareness training for health staff and increase awareness of NHS Highland Deaf Services. We will learn about best practice from other NHS Boards and consider how best to apply this to Highland.
- **Celebrating BSL Culture** – We will continue to work with partners and the local d/Deaf community to share communications around Sign Language Awareness Week, and other campaigns relating to d/Deaf culture.





- **BSL Data** – We will work together to improve the quality of data collection and analysis in relation to local BSL users, d/Deaf and deafblind people as we seek to improve outcomes for BSL Users.
- **Access to Services** - We will support access to services by providing awareness training to Council bus and NHS transport providers where needed and promote the use of Contact Scotland BSL for community transport providers. We will review contact arrangements for BSL users in Council tenancies and work will be undertaken to review and improve website information and staff awareness for HLH leisure and library provision.

## Action Plan

The Highland Action Plan is set out below. It covers 8 thematic areas and for each describes the ongoing commitments and actions for Highland Council and NHS Highland.

A number of the actions and commitments are shared and will be delivered either by both organisations independently or by working together, depending upon the action.

The 8 thematic areas are:

- BSL Accessibility
- Children, Young People and their Families
- Access to Employment
- Health and Wellbeing
- Celebrating BSL Culture
- BSL Data
- Access to Services
- Democratic Participation

This Plan does not include actions aligned with all of the national priorities, in particular relating to Access to Justice, as this priority area in the National Plan focuses on actions for Scottish Government and National agencies.





## Action Plan section 1

### BSL Accessibility

**The BSL National Plan says:** “For many BSL users, BSL is their first language. The Scottish Government recognises that for public services to be truly accessible for BSL users, there should be awareness around the culture of BSL, providing vital information in BSL, and enabling people to access services using their own language.”

By 2030 we will:

#### Ongoing Commitments:

- |   | <b>Owner:</b> |
|---|---------------|
| 1.1 Continue to promote the use of Contact Scotland BSL and improve awareness of the service with BSL users and Council staff.  | Joint         |
| 1.2 Continue to promote BSL 999, Emergency SMS, and NHS24 access via Contact Scotland BSL.  | NHS Highland  |
| 1.3 Continue to provide and promote Communication Support Services for Deaf people to provide access to Highland Council and NHS services and information and seek feedback to support continuous improvement of the service. | Joint         |
| 1.4 Continue to increase staff awareness of their responsibility to use BSL interpreters, how to access them and why they're key to effective and equitable communication and access to services.                             | Joint         |
| 1.5 Work with Scottish Government and the BDA to raise awareness of the need for greater access to full funded training courses in BSL.   | Joint         |

#### Actions:

- |   |                  |
|---|------------------|
| 1.6 As part of the My Council Programme, consider how to capture communication needs at first contact and share (with permission) across Council services as needed to support improved access to services. | Highland Council |
|---|------------------|



- |      |   |                     |
|------|---|---------------------|
| 1.7  | Continue to seek improvements with current IT systems to highlight patients who need BSL interpreters.  | NHS<br>Highland     |
| 1.8  | Scope digital solutions to improve accessibility and support health needs for BSL users.  | NHS<br>Highland     |
| 1.9  | Work with NHS Highland Patient Booking Service to ensure advanced booking of BSL interpreters for appointments.   | NHS<br>Highland     |
| 1.10 | Between 2024 and 2026, work with BSL users to review and improve BSL content and accessibility on the Council's and NHS Highland's website. This will include key information about Highland Deaf Services and the Communication Support Service. All content in BSL will be in the same place on both websites. This will be reviewed annually thereafter. | Joint               |
| 1.11 | Ensure all frontline customer service facing staff have undertaken Deaf awareness training.   | Highland<br>Council |
| 1.12 | Review the current Service Level Agreement for the BSL Communication Support Service with NHS Highland, to ensure the most effective and supportive service provision, involving BSL users.   | Joint               |
| 1.13 | Establish quarterly engagement sessions with the Highland BSL community to share progress and inform actions related to the BSL Plan.   | Joint               |





## Action Plan section 2

### Children, Young People and their Families

The BSL National Plan says: *“Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC) is our commitment to provide all children, young people and their families with the right support at the right time. This is so that every child and young person in Scotland can reach their full potential.*

By 2030 we will:

