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Economy and Gaelic
Leas Phrìomh Mhinistear agus Rùnaire a' Chaibineit
airson Eaconamaidh agus Gàidhlig
Kate Forbes MSP
Ceit Fhoirbeis BPA



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4 December 2025

Dear Karen,

Please find attached the Scottish Government response to the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee's report on the BSL (Scotland) Act 2015, BSL National Plan 2023-2029, and BSL local plans.

I would like to express my thanks to the Committee and all who contributed evidence to the Inquiry. This important report highlighted the significant impact the BSL (Scotland) Act 2015 has had for BSL users.

The Scottish Government's British Sign Language (BSL) National Plan 2023–29 sets out a clear and ambitious programme of actions across ten priority areas. The plan places a strong focus on children, young people and their families; health and wellbeing; the celebration of Deaf culture; the removal of accessibility barriers across transport, democratic participation, and access to justice. These priorities reflect what BSL users themselves have told us matters most.

We are firmly committed to delivering actions that will strengthen equality, expand opportunities, and improve outcomes for BSL users, across Scotland.

In reviewing the Committee's report, we assessed each recommendation against two key factors:

- The extent to which it aligns with the priority areas and actions in the BSL National Plan 2023–29; and
- Its overall deliverability, including resource and cost implications.

Scottish Ministers, special advisers and the Permanent Secretary are covered by the terms of the Lobbying (Scotland) Act 2016. See www.lobbying.scot

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We are clear that our BSL National Plan is not static. We will continue to build on the actions the National Plan contains and take the steps necessary to deliver sustainable, long-term improvements for BSL users.

The Committee's findings will assist us in progressing this agenda to ensure the full ambitions of the Act are achieved. To do so, we must remain vigilant to the barriers BSL users face, and we must tackle these barriers in a coordinated way by building on work already underway across communities, listed authorities, and at the national level.

Yours sincerely,

KATE FORBES

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Scottish Government Response to
Recommendations of the Equalities,
Human Rights, and Civil Justice
Committee's Report on the British Sign
Language (Scotland) Act 2015
December 2025

December 2025

1. Foreword

The British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 requires Scottish Ministers to “*promote, and facilitate the promotion of, the use and understanding of British Sign Language (BSL)*”, and to publish national plans in accordance with the Act. In the ten years since its passage, the Scottish Government has published two national plans, alongside local BSL plans produced by listed authorities. We acknowledge the significant and sustained 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.

The Scottish Government’s British Sign Language (BSL) National Plan 2023–29 sets out a clear and ambitious programme of actions across ten priority areas. The plan places a strong focus on children, young people and their families; health and wellbeing; the celebration of Deaf culture; and the removal of accessibility barriers across transport, democratic participation, and access to justice. These priorities reflect what BSL users themselves have told us matters most. We are firmly committed to delivering actions that will strengthen equality, expand opportunities, and improve outcomes for BSL users.

In reviewing the [Committee’s report](#), we assessed each recommendation against two key factors:

- The extent to which it aligns with the priority areas and actions in the BSL National Plan 2023–29; and
- Its overall deliverability, including resource and cost implications.

We are clear that our BSL National Plan is not static. We will continue to build on the actions it contains and take the steps necessary to deliver sustainable, long-term improvements for BSL users. The Committee’s findings will assist us in progressing this agenda to ensure the full ambitions of the Act are achieved. To do so, we must remain realistic about the barriers BSL users face, and we must address these barriers in a coordinated way by building on work already underway across communities, listed authorities, and at the national level.

I thank the Committee and all who contributed evidence to the Inquiry for their analysis and commitment to advancing this important area of policy.

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

2. Summary of our Response

1. The Committee put forward [forty-four recommendations](#). These recommendations were focused on key areas such as the BSL National Plan 2023-29, Authority Plans (referred to as BSL local plans), accountability and monitoring, education and access to work, healthcare, transport and rural access, and Contact Scotland BSL.
2. For each Committee recommendation, we have set out the Scottish Government's response and a brief rationale of our decision. Our responses fall into four types:

Accept

The recommendation is within devolved competence, aligns with Scottish Government policy objectives set out within the BSL National Plan 2023-29, and is achievable.

Partially accept

We agree in principle, but not to the full extent proposed by the Committee.

Consider further

Additional analysis is required to understand the recommendation's impact or cost before a final decision is made.

Decline

The recommendation does not align with Scottish Government policy objectives or is not deliverable.

3. A summary of our decisions is below:

Decision	Total
Accept	22
Partially Accept	18
Consider further	3
Decline	1
TOTAL	44

4. Overall, this means we have accepted, either in full or in part 40 of the 44 recommendations. We will consider 3 recommendations further and reach a conclusive decision by November 2026 once further analysis has taken place. We have declined one recommendation as this is not within the remit of the Scottish Government to respond to.
5. The next phase of activity is to consider implementation of the recommendations as part of our ongoing work to deliver the BSL National Plan 2023-2029.

Scottish Government response to the Committee recommendations

3. Second British Sign Language National Plan

3.1 Recommendation 1/paragraph 35

In contrast to much of the feedback received on the first National Plan, the Committee is disappointed to hear of the negative experience of some who contributed to the second Plan. The Committee recognises the challenges created by finite resources and understands that it would not be possible to include every suggestion made in the final Plan. However, it appears to the Committee that greater clarity could have been provided to stakeholders on what they could expect from the development process with a view to helping mitigate the sense of disappointment among many stakeholders that their suggestions had not been included in the final draft. The Committee regrets that the sense of positivity engendered in many stakeholders through collaborative working on the first Plan appears not to have been fully built upon and enhanced during the production of its successor.

3.1.1 Decision

Partially accept

3.1.2 Scottish Government Response

The BSL National Plan 2023-2029 is not a static document but is designed to be responsive to the daily barriers facing BSL users over its six-year lifecycle. BSL users were consulted with as part of the development of the second plan, with a steering group involving representative organisations of the Deaf and Deafblind communities contributing to the actions. We have committed to ongoing engagement and established the Implementation Advisory Group (IAG) of the National Plan to help inform its delivery. We commit to ongoing engagement with BSL users to reflect their lived experience as our actions progress. There are several actions requiring collaborative working, including in areas such as education, health and justice. We commit to working with the key stakeholders, including BSL users, to make the cross-cutting connections required to progress BSL equality in Scotland.

3.2 Recommendation 2/paragraph 36

The Committee welcomes confirmation that the Scottish Government will give further consideration to whether a replacement National Advisory Group or similar central oversight body, including representatives of BSL users, should be established. We invite the Scottish Government to provide an update on the outcome of this further consideration when available.

3.2.1 Decision

Accept

Within the BSL National Plan 2023-29, we commit to working with listed authorities and the BSL users to establish best practice, share knowledge and improve the development and implementation of actions within national and local BSL plans.

