**FE/HE Institutions – Progress Report**

**University of Aberdeen**

1. **Progress of your FE/HE’s Institution’s BSL Plan**

a. Since the implementation of your institution’s BSL plan, which action points have progressed?

b. Which action points have been more difficult to progress?

c. How have you promoted your BSL plans to students and prospective students?

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| 1. **and c)**

The University’s ambitious BSL Action Plan 2018-2024 can be found here:<https://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/governance/equality-and-diversity-277.php#panel8286>The Plan was developed in consultation with staff, students and external partners, including Aberdeen City Council, Robert Gordon University and North East Scotland College.BSL users have been specifically consulted in the following ways:* Staff and students who are BSL users or have an interest in BSL comprised a working group to develop the Plan. The working group was chaired by the Vice-Principal for People.
* The Aberdeen University Student Association has circulated the Plan to the student body
* North East Sensory Services has circulated the Plan to its contacts
* Deaf Action has circulated the Plan to its contacts and provided feedback

The Plan is monitored by the BSL Working Group and the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee.Actions taken to date include:* The University’s strategic plan – Aberdeen 2040 - was available in BSL from its launch date and is available here: <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/2040/>
* BSL accessibility across campus will be part of Aberdeen 2040 key commitments
* Data analysis indicates that no students or staff who use BSL are studying or working currently at the University, although we note that this does not include colleagues or students who would prefer to use BSL but ‘make do’ with, for example, recording lectures or meetings. This is something we need to pick up on. There are also staff who prefer to communicate solely by e-mail and not use the telephone who may or not be BSL users. Again, all of these points will need to be reviewed as part of the review of the Plan commencing October 2020.
* The Scottish Government’s BSL online interpreting video relay service contactSCOTLAND-BSL has been promoted across the University and a wide number of colleagues have added this to their e-mail signatures and this can be used by prospective staff and students when contacting the University
* Basic BSL training sessions were offered to staff and students during the University’s Inclusion Week 2019, with all places being filled and a waiting list for attendance. There were plans to repeat this in 2020 but this has been delayed due to having to prioritise planning in relation to Covid-19
* All places were filled for a session on Supporting Staff and Students with Hearing Impairments delivered by North East Sensory Services during Inclusion Week 2019
* All keynote events during Inclusion Week 2019 were signed by a BSL Interpreter and recorded so that staff and students could access the events at any time
* BSL interpreters have been available on campus during the University’s Open Days and Offer Holder Day since 2018. Translation was available on key talks – (Welcome, Finance, Applying to UCAS, Accommodation) and for subject talks for specific visitors. Any visitor who, when registering, identified as needing assistance was contacted by the University for further details about which talks they planned to attend. A schedule for the translator was then developed. If the University was alerted on the day to specific requirements, it did everything possible to arrange for the additional sessions to be translated. Talks which were to be interpreted were highlighted in the printed guide.
* The BSL Action Plan has been promoted in the University’s weekly staff e-zine
* Employment candidates who use BSL can access the University’s recruitment processes by requesting a reasonable adjustment through the application process. The University does not currently ask specific information regarding BSL.
* All graduation events are signed by a BSL interpreter
* A BSL Interpreter has attended the meetings of the University’s BSL Working Group, as one of the members, an alumnus of the University, is a BSL user and another member prefers to use BSL
* The School of Education has renewed its focus on the creation of a short-course professional learning offering for teachers. As a part of this initiative, it will seek to include BSL within Inclusive Practice professional learning/CPD course content
* The Digital Accessibility Working Group has a remit to look at all aspects of accessibility in the digital area and BSL is part of their work.