#### Ongoing Commitments:

	<b>Owner:</b>
2.1 Signpost and/or provide resources (including BSL specific) for families and staff as needed in order to meet the needs of individual children and young people who use BSL.	Highland Council
2.2 Through the Highland Deaf Education Service, provide support to families with a deaf or deafblind child particularly at educational transitions.	Highland Council
2.3 Promote BSL Education 1+2 pack to Highland schools and beyond across Scotland and the UK.	Highland Council
2.4 Continue to offer SQA National Awards in BSL at SCQF levels 3-6 in Dingwall Academy and contribute to any future BSL initiatives from SQA	Highland Council
2.5 Continue to contribute to CRIDE (Consortium for Research into Deaf Education) and highlight the recognised examples of good practice in Highland.	Highland Council
2.6 Ensure access to communication support services for pupils in order to access formal meetings in schools if the pupils wish to attend e.g. Child’s Plan.	Highland Council
2.7 Continue to promote and raise awareness of the importance of BSL through the work of Highland Deaf Education Service.	Highland Council



<b>Actions:</b>	<b>Owner:</b>
2.8 Provide deaf/BSL Awareness to all staff in educational settings (PVI and school-based).	Highland Council
2.9 Highland Deaf Education Service will provide training to support the use of Highland's 1+2 BSL pack.	Highland Council
2.10 Work on the development of a second Highland BSL pack to consolidate and develop the award-winning Highland 1+2 BSL pack.	Highland Council
2.11 Through Highland Deaf Education Service, provide deaf/BSL awareness training to staff in educational settings (early years, PVI and school-based) who work with BSL users and families as required.	Highland Council
2.12 Provide an annual reminder to all schools and Deaf parents/carers or parents of Deaf children of how to contact the Communication Support Services to enable deaf parents/carers to attend parents'/information evenings.	Highland Council
2.13 Seek d/Deaf BSL user role models within our organisation, and partner organisations, to allow Deaf children, young people, and their families the opportunity to learn about BSL identity and culture.	NHS Highland
2.14 Provide key public protection information, e.g. child protection, messages in BSL.	Highland Council
2.15 As part of the Council's commitment to The Promise, consider the specific actions required to ensure that Care Experienced children and young people have access to BSL support.	Highland Council
2.16 Consider how the Scottish Government action to 'Work with representative groups across Midwifery, Health Visiting, Family Nurse Partnership, Allied Health Professionals and Audiology to support understanding of the importance of BSL provision on child and family wellbeing' could best be approached for NHS Highland	NHS Highland





## Action Plan section 3

### Access to Employment

**The BSL National Plan says:** “No One Left Behind is our all-age approach to employability support in Scotland. Support is available to all who need it, though it is aimed at supporting those further from the labour market.”

By 2030 we will:

#### Ongoing Commitments:

- 3.1 Continue to raise awareness of the UK Government’s Access to Work Scheme with managers, staff who use BSL and potential employees who are BSL users by making this information available on the Council’s and NHS website and staff information pages.

**Owner:**

Joint

#### Actions:

- 3.2 Creating appropriate pathways to support BSL users transition to positive and sustainable destinations post school – learning, training or employment.
- 3.3 Raise awareness with employers to become Disability Confident, creating more opportunities for BSL users.
- 3.4 As part of the development of Highland’s Good Employer Charter, explore the opportunities to including Deaf/BSL awareness as part of the commitment to Fair Work.
- 3.5 Scope options to improve accessibility within the recruitment process.

**Owner:**

Highland Council

Highland Council

Highland Council

Joint





## Action Plan section 4

### Health and Wellbeing

**The BSL National Plan says:** “Under the law, patients who are BSL users are entitled to the same health and social care access as their hearing peers, in their first or preferred language.”

The lead agency model means that NHS Highland is commissioned to deliver adult services in Highland.

By 2030 we will:

#### Ongoing Commitments:

- |  | <b>Owner:</b> |
|--|---------------|
| 4.1 Continue to provide BSL Mental Health Service, via NHS Lothian.                        | NHS Highland  |
| 4.2 Promote Breathing Space for mental health support, available via Contact Scotland BSL. | NHS Highland  |
| 4.3 Continue to offer BSL classes for staff, at different levels of proficiency.           | NHS Highland  |

#### Actions:

- |  | <b>Owner</b> |
|--|--------------|
| 4.4 Increase reach of Deaf Awareness training, delivered by See Hear Highland Education & Learning Services (SHHELS), for staff.   | NHS Highland |
| 4.5 Building on the decision to categorise the e-learning Deaf Awareness as mandatory for social care staff, endeavour to categorise Deaf Awareness e-learning as mandatory for health care staff too. | NHS Highland |
| 4.6 Increase staff awareness of NHS Highland Deaf Services.  | NHS Highland |
| 4.7 Review available NHS Highland training with people who are deaf to highlight any potential improvements.   | NHS Highland |
| 4.8 Scope options to reduce loneliness and isolation for deaf BSL users.   | NHS Highland |
| 4.9 Scope possible digital solutions to improve accessibility and support health needs for BSL users   | NHS Highland |
| 4.10 Learn about good practice from other NHS boards, via the NHS Scotland Equality and Diversity Lead Network, and consider how similar approaches could be applied in Highland.                      | NHS Highland |
| 4.11 Scope options to better connect with deaf BSL users across Highland.  | NHS Highland |





## Action Plan section 5

### Celebrating BSL Culture

**The BSL National Plan says:** “Culture can improve the life chances of all people at every stage in their life. In Scotland, culture can be an important element to help reduce poverty and mitigate its impacts.”

By 2030 we will:

**Ongoing Commitments:**

5.1 Continue to share communications about Sign Language Awareness week.

**Owner:**

Joint

**Actions:**

5.2 Work with the British Deaf Association Scotland to share campaigns and messaging relating to Deaf culture.

**Owner:**

Joint







## Action Plan section 6

### BSL Data

**The BSL National Plan says:** “We recognise the need to build an evidence base and gather data on BSL in Scotland, which will help inform our work in delivering this BSL National Plan and inform local plans.”

We recognise that there has been extensive work within academia and the third sector to build up evidence and data around BSL users, d/Deaf and deafblind people, which is essential for informing public policy and shaping services to meet people’s needs.

By 2030 we will:

**Ongoing Commitments:**

6.1 Review any data related recommendations from Scottish Government as we seek to improve outcomes for BSL users.

**Owner:**  
Joint

**Actions:**

6.2 We will work together to improve the quality of data collection and analysis in relation to local BSL users, d/Deaf and deafblind people to support improving outcomes for BSL Users.

**Owner:**  
Joint





## Action Plan section 7

### Access to Services

**The BSL National Plan says:** “Transport Scotland’s Accessible Travel Framework for Scotland focuses on supporting disabled people’s rights by removing barriers and improving access to travel.”

The Council and NHS Highland also recognises that there are key commitments and actions related to the provision of housing, culture and leisure services, based on the feedback from BSL users.

By 2030 we will:

#### Ongoing Commitments – Transport:

- 7.1 Promote the use of the HITRANS Thistle Assistance Card to BSL Users. This card lets drivers know that support is needed by users of public transport. The aim is to improve communication between bus drivers and passengers.

**Owner:**  
Highland Council

#### Actions - Transport

- 7.2 Provide Deaf/BSL awareness training to Council bus service providers and to any school transport providers who have BSL users on their routes.
- 7.3 Promote Deaf Awareness, including BSL content, training to private transport providers contracted by NHS Highland.
- 7.4 Promote the use of Contact Scotland BSL for community transport providers to support booking of services for BSL users.
- 7.5 Promote Deaf Awareness, including BSL content, training to NHS transport services.

**Owner:**  
Highland Council

NHS Highland

Highland Council

NHS Highland

#### Ongoing Commitments – Housing

- 7.6 Continue to provide access to housing support services for BSL users as and when appropriate, in order to support and sustain social tenancies.

**Owner:**

#### Actions - Housing

- 7.6 Review contact arrangements for BSL users in Council tenancies to improve access and support.

**Owner:**  
Highland Council

#### Actions – Access to Leisure Services

- 7.8 Provide Deaf/BSL awareness training to High Life Highland staff who work in leisure, libraries, museums to support improved access to services.
- 7.9 Work with BSL users to review and improve BSL content and accessibility on High Life Highland’s website.

**Owner:**  
Highland Council

Highland Council





## Action Plan section 8

### Democratic Participation

**The National BSL Plan says:** “The Christie Commission principles – a focus on people, performance, partnership and the prevention of harm – continue to shape the Public Service Reform agenda in Scotland. At the heart of this is the recognition that no single actor can achieve transformational change alone, and that people should be involved in and able to influence the decisions affecting them.”

By 2030 we will:

#### Ongoing Commitments:

- |     |   |                                   |
|-----|---|-----------------------------------|
| 8.1 | Continue to review the format of information about elections and election process with a specific focus on accessibility.   | <b>Owner:</b><br>Highland Council |
| 8.2 | Continue to promote the election specific accessibility page on the Council’s website, which includes key information in BSL on how to vote and participate in elections. | Highland Council                  |

#### Actions:

- |     |   |                                   |
|-----|---|-----------------------------------|
| 8.3 | Promote the use of Contact Scotland BSL in polling stations to support BSL users access the election process.   | <b>Owner:</b><br>Highland Council |
| 8.4 | Raise awareness of Contact Scotland BSL with elected Members to support engagement with BSL user constituents.  | Highland Council                  |
| 8.5 | Along with BSL users, develop a BSL user friendly complaints process, to support BSL users to raise concerns and complaints about Council services.   | Highland Council                  |
| 8.6 | Through quarterly engagement sessions with the Highland Deaf Club, support wider engagement on key Council, NHS and partnership service developments. | Joint                             |