3.2.2 Scottish Government Response

We will do this by:

- Funding the Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland (the ALLIANCE) to create a support network for listed authorities mentioned in the BSL (Scotland Act) 2015 to enable opportunities to share good practice, resources and raise challenges around implementing local BSL plans. The network will encourage partnership working, improve data collection, foster connectivity and enable greater accountability on progress towards implementation of local plans.
- Funding British Deaf Association (BDA) Scotland through the Equality and Human Rights Fund to continue their work with listed authorities, fostering community connections and sharing information on how best to engage with BSL users.

3.3 Recommendation 3/paragraph 37

The Committee also agrees with comments made by stakeholders including the ALLIANCE and Professor Kusters on the importance of having robust disaggregated data on the profile of BSL users in Scotland and invites the Scottish Government to respond to these suggestions.

3.3.1 Decision

Accept

3.3.2 Scottish Government Response

The BSL National Plan 2023-29 commits to strengthening data on the BSL community in Scotland to better inform decision making in public policy and service design. We will continue to progress the actions as set out in the plan given the alignment with the committee recommendation and commit to meeting with the ALLIANCE and Professor Kusters to discuss their ideas further as we take forward the data actions within the plan.

3.4 Recommendation 4/paragraph 38

The Committee is also sympathetic to suggestions from Deafblind stakeholders that they can feel “drowned out” and for tactile BSL to be routinely included on an equal footing to BSL. We therefore invite the Scottish Government to consider what more should be done to ensure parity of esteem for both forms of BSL.

3.4.1 Recommendation 4/paragraph 38

Accept

3.4.2 Scottish Government Response

The BSL National Plan 2023-29 is clear that when referring to BSL users, this covers people whose first or preferred language is BSL, including those who receive the language in a tactile form due to sight loss.

There are a number of actions regarding Deafblind BSL users in the BSL National Plan 2023-2029, including supporting Deaf and Deafblind children, young people and their families, to learn about the heritage and culture of BSL in Scotland, supporting NHS teams and BSL providers to develop robust referral pathways for Deaf and Deafblind children, and developing opportunities for Deaf and Deafblind young people to learn about transitioning into and navigating the workplace.

Deafblind Scotland are a key partner on the BSL National Plan Implementation Advisory Group and provide the expertise and lived experience of their members in the Deafblind community to ensure that equal consideration is given throughout the plan to tactile BSL users and to Deafblind people.

The Scottish Government funds Deafblind Scotland via the Equality and Human Rights Fund to deliver human rights training to Deafblind community members through their Right to Dream project, in partnership with Visibility Scotland.

In June the Scottish Government announced its intent to take forward work to adopt the Nordic definition of Deafblindness as a functional model in Scotland.

The Government recognises the distinct challenges faced by the Deafblind community, and we want to ensure that Deafblind people in Scotland receive the recognition they need and are able to access the best possible care and support. Announcing our intention to adopt the Nordic definition is an important first step. Over the coming months we will be working through the detail of putting this into practice, working closely with the Cross-Party Groups on Deafness and Visual Impairment and key partners such as Deafblind Scotland

4. Authority Plans & Accountability & Monitoring

4.1 Recommendation 5-8/paragraph 47, 48, 56, and 57

Paragraph 47: The Committee recognises the importance of effective consultation with Deaf communities and of collaborative working between listed authorities, particularly those covering the same geographical areas. We welcome the positive examples of such work taking place but are concerned at suggestions that this has regressed in some areas and that specialist roles are being discontinued by some authorities. Whilst the Committee is keenly aware of the budgetary restrictions being faced by local government, we consider that such roles should not be removed given the importance of them in acting as a conduit for engagement with BSL users and other less-privileged groups in society.

We therefore invite the Scottish Government to confirm what further actions it will take to promote examples of best practice and encourage all listed authorities to adopt a similar best-practice approach.

Paragraph 48: The Committee is also concerned by suggestions from the ALLIANCE that Deafblind inclusion from some authorities can be “tokenistic” although we welcome its recognition that others have worked hard to consult and engage with Deafblind BSL users. This approach is to be encouraged. We therefore invite the Scottish Government to confirm what actions it intends to take to help promote examples of best practice on Deafblind engagement to all listed authorities and encourage them to adopt a similar approach.

Paragraph 56: The Committee understands the Scottish Government’s reluctance to play an overly-directive role and appreciates the importance of having local flexibility to address local priorities but is disappointed that only 62% of listed authorities had met their statutory duties by publishing BSL translations of their plans. We therefore invite the Scottish Government to consider what further steps could be taken to ensure compliance with legislative requirements by all listed authorities.

Paragraph 57: The Committee also welcomes the DFM’s recognition that consistency of high-quality service provision across the country is necessary and considers that robust monitoring is needed to achieve this. Bearing in mind the caveats above, and the actions already being taken, we invite the Scottish Government to further consider what additional steps could be taken to improve accountability for the delivery of local plans, including whether requiring three-year progress updates from listed authorities would be beneficial.

4.1.1 Decision

Accept

4.1.2 Scottish Government Response

The Scottish Government does not have a regulatory function under the BSL (Scotland) Act 2015, and it is the responsibility of listed authorities under to meet their legal duties under the Act.

We will fund the ALLIANCE to deliver a network that engages listed authorities in Scotland with intention to strengthen monitoring, data collection and accountability.

The purpose of the BSL Network is:

1. To enable opportunities to share good practice, resources and raise questions and challenges around implementing local BSL plans.
2. To encourage and facilitate partnership working and efficient use of resources and people’s time.
3. To enable efficient connections between Scottish Government and those responsible for the national BSL plan, and organisations/people responsible for local BSL plans.

4. To enable opportunities for improved data collection and analysis around the impact of BSL local plans (and wider monitoring and evaluation work).
5. To enable greater public accountability on progress towards the implementation of local plans.

This will complement the existing activity delivered by BDA Scotland, that supports listed authorities to:

1. Engage with BSL users within their local communities in the development and delivery of local BSL plans.
2. Identify and share good practice for engaging with BSL users.

Support the delivery of actions within plans by capturing the lived experience of BSL users.

4.2 Recommendation 9/paragraph 58

For many Deaf people, BSL is not an additional language but their only language. That difference is crucial. Whilst investment in Gaelic is rightly celebrated, the same parity of esteem has not been extended to BSL. Whilst recognising the need for full consultation with the Deaf community, the Committee therefore invites the Scottish Government to respond to suggestions that a national body along the lines of Bòrd na Gàidhlig or a “National BSL Centre of Excellence” would help bring greater oversight and clarity on financial investment in BSL along with greater parity of esteem with Gaelic and other minority languages.