**b)**It has been more difficult to progress actions which involve external partners. Although the University did work with Aberdeen City Council, Robert Gordon University and North East Scotland College to establish common themes and jointly seek advice from Deaf Action in the establishment of respective BSL Action Plans, this collaboration has not continued on a regular basis due to competing demands on time and resource. Going forward we will prioritise this and work with partners to, for example, understand how the University can better facilitate the move between school and university for BSL users and to lobby the Scottish Government for enhanced support in retaining BSL interpreters in the North East of Scotland. |

1. **Challenges and Gaps**
2. What challenges have you faced towards implementing your institution’s BSL plan, and how did you address them?
3. Do you feel that there are gaps arising from your institution’s BSL plan? If yes, please detail what they are.

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| **a)**While the University will always seek to support BSL users there have been tensions regarding the Action Plan as we need to be realistic about what is possible to achieve while still being ambitious enough to ensure we can reach our mission of being ‘open to all’. As Deaf Action will be aware, there are limited numbers of fully qualified BSL interpreters in the North East of Scotland. Also, in an academic context there are challenges given the materials and vocabulary used in university teaching and learning. For example, scientific words may not yet be able to be translated fully into BSL. While discussing our draft Plan with university partners an example was cited of a student nurse who required a BSL interpreter and this had proved challenging given the medical terminology. The student and the interpreter were able to develop their own strategies for combatting this but when the student had completed their studies, all this work was essentially lost. There needs to be a system which captures this so that prospective students can confidently engage in Higher Education. We have recently been made aware of this website <http://www.ssc.education.ed.ac.uk/bsl/> and will promote this within the University and open discussion on how it can be used. We will add this action to the revised BSL Action Plan.The University has previously arranged BSL interpreters for students via North East Sensory Services; for students who are eligible, some of the costs can be met through Disabled Students’ Allowance, for SAAS funded students the non-medical personal allowance provides funding for:* Full time students - £20,520 per year
* Part-time student - the allowance is pro rata (for example, if the student is studying 50% of the full time equivalent course they will be entitled to a maximum of £10,260)

The University would then need to meet any additional costs. However, we do have to advise students that it can be challenging to source interpreters in the local area.The University has arranged remote captioning and note-taking support for students with hearing impairments via AI Media; please see the information in the following link: <https://www.ai-media.tv/products/live-content/live-captions-cart/>. This is something that can be funded by DSA, when a student is eligible. The University understands that Local Authorities were provided with additional budget from the Scottish Government to implement their BSL Action Plans. The Higher Education sector has not received any additional financial support, and this will have an impact on what is achievable e.g. to deliver BSL training events, engage consultants etc.A limited number of universities have employed a BSL Officer, this is not the case at the University of Aberdeen at present.The University recognises its limitations in terms of knowledge and expertise and will to some extent rely on other agencies such as Deaf Action, Deaf Scotland and North East Sensory Services. We won’t be the only institution in this position and therefore we would like to request that these agencies are sufficiently funded and resourced so that they can provide the vital support required. **b)**The University aligned its BSL Plan directly with the Scottish Government’s key priorities in this area. It is an ambitious Plan, particularly given the issues raised in a) above. The University is committed to reviewing and updating the Plan and will be starting this exercise in October 2020. In particular, the Plan will need to be amended to take account of the Covid-19 pandemic and the issues which could arise in relation to Blended Learning. The University has established an implementation group in relation to blended learning and has undertaken an Equality Impact Assessment of its work and this is reviewed on a very regular basis. The University is conscious that additional barriers may exist for BSL-users in this context and will always seek to put support in place to ensure BSL-users can access all aspects of university life. |

1. **BSL-signing Students**
2. Have you received any feedback from BSL students about your institution’s BSL plan?
3. If yes, please provide a summary and what methods they used?
4. If no, what do you think contributed to this?

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| **a)**The BSL Plan was shared with the Aberdeen University Students Association (AUSA) for comments and they shared it with the wider student body. AUSA is represented on the groups and committees which approved the Plan. No feedback was received specifically from students who are BSL-users.**b)**N/A**c)**The University has not been aware of any students using BSL since the Plan was launched. However, we did contact one student who had previously studied at the University and used BSL, but we received no response. This also raises the question around whether Deaