

British Deaf Association

**SIGN**  
**LANGUAGE**  
**WEEK**

#SignLanguageWeek

*BSL Brings Us Together*

14 - 20 March **2022**

# About the British Deaf Association

## Q Who are we?

The British Deaf Association (BDA) is a national Deaf people's organisation. We represent the interests of Deaf and Deafblind people based in England Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

We are the only Deaf organisation that is Deaf-led with a Deaf CEO. Our aim is to foster the recognition and acceptance of British Sign Language (BSL) as used by Deaf people.

We stand for the recognition of BSL and Deaf culture, the Inclusion of Deaf people in all areas of public life and Equality for Deaf people. Our belief is a world where Deaf and deafblind people can play a full role in society and where they are not held back by ignorance or communication barriers.

The BSL Bill that is currently going through parliament aims to finally recognise and protect BSL in law.

## Q What is Sign Language Week?

Sign Language Week is an annual celebration of British Sign Language in the UK, led by the British Deaf Association. It always falls in March, on the week of 18 March, marking the date that the UK Government first recognized British Sign Language as a language in its own right. This year, it falls from 14 – 20 March.

The theme of Sign Language Week 2022 is "BSL Brings Us Together". We believe that if more people learned BSL, for example at school, that would lead to better inclusion of Deaf people in society. Not only would there be more BSL interpreters available but hearing people would be able to communicate with Deaf people directly. We cannot learn to hear, but you can learn to sign!

Learning about BSL and Deaf culture is fascinating and fun! Why learn Spanish when you can learn about a unique Indigenous language of the UK!



## Q What is BSL?

British Sign Language (BSL) is the preferred language of over 87,000 Deaf people in the UK for whom English may be a second or third language. An estimated total of around 151,000 individuals in the UK who can use BSL – this figure does not include professional BSL users, Interpreters, Translators etc, unless they use BSL at home.

BSL was recognised by the British Government as a language in its own right on 18 March 2003.

## Q Is BSL a real language?

BSL is a language in its own right, separate and distinct from English. Sign languages are fully functional and expressive languages; at the same time, they differ profoundly from spoken languages. BSL is a visual language with its own linguistic structure and a distinctive grammar using handshapes, facial expressions and body language to convey meaning. We have records of BSL being used in the UK for hundreds of years.

## Q Is BSL the same as Makaton?

No. Makaton is not a language, but a collection of signs that are used, in English spoken word order, alongside speech to help, encourage and support those who have communication or learning impairments. BSL is a full, complex, ever-evolving language with its own grammar and regional variation.

## Q Is sign language universal?

No. Contrary to popular belief, Sign Language is not international. Sign languages evolve wherever there are Deaf people, and they show all the variation you would expect from different spoken languages.

There is a collection of internationally accepted signs – International Sign (IS) – which is sometimes used in the course of international meetings of Deaf people.



## Q How many people use BSL in the UK? How many of these users are Deaf?

Based on official statistics, we believe the figure is 151,000 and 87,000 of these are Deaf. This figure does not include professional BSL users, Interpreters, Translators etc unless they use BSL at home.

Our statistics are based on the percentage of 'BSL users at home' from the Scottish Census in 2011, because the question about BSL was badly phrased in the Census for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The failure to even capture an accurate assessment of how many people use BSL is itself an indicator of the problems the Deaf community faces – how can Government and wider society meet the needs of BSL users without knowing how many of them there are?

## Q If the UK government has already recognised BSL, what is the aim of the BSL Bill currently going through Parliament?

On 18 March 2003, the UK Government formally recognised British Sign Language as a language in its own right. It also promised to look into conferring legal status on BSL. Nearly nineteen years on, we're still waiting. We hope that this BSL Bill will finally help the Government to understand the importance for the Deaf community of being able to communicate, receive information and access vital public services in our first language.

A BSL Act would achieve legal status for British Language as the primary language of the Deaf community in the United Kingdom. Achieving legal recognition would be a huge step forward in terms of raising awareness of BSL, by enshrining in law its existence and equal status to English.

This in turn would create an opportunity to improve the quality of life for Deaf people by improving their inclusion and autonomy in society, public services such as healthcare and education and professional opportunities.

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## Q What is the BSL Act Now! campaign?

Deaf people in the UK in 2022 still do not have access to the same public information and services that are easily available to the hearing population. They are forced to rely on inadequate disability discrimination legislation (Equality Act 2010) to fight for access to vital information (for example, about COVID, healthcare, education and justice) in their own language – an indigenous language of the United Kingdom – British Sign Language.

The BSL Act Now! campaign is being led by the British Deaf Association (BDA) to support the Deaf community across the UK to come together and campaign for the legal recognition of BSL and to create public policy mechanisms that will remove the countless barriers that society places in front of Deaf BSL users in their daily lives.

## Q How would the BSL Act improve the lives of Deaf people in the UK?

The BSL Bill would place an obligation on UK government departments to issue guidance on the “promotion and facilitation” of British Sign Language. This means they would have to report back to the Department of Work and Pensions every year on what they have done to promote and facilitate the use of British Sign Language in their public communications.

Government Departments do not routinely provide accurate and up to date information in BSL, including when the information is targeted specifically at Deaf and disabled people. The most high-profile example of this was the failure to provide BSL interpretation at national COVID Briefings at the start of the pandemic.

We believe that the Act would create momentum for more people across the UK to learn BSL, whether as a hobby, as a skill for work (for example, if they are a Civil Servant), or to train as a British Sign Language interpreter.

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## Q Why do Deaf people need access to public information in BSL? Why not English / captions, etc?

British Sign Language is a visual language, and a language in its own right, with its own unique structure and grammar. It is not “English on the hands”. Written English is a second language for many Deaf people, who prefer to access vital, potentially life-saving information in their primary language.