4.2.1 Decision

Consider further

4.2.2 Scottish Government response

While the committee has not outlined the function, remit or alignment of a BSL National Centre of Excellence within the existing Scottish landscape, the idea merits further consideration on the added value this would create for BSL users in Scotland.

Through our Equality and Human Rights Fund, we provide funding to British Deaf Association (BDA) Scotland, Deafblind Scotland, and Scottish Ethnic Minority Deaf Charity (SEMDC). This helps to facilitate vital community engagement with policy both at a national and local level, as well as provide support, advocacy, and engagement with BSL users across Scotland.

In addition, we engage with other key partners including Deaf Action, the National Deaf Children’s Society, and Health and Social Care Alliance (The ALLIANCE) Scotland, to gather feedback and evidence from the BSL community that informs the delivery of the BSL National Plan 2023-29. It is the Scottish Government’s view that we would not want to divert resources from community organisations to fund the Committee’s idea for a national body.

More detailed scoping would be required on the cost associated with the establishment and operation of a BSL National Centre for Excellence, its purpose and alignment with existing organisations and structures within the BSL landscape in Scotland. The Scottish Government commits to exploring this concept further.

5. Education and Access to Work

The BSL National Plan 2023-29 has children, young people and their families as one of its priority areas. The plan contains actions that tackle barriers for Deaf and Deafblind children to ensure they have the support they need at all stages of their learning, so that they can reach their full potential.

5.1 Recommendation 10/paragraph 69

The Committee agrees on the importance of Deaf BSL users with lived experience being qualified to teach BSL-using pupils. We further agree that investment will be necessary to achieve this and invite the Scottish Government to consider what actions could be taken to help increase the numbers of Deaf BSL users being qualified to perform such roles.

5.1.1 Decision

Partially accept

5.1.2 Scottish Government Response

We remain committed to tackling barriers and developing practical and viable support that Deaf people, making effective use of BSL, to become registered teachers.

BSL users can already become registered teachers. Currently 46 active Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses exist. Support is provided on a case-by-case basis for ITE students using BSL

We are committed to engaging with key professionals (General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS), Initial Teacher Education (ITE) course providers / Deans of Education, local authorities (LAs), Education Scotland) and lived experience stakeholders such as the BSL National Plan Implementation Advisory Group and Scottish Sensory Centre (and, if possible, teachers/learners) to review current challenges, support and guidance with a view to developing new/enhanced best practice guidance (for viable support).

6. Early years provision

6.1 Recommendation 11/paragraph 74

The Committee strongly agrees on the importance of young Deaf children being able to learn their native language of BSL from the earliest age and considers it unacceptable that some Deaf children can start nursery or school with no knowledge of the language.

6.1.1 Decision

Accept

6.1.2 Scottish Government Response

The Additional Support for Learning Act 2004 set duties for education authorities to identify, provide for and review the additional support needs of their pupils, including D/deaf children. Duties under the Act can apply from under the age of 3 to the point at which a young person leaves school.

To support staff in the childcare workforce, the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC), funded by the Scottish Government, launched a [continuous professional learning \(CPL\) portal](#) specifically for the childcare profession. All resources are quality assured and designed to support practice within the sector. We are investigating what BSL resources and information about training opportunities can be added to the portal to support childcare practitioners in this area.

We recognise the difficulties parents and carers of Deaf and Deafblind children have in learning BSL in early years. As stated in the BSL National Plan 2023-29, we are committed to working with the NHS and BSL providers to ensure the right support is provided at the earliest stages of childhood.

We value partnership working from organisations including the National Deaf Children's Society and BDA Scotland, and commit to working with them and other partners to explore this issue further and identify next steps, including any training that might help to fill any gaps.

6.2 Recommendation 12 & 13/paragraphs 75 & 76

Paragraph 75: We greatly value the work being done to educate Deaf children by teachers of the Deaf and support workers but recognise that more needs to be done to ensure such learning opportunities are available to all Deaf children. The shortage of qualified Teachers of the Deaf and interpreters of sufficient standard is having a direct impact on children's learning. Too many Deaf children are leaving school without the language and support they need, and this is setting them up to fail in later life. This is not a future risk but is happening now, with lifelong consequences

Paragraph 76: For many Deaf people, BSL is not an additional language but their only language. That difference is crucial. Whilst investment in Gaelic schools is rightly celebrated, the same parity of esteem has not been extended to BSL, despite the fact that Deaf children cannot simply 'choose' another language in order to get on in society. We therefore invite the Scottish Government to set out what additional steps it intends to take to increase the number of qualified teachers of the Deaf, invest in Deaf education, and help bring about a parity of esteem with other minority languages such as Gaelic.

6.2.1 Decision

Accept

6.2.2 Scottish Government Response

Under the Children, Young People, and Families section of the BSL National Plan 2023-2029 there are several actions relating to appropriate qualifications for staff support for D/deaf children in different education settings including supporting early years workers, teachers of the Deaf, and teachers working with Deaf and Deafblind children to learn BSL up to the appropriate level (up to Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) level 6 for early years workers and up to SCQF level 10 for teachers of the Deaf and teachers working with Deaf and Deafblind children).

We are working with partners to update the existing qualifications guidance for teachers of children and young people who are blind or partially sighted, D/deaf or D/deafblind to ensure education authorities and teaching professionals have the latest advice on recommended qualifications and teacher competencies, and routes to gaining them. The revised guidance aims to enhance the attainment levels of children and young people with these additional needs.

A recent consultation on proposed revisions to the existing guidance will enable views across the education and third sector to be considered before the final draft is published. The conclusion of the teacher competency guidance update will allow us to consider next steps for the Teachers of Deaf children and young people workforce

7. Mainstreaming

7.1 Recommendation 14/paragraph 82

The Committee is concerned about the challenges faced by Deaf pupils (and teachers) in mainstream schools and the impact it can have on them, particularly in respect of a shortage of teachers with adequate BSL skills, and a lack of identity and sense of isolation from the wider Deaf community. We are clear that the status quo is not sustainable and are therefore sympathetic to suggestions from Deaf stakeholders that Deaf pupils should be grouped together in Deaf units, hubs or resource base schools rather than being the only, or one of only a handful of Deaf pupils in a mainstream school. BSL must be understood as a language and culture in its own right, not framed as a disability add-on. We therefore invite the Scottish Government to respond to these suggestions and to suggestions that it may be more beneficial for Deaf probationary teachers to complete their placements in such schools.

7.1.1 Decision

Partially accept

7.1.2 Scottish Government Response

Mainstreaming is a central pillar of our inclusive approach to education. Scotland's inclusive approach celebrates diversity and allows all children and young people to develop an understanding and recognition of differences, contributing to the development of an increasingly inclusive, empathetic and more just society.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills held a cross-party roundtable on 4 September with opposition education spokespersons to discuss what more can be done to support Additional Support Needs in our schools and to undertaking a review of Additional Support for Learning. The scope and detail of the review will be informed by the outcome of the roundtable discussion and will also draw on the evidence set out in the recent reports from the Education, Children and Young People Committee Inquiry Report, Audit Scotland briefing and the Children and Young People Commissioner's Report.

We acknowledge the committee's findings regarding the negative impact of mainstream education for some BSL users. The presumption to provide education in a mainstream setting applies unless certain exemptions are met. The exemptions are designed to ensure that children with additional support needs can access a quality education that meets their needs and helps them achieve their full potential. These are:

- the education provided in a mainstream school would not be suitable for the aptitude and abilities of the child in question.
- would be incompatible with the provision of efficient education for the children with whom the child would be educated.
- placing the child in question in a mainstream school would incur unreasonable levels of public expenditure that would not otherwise be incurred.

The exemptions allow for decisions to be made in the best interest of the child or young person and could be applied to Deaf BSL users to allow them to attend a specialist provision with their peers.

7.2 Recommendation 15/paragraph 83

We agree with stakeholders that improved opportunities to learn BSL should be provided to hearing pupils too, given the increased interest in the language and the longer-term benefits that having larger numbers of hearing BSL users in Scotland would bring. We therefore invite the Scottish Government to consider what further steps could be taken to expand opportunities to learn BSL for all pupils in Scotland and whether it may be helpful to "pilot" such an approach in a specific area in order to assess its effectiveness in advance of any future roll out. We will continue to support and enhance opportunities for hearing pupils to learn BSL.

7.2.1 Decision

Partially accept

7.2.2 Scottish Government Response

The Scottish Government agrees that increasing BSL capability in the general population would be beneficial, and we note that there are already opportunities which enable and support hearing pupils to learn BSL.

The most recent 1+2 language survey (published 2024, providing data relating to 2023) showed an increase in the number of primary schools offering BSL as a second additional language to 179.

We welcome the extraordinary success of Highland Council's BSL Resource Pack, which was specifically designed to support the delivery of BSL in the context of 1+2, and note that it has been purchased by all 32 local authorities across Scotland to enable the effective teaching of BSL to all school learners. We also note the availability of SQA Awards in British Sign Language, available to hearing and D/deaf learners, and welcome continued uptake of these Awards.

We have funded Scotland's National Centre for Languages, which delivers a dedicated BSL tutoring offer to primary schools.

The Committee will also be aware that we are committed with education partners to a programme of curriculum, qualifications and assessment reform, and this includes a review of the Languages curriculum led by Education Scotland.

8. Cochlear implants and language choice

8.1.1 Recommendation 16/paragraph 86

The Committee recognises the benefits that cochlear implants can bring but is mindful of stakeholder comments that they can lead to a sense of isolation from their community for Deaf children. We agree with Lucy Clark that opportunities to learn both speech and BSL should be provided to Deaf children and that adequate information is provided to hearing families of Deaf children to help inform these choices.

8.1.2 Decision

Accept

8.1.3 Scottish Government Response

It is important that Deaf children and their families are given the appropriate level of information and support regarding the options that are available, to make a choice that is right for them.

Under the Children, Young People, and Families priority in the BSL National Plan 2023-2029 there are several actions related to appropriate support being provided to Deaf children and their families.

This includes actions to support NHS teams and BSL providers to develop robust referral pathways for Deaf and Deafblind children to access the healthcare and language learning support they require, facilitating the building of partnerships and effective working relations between NHS teams and BSL providers, and working with representative groups across Midwifery, Health Visiting, Family Nurse Partnership and Allied Health Professionals and Audiology to highlight the importance of BSL provision on child and family wellbeing. We will continue to progress these actions within the BSL National Plan 2023-29.

9. Access to BSL training

9.1 Recommendation 17/paragraph 93

The Committee recognises that whilst online learning of BSL is better than nothing, it is not ideal for the reasons set out above. We therefore invite the Scottish Government to respond to suggestions that a BSL tutor course is developed for the whole of Scotland (including through online learning where appropriate).

9.1.1 Decision

Consider further

9.1.2 Scottish Government Response

We recognise the requirement for improved access to BSL training. We note the difficulties that some Education Authorities have with employing BSL tutors to support children and young people in their council area due to shortages in the BSL tutor workforce. We also recognise the importance for family and friends to learn BSL alongside a Deaf or Deafblind person.

The Scottish Government will consider the Committee's proposal to develop a new course and engage with existing providers of BSL training to scope out the remit and scale of a new national provision. In doing so we will commit to carry out a review of courses and services on offer and the barriers that exist to accessing them.

9.2 Recommendation 18/paragraph 94

In respect of amendments to the Education (Scotland) Bill made at a late stage, the Committee invites the Scottish Government to consider what further steps can be taken to ensure that the inclusion and promotion of BSL is included at the earliest stage of the policy development process.

9.2.1 Decision

Accept

9.2.2 Scottish Government Response

The Scottish Government adopts a mainstreaming approach to BSL to ensure it receives a cross-portfolio reach. As set out in the 2025/26 Programme for Government, in December 2025 we will publish a new Mainstreaming Strategy which will support Scottish Government, and the wider public sector, to focus on mainstreaming equality and human rights. We recognise that although a Strategy provides direction, it does not achieve change on its own. Therefore, to support this Strategy we have launched a key resource; an online Toolkit, which contains guidance, advice and best practice examples to support the public sector to mainstream equality and human rights.

The Equality and Human Rights Mainstreaming Strategy, Action Plan and Toolkit will reinforce the importance of Equality Impact Assessments (EQIAs) as a key driver of change. By promoting early and meaningful use of EQIAs, we aim to ensure that equality and human rights - including the inclusion of BSL - are systematically considered across all areas of government policy and practice.

We are funding Communication Inclusion People and Disability Equality Scotland to develop an Inclusive Communication Toolkit. This toolkit is designed to provide structured, practical support to public bodies, helping them mainstream inclusive communication and meet the general equality duty.

The toolkit is being co-produced with people who communicate in diverse ways, public bodies and other expert organisations. The toolkit itself aims to be fully inclusive by using inclusive language and will have BSL, captions and voiceover embedded in all videos. It will be rolled out in early 2026.

9.3 Recommendation 19/paragraph 95

We welcome the DFM's agreement on the importance of Deaf children learning BSL at a young age and agree that sufficient numbers of suitably trained teachers are necessary to achieve this. We therefore await the findings of the recent consultation on competences of teachers of sensory impaired pupils with interest and look forward to considering them further, along with the Scottish Government's intended next steps, in evidence with the DFM in due course.

9.3.1 Decision

Accept

9.3.2 Scottish Government Response

The consultation on revisions to the guidance on appropriate qualifications and teacher competencies for teachers of children and young people who are blind or partially sighted, D/deaf, or D/deafblind included recommendations on BSL skill levels that Teachers of Deaf children and young people should attain to effectively support learners who are Deaf.

Once a full analysis of consultation responses has been completed, we will publish this and consider next steps.

9.4 Recommendation 20/paragraph 96

In respect of feedback from Deafblind stakeholders that there is a lack of parity of esteem for tactile BSL, the Committee welcome the DFM's recognition that the Act was intended to improve the lives of all BSL users in Scotland, including those who use tactile BSL, and invites the Scottish Government to consider what further actions are needed to ensure such a parity of esteem.

9.4.1 Decision

Accept

9.4.2 Scottish Government Response

We have set out some of the steps we are taking to ensure equal consideration is given to tactile BSL in our response to recommendation 38. We will continue to engage with the BSL National Plan Implementation Advisory Group, including Deafblind Scotland, as well as the Deafblind community, to strengthen actions within the BSL National Plan 2023-29 for Deafblind BSL users.

10. Access to work

10.1 Recommendation 21/paragraph 99

Whilst the Committee is mindful that the DWP's Access to Work scheme is reserved, we understand the concerns raised by stakeholders and invite the Scottish Government to consider any additional assistance it may be able to provide to help ease the administrative burden for working BSL users accessing support under the scheme.

10.1.1 Decision

Partially accept

10.1.2 Scottish Government Response

Access to Work is a UK Government scheme, funded and facilitated by the Department for Work and Pensions. Despite Scottish Ministers' requests to devolve the service in Scotland, Access to Work remains reserved to the UK Government. Whilst the Scottish Government does not have direct control over the scheme, we are committed to using all available levers to support BSL users. This includes facilitating the Scottish Access to Work Stakeholder Forum to provide a platform for Scottish interests to be represented and discuss thematic questions directly with DWP. Deaf Action is an active member of the Forum, and at the most recent meeting they agreed to engage further with DWP offline to explore specific issues affecting BSL users.

The UK Government have recently consulted about changes to the future of Access to Work, and we hope the analysis of this consultation will be shared by the end of 2025. Any actions taken will be based on the results of this consultation, and the Scottish Government will continue to engage constructively with the DWP to ensure the needs of BSL users across Scotland are met.

11. Justice

11.1 Recommendation 22-24/paragraph 105, 106 and 107

Paragraph 105: The Committee agrees with our witnesses that Deaf women in particular should have better access to education and information about their rights and the law and that Deaf specific service providers would help to achieve this.

Paragraph 106: The Committee further agrees that it is highly unsatisfactory for Deaf survivors of domestic abuse to be “lumped in” with disabled survivors in domestic abuse statistics, given the differing challenges they face and the importance of having robust, disaggregated data on which to base policy initiatives.

Paragraph 107: The Committee therefore invites the Scottish Government to consider what further steps should be taken to:

- Help educate Deaf people (particularly women) about their rights and how the justice system works.
- Increase the numbers of suitably trained Deaf experts (and failing that, BSL interpreters for IDAAs) to provide support and advice to survivors.
- Consider what steps could be taken to improve the accuracy and robustness of data in this area.

11.1.1 Decision

Partially accept

11.1.2 Scottish Government Response

The Delivering Equally Safe Fund provides support to Deaf Links to deliver the Violence Advocacy service for Deaf women. This project integrated within Deaf Links, and Dundee, Angus and Perthshire Women's Aid supporting Deaf women in Tayside to have equal and appropriate access to specialist violence against women/domestic violence services. It provides local basic needs assistance through advocacy support in BSL and specialist support for Deaf Women experiencing Gender Based Violence.

We are supporting Deaf Links to develop tools and assets to raise awareness of domestic abuse amongst the Deaf community

We continue to engage with Deaf Links and the Sign Loud team at Herriot Watt University and University of Edinburgh, a project focused on experiences of domestic abuse and communication barriers, to consider deliverables that will make a difference to Deaf women within the new Equally Safe Delivery Plan.

With regards to the point on increasing the numbers of suitably trained Deaf experts to provide support and advice to survivors, the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service (SCTS) does not provide legal advice or support for victims of crime. This recommendation would be best addressed to services such as Victim Information and Advice, which is part of the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPS) or Victim Support Scotland. The Scottish Government will facilitate a meeting between BSL stakeholders, members of the community, and these bodies to capture areas for improvement in this area.

As part of the Justice partners domestic abuse roundtable, we are currently looking at how we can utilise the data regarding domestic abuse offences to better inform policy and operational practice. We commit to exploring how to best capture data relating specifically to Deaf survivors of domestic abuse. We will also raise at the Police Scotland Domestic abuse Forum where stakeholders from the Deaf community are represented

12. Emergency responses

12.1 Recommendation 25/paragraph 112

The Committee therefore agrees with Professor Napier that consideration should be given to how emergency services should be alerted to the fact that a person is Deaf before attending an emergency call to enable interpretation to be provided, even if initially online. It also recommends that front-line responders are given adequate training in Deaf awareness and communication requirements.

12.1.1 Decision

Accept

12.1.2 Scottish Government Response

The Scottish Ambulance Service (SAS) are currently working with BDA Scotland to look at what facilities they currently have in place for BSL patients and service users and how they can improve and develop in this area

With their partners at Police Scotland and Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, SAS have linked with Tap SOS, an organisation that has developed an App for use in emergencies, which will be helpful for members of the public who are D/deaf, hard of hearing or have difficulty with speech.

12.2 Recommendation 26/paragraph 113

However, the Committee is less understanding of situations where interpreters have not been organised to enable Deaf complainers to provide statements to the police and invites the Scottish Government to consider what further guidance could be provided to Police Scotland to prevent such scenarios from being repeated.

12.2.1 Decision

Partially accept

12.2.2 Scottish Government Response

The deployment of BSL interpreters and frontline procedures are matters for Police Scotland, which operates independently under the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012. The Scottish Government cannot direct operational decisions, including how and when interpreters are used. The Chief Constable is held to account by the Scottish Police Authority (SPA). Police Scotland has established protocols for arranging interpretation services, including the use of Contact Scotland BSL and 999BSL, which allow Deaf individuals to contact emergency services via video relay.

Police Scotland has developed Deaf awareness training and collaborated with academic partners to improve communication tools, such as a BSL version of the police caution. Despite these measures, concerns remain about delays in interpreter provision, particularly when Deaf individuals are giving statements or reporting crimes. The Scottish Government acknowledges these concerns and will work with the SPA and Police Scotland to highlight any concerns and explore how the current response could be strengthened to promote consistency and accessibility.

Police Scotland's Policing Together Equality and Diversity Unit has been working to improve the provision of BSL interpreters in planned and unplanned police contact. This work includes working with BSL interpreting agencies to provide police specific training, working to implement a VRI (video remote interpreting) app that would give officers instant access to a video interpreter on their devices for all unplanned contact and suitable planned contact, and supporting numerous research projects on identifying service improvements for BSL communities.

13. Court proceedings

13.1 Recommendation 27/paragraph 117

The Committee understands how challenging it must be for Deaf people to navigate the legal system and notes the calls of stakeholders for information to be provided in their native language. We therefore invite the Scottish Government to set out what steps it intends to take to achieve this and to respond to calls for BSL intermediaries who provide support to Deaf people involved in court proceedings to be introduced in Scotland.

13.1.1 Decision

Partially accept

13.1.2 Scottish Government Response

The British Sign Language Justice Advisory Group is made up of justice sector organisations and representatives of BSL users. It is currently focusing on a model for BSL intermediaries.

The provision of information in BSL format is actively discussed at the group and actions are being identified to deliver information in BSL that help BSL users navigate the legal system.

13.2 Recommendation 28 & 29 /paragraph 118 & 119

Paragraph 118: The Committee welcomes the amendment to the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill agreed at Stage 2 which enables the appointment of communication supporters to enable Deaf people to serve as jurors and participate effectively in trials in that capacity.

Paragraph 119: We further welcome confirmation that “different types of communication supporters” are involved in further deliberations on the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill and invite the Scottish Government to update the Committee on the outcome of these deliberations when complete.

13.2.1 Decision

Accept

13.2.2 Scottish Government Response

The Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill was passed by the Scottish Parliament in September 2025 and received Royal Assent on 30 October 2025. Section 64 of the Act will insert a new section 88A into the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995 to enable the court to appoint a communication supporter for a juror and allows them to be present in the jury room. This will allow people who, as a result of physical disability, require a communication supporter to participate effectively in jury deliberations.

Whilst we acknowledge that many BSL users do not identify as disabled and that BSL is first and foremost a language and a culture, BSL users will be included in this legislation by virtue of allowing communication support into the jury deliberation room.

This section has not yet been commenced. We are engaging closely with the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service (SCTS) and the Criminal Courts Rules Council as they make preparations for implementation, including making necessary changes to court rules.

SCTS intend to initially focus on the provision of BSL interpreters for jurors who use BSL. However, the definition of communication supporters has been drafted as broadly as possible to allow for different types of support to be rolled out at a later stage.

We will keep the Committee updated on the progress of implementation of section 64 and any plans for future roll out.

14. Civil Justice

14.1 Recommendation 30/paragraph 121

Whilst the Committee received limited feedback on civil justice proceedings, we are concerned at suggestions that the civil courts are lagging behind the criminal courts in terms of access to BSL interpreters and invite the Scottish Government to respond to these comments.

14.1.1 Decision

Decline

14.1.2 Scottish Government Response

The Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service (SCTCS) have informed us they were made aware last year of the issues regarding difficulties accessing BSL interpreters in civil courts and that this has now been resolved, stating that anyone who requires a BSL interpreter will be provided with one in both civil and criminal courts. As listed authority under the BSL (Scotland) Act 2015, SCTCS produced their own [BSL Plan](#) which aims to ensure BSL interpreters are readily available in both civil and criminal courts, and they are continuing to work with BSL service providers to deliver this outcome.

15. Healthcare

15.1 Recommendation 31 & 32/paragraph 128-129

Paragraph 128: The Committee considers that the current levels of health service provision for BSL users is inadequate, particularly in respect of mental health services. Given the similarities in concerns raised in relation to health services when compared to education and justice, the Committee reiterates its recommendations above and invites the Scottish Government to set out actions it will take to:

- Alert emergency services to the fact that a caller is Deaf to enable translation support to be put in place, both in emergency situations and for planned appointments, particularly in respect of mental health services.
- Ensure that greater numbers of Deaf BSL users have opportunities to become healthcare professionals.
- Educate medical professionals on attitudes to interventions such as cochlear implants within the Deaf community and the importance of Deaf identity.

Paragraph 129: The Committee also invites the Scottish Government to set out what steps it will take to increase knowledge and understanding of tactile BSL among medical practitioners, particularly in fields such as audiology.

15.1.1 Decision

Partially accept

15.1.2 Scottish Government Response

Operational matters – including staff training are in the first instance the responsibility of the public sector employer. We expect public sector employers including Health Boards to undertake their own impact assessments where necessary, and to comply with the Scottish Specific Duties which aim to enable better performance of the Public Sector Equality Duty in Scotland. We expect employers to plan and provide safe, effective, inclusive and high-quality care, in line with their statutory service provision and workforce planning responsibilities. It is the role of employers, to ensure that their employees, including agency staff, have undertaken the necessary mandatory and essential training.

The Scottish Government published an Equalities Impact Assessment (EQIA) alongside the [Mental Health and Wellbeing Workforce Action Plan](#). This helped us identify and inform the actions we needed to address inequalities in the mental health and wellbeing workforce. Actions are designed to improve the diversity of the workforce, encourage and promote inclusive workplace practices and ensure the workforce have the right skills to meet the needs of the people of Scotland. This specifically included an action on promoting BSL resources.

Through the Mental Health and Wellbeing Workforce Education and Training Advisory Group a new Mental health and wellbeing learning page been developed, and is hosted on the NHS' TURAS website, to signpost people to education resources associated with mental health and wellbeing.

This first iteration will be further developed and improved following feedback from stakeholders, workforce volunteers and carers. TURAS offers a range of resources on communication and BSL.

A key entry point to unscheduled and urgent care is NHS 24's Mental Health Hub which is accessible through the 111 service. The Hub enables BSL users to use the free BSL interpreting video relay service Contact Scotland BSL and also enables textphone users to access the service through a dedicated number or the Relay UK app.

On employment of BSL users in the NHS – again this is the responsibility of the public sector employer (specifically health boards in this instance). To support this, the Scottish Government published the NHS Health Workforce Policy on Reasonable Adjustments in August this year.

Health is one the key priority themes that will be developed with the BSL National Plan Implementation Advisory Group during the lifecycle of the plan, ensuring that we are responsive to key issues and barriers BSL users face in healthcare.

15.2 Recommendation 33/paragraph 130

The Committee also invites the Scottish Government to respond to concerns raised by BDA Scotland and the ALLIANCE about the need for a robust approach to ensuring that older Deaf BSL users have access to appropriate services and care packages where appropriate.

15.2.1 Decision

Partially accept

15.2.2 Scottish Government Response

In December 2022, the Scottish Government and COSLA issued an updated joint statement of intent outlining how they will continue to work together to deliver key commitments in response to the Independent Review of Adult Social Care in Scotland. This continuing work is important as it is local authorities and not Scottish Government who commission Social Care.

The Scottish Government relaunched the Support in the Right Direction (SiRD) Programme in April 2024, committing £9.9 million to support its delivery over the next three years (2024-2027).

The SiRD programme provides local independent support, advice and advocacy to people who need social care, so they understand the Self Directed Support (SDS) options and are able to choose the support which best meets their individual needs.

This multi-year funding agreement provides much needed reassurance and stability to supported people across Scotland, as well as to the third sector organisations providing these services.

In the BSL National Plan 2023-29 there is an action centred around involvement of BSL users with the development and implementation of the National Care Service. While proposals for structural NCS reform were ultimately not supported by Parliament or local government, the Scottish Government remains committed to achieving the scale of improvement that the Feeley Review said was necessary.

To support the involvement of BSL users, we promote the use of Contact Scotland BSL for communication during the application process to join the Lived Experience Experts Panel (LEEP). We have a number of organisations on our NCS Stakeholder Register who provide support for Deaf people. We share our monthly newsletter with them, which includes co-design opportunities for LEEP members, and they forward to their BSL users. As part of the registration process, we ask LEEP members to share accessibility needs and language preferences. This helps us to recruit participants for particular activities and identify gaps in diversity so we can increase engagement.

We worked with BDA Scotland to carry out a co-design project which included seeking input from 3 Deaf Clubs and an online group of BSL users relating to the National Care Service Charter of Rights. We will use the findings to inform the final content and design of the Charter

Through the Co-design Partnership Programme, we are currently running a number of participation sessions with Deafblind Scotland which will include engagement with BSL users.

15.3 Recommendation 34/paragraph 131

Finally, the Committee invites the Scottish Government to respond to the Alliance's comments around the likelihood of increasing numbers of Deafblind people and its calls for an increase in numbers of social workers for the Deaf.

15.3.1 Decision

Partially accept

15.3.2 Scottish Government Response

Funding of social work services lies with local authorities who will often contract specialist social work services for people with sensory impairment, including BSL users, as local demand requires.

We know there are systemic challenges affecting social work and recognise the need to support the workforce. We will, therefore, establish the National Social Work Agency (NSWA) by spring 2026. The NSWA will be an executive agency of the Scottish Government and be accountable to Scottish Ministers. The NSWA will seek to raise the profile and strengthen the cohesion of the profession, drive change and continuous improvement in social work education and learning, ensure Scotland has a national approach to the numbers of social workers needed now and, in the future, support implementation of national policy.

16. Transport and rural access

16.1 Recommendation 35 &36/paragraph 142 & 143

Paragraph 142: The Committee strongly agrees on the importance of enabling Deaf people in rural communities to access the services they need. However, we are mindful of the lack of adequately trained interpreters and BSL using professionals in such areas and the challenges this brings. The Committee also invites the Scottish Government to consider what actions could be taken to improve Deaf awareness and understanding of communication requirements in the care home workforce

Paragraph 143: The Committee also recognises the challenges that listed authorities in rural areas can face in engaging with BSL users where they are fewer in number and may have more limited opportunity to engage with other BSL users.

16.1.1 Decision

Partially accept

16.1.2 Scottish Government Response

The BSL National Plan 2023-2029 is designed to tackle systemic barriers faced by BSL users across Scotland in ten priority areas including children, young people and their families; health and wellbeing; culture; transport, democratic participation, and access to justice. As we progress with delivery of the plan, we will work closely with the Implementation Advisory Group to ensure the lived experience and needs of BSL users in rural and island communities is a part of this delivery. Listed authorities play a vital role in ensuring the lived experience of the BSL community is fed into the development and delivery of actions for BSL users in rural areas.

As noted in the response to recommendations 37, 47, 48, 56, and 57 the newly established BSL network for listed authorities will cover the whole of Scotland, including listed authorities in rural and island areas, and will provide the opportunity for listed authorities in those areas to discuss challenges further with others to help identify solutions to the issues they are facing. The Scottish Government also funds BDA Scotland to provide support to listed authorities, offering advice to assist with challenges they face in communicating with BSL users within their communities.

With regards to the point around improving Deaf awareness and understanding of communication requirements in the care home workforce, as part of their ongoing registration with Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC), the social care workforce need to undertake annual Career Long Professional Learning (CLPL). One of the 7 core learning elements is 'Communication and Relationships', and workers will select learning opportunities within this theme which reflect their roles and development needs. Communication is also a key theme in professional qualifications needed for registration, with learners being asked to consider language needs and preferences, and any extra support which may be required

16.2 Recommendation 37/paragraph 144

The Committee agrees with Deaf Links that technology could form part of the solution but considers that investment in digital literacy through suitable training, infrastructure and equipment is vital for this to work effectively.

16.2.1 Decision

Accept

16.2.2 Scottish Government Response

The Scottish Government recognises the Committee's observations on the challenges faced by Deaf people in rural communities, including access to interpreting services, education, and employment opportunities. We agree that access to technology, combined with digital skills and confidence, can help address some of these barriers.

Digital inclusion is a priority for the Scottish Government, and programmes such as Connecting Scotland have provided devices, connectivity, and digital skills support to those facing digital exclusion.

We continue to embed accessibility and inclusion across digital policy and service design, ensuring that all communities, including Deaf users, can participate fully in Scotland's digital world.

The new Contact Scotland BSL service started on 1 December 2025. VRS can be particularly helpful in rural areas where access to interpreters is challenging. We are working closely with the new supplier Sign Solutions, who have provided appropriate support and guidance materials in BSL to help users access the service, and who will engage with BSL users across Scotland to gather continuous feedback on the service. As part of this new service, we will pilot Video Remote Interpreting (VRI). We are working with Sign Solutions to consider the best approach to VRI in Scotland and will engage directly with the community to make sure this is targeted and proportionate to ensure the most impact.

We support the roll out of Signport, an interpreter booking app, website, and social enterprise that launched at the end of October 2025. This app was designed by Deaf BSL users and interpreters and is designed to streamline the interpreter booking process for both BSL users, interpreters, and public bodies. We encourage its use across Scotland.

16.3 Recommendation 38/paragraph 145

The Committee shares the concerns of stakeholders about the closure of Deaf clubs and other facilities for Deaf people, which can add to feelings of isolation, particularly in remote areas and invites the Scottish Government to respond to these concerns.

16.3.1 Decision

Partially accept

16.3.2 Scottish Government Response

We recognise the key role Deaf clubs in giving Deaf BSL users access to their language, culture, and community, and combating social isolation. We support their use but recognise that funding is mainly delivered at a local authority level and it is them to consider longer term sustainability for Deaf Clubs throughout Scotland.

The Scottish Government allocates £8.543 million in funding to Third Sector Interfaces (TSIs), which operate across all local authority areas in Scotland. TSIs provide a broad range of support to third sector organisations, including assistance with organisational development, governance, and volunteering. This support extends to a variety of community groups, including Deaf clubs.

The Scottish Government will engage further with key partners to better understand the issues impacting on the sustainability of Deaf Clubs in Scotland.

16.4 Recommendation 39/paragraph 146

As noted above, the Committee invites the Scottish Government to respond to comments about the need for a robust approach to ensuring that older Deaf BSL users have access to appropriate services and care packages where appropriate, something that presents an even greater challenge in smaller and rural communities.

16.4.1 Decision

Partially accept

16.4.2 Scottish Government Response

Please refer to answer for recommendation 33, paragraph 130.

16.5 Recommendation 40/paragraph 147

In respect of public transport, the Committee invites the Scottish Government to consider what action it can take to encourage transport providers to provide accessible information for BSL users and to implement simple solutions suggested by the community such as having a laminated route map on buses.

16.5.1 Decision

Accept

16.5.2 Scottish Government Response

Transport Scotland's Digital Travel Data Services project delivered the first iteration of the new Traveline Scotland website and app in September last year, with further enhancements to the journey planning service expected in late 2025 and over the coming years.

In line with the project's commitment to continuous improvement, the team is engaging with users through various channels, such as customer satisfaction surveys and via the Traveline Scotland telephone helpline. The team is incorporating feedback which is already driving improvements to the overall design, usability, and accessibility of the Traveline Scotland website & app. We welcome all input to these channels and would like to learn more from BSL users on their direct experience. This will be done as part of our commitments within the BSL National Plan 2023-29 to ensure BSL users have safe, fair and inclusive access to public transport.

Network Rail has installed BSL customer information screens at several stations in Scotland, including Edinburgh Waverley and Glasgow Central. These were the first in the UK to have BSL on the main boards and sub boards as part of an ongoing investment to make Scotland's Railway more accessible.

Our vision is that everyone can travel with the same freedom, choice, dignity and opportunity. Launched in 2016, Scotland's Accessible Travel Framework was co-produced with D/deaf and disabled people and sets out a ten-year plan for making travel in Scotland more accessible. Transport providers have legal duties to deliver equality of access to their services.

The current Accessible Travel Framework comes to an end in 2026, and work is underway to understand the priorities of Deaf and disabled people as we co-produce the next Framework. This will also include seeking to engage with D/deaf-led organisations to understand the lived experiences, challenges and opportunities for D/deaf people. The National Transport Accessibility Steering Group membership includes a broad range of stakeholders, including D/deaf-led organisations having membership.

16.6 Recommendation 41/paragraph 148

The Committee also invites the Scottish Government to respond to suggestions that an Australian-style approach to incentivising newly qualified professionals to live and work in rural areas for an initial period after qualification might work in Scotland.

16.6.1 Decision

Consider further

16.6.2 Scottish Government Response

There is no quick fix for the challenges leading to depopulation, however our Addressing Depopulation Action Plan, published in February 2024, sets out the Scottish Government's strategic approach aimed at supporting local communities facing population decline. The Plan seeks to maximise the range of levers at the Scottish Government's disposal, while also channelling the power of local leadership, acknowledging that local communities are best placed to respond to their distinct challenges.

As part of this Action Plan, we have established a range of new and targeted place-based commitments, aligned to local ambitions to support population attraction and retention to these areas. These interventions are enabling communities to develop and deliver bespoke responses, while also generating learning for communities across Scotland more broadly.

Scotland's first ever National Islands Plan was published in 2019. A statutory document under the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, it sets out the investments and policies that the Scottish Government intends to take forward to improve outcomes for island communities.

As required by the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, the first National Islands Plan underwent a review in 2023-2024. The review was informed by a public consultation and direct engagement with island communities.

Responding to the review, a new National Islands Plan is being developed for publication later this year.

The new Plan will have population retention and attraction as its central overarching objective and restates the Scottish Government's commitment to working with and for islanders to build sustainable and prosperous communities. To this end, it sets out clear, tangible, and measurable commitments designed for local implementation.

The new Plan will also have a renewed focus on the role of languages across our island communities, recognising its important role in culture, heritage and economic development. This includes British Sign Language as according to Census 2022 data around 2,700 islanders use BSL.

The Plan recognises difficulties in accessing classes and training for BSL for individuals on islands and will seek to build on the BSL National Plan in providing targeted action to reduce barriers and improve inclusion for BSL users in island communities.

17. Contact Scotland BSL

17.1 Recommendation 42-44/paragraph 157, 158 & 159

Paragraph 157: The Committee strongly welcomes the positive feedback received on the Contact Scotland BSL service and agrees that it appears to have been "life-changing" for many users.

Paragraph 158: The Committee therefore welcomes the Deputy First Minister's assurance that there will be no break in service provision and her "regret" that alarm was caused by communications around the procurement exercise to identify the new service provider. We further welcome her confirmation of 1 September that a new preferred bidder has been agreed and is expected to be in place by December.

Paragraph 159: However, the Committee notes the absence of a formal evaluation of Contact Scotland BSL to assess the views of its users on how well it meets their needs, why not all BSL users are comfortable using the service, and other potential areas where it could be improved on and invites the Scottish Government to confirm whether it intends to undertake such an evaluation.

17.1.1 Decision

Partially accept

17.1.2 Scottish Government Response

We recognise what the community told us about the importance of Contact Scotland BSL and that this service is valued by BSL users given it helps maintain their independence.

Following a competitive procurement process, the new supplier, Sign Solutions, took over the operation of Contact Scotland BSL on 1 December 2025.

As with the previous contract, the new supplier of Contact Scotland BSL is required to provide monthly and quarterly reports containing relevant management information and evidence of key performance indicators (KPIs) including call volumes, average queuing time, number of unique agencies contacted, information on complaints and user feedback, marketing and awareness, community engagement, training offered, and more.

As well as this continued engagement with and feedback with the community will be a key part of the new supplier's activity as the new service progresses, including when piloting Video Remote Interpreting (VRI) into the service for the first time. Sign Solutions have already engaged with key groups including the BSL National Plan Implementation Advisory Group and representatives of the interpreter workforce as well as engaging with the BSL community through a community event on 20 November 2025, with more events planned.

Sign Solutions will also provide support and guidance for users who might not be familiar with how to use the service, including both Deaf and Deafblind BSL users and public service staff. A Community Liaison Officer will deliver a series of community outreach events and online engagement, delivered in BSL, to promote the service, receive feedback on its current operation and encourage uptake of user within the community.

Given the early stages of the new service, we do not think that a formal evaluation would be beneficial at this stage, however we welcome ongoing feedback from the BSL community to ensure the continued success of Contact Scotland BSL. Any evaluation will seek to ensure that the needs of users are met and refined where that might be required. The Scottish Government recognises that continuous improvement and ongoing community engagement are key to the success of this service.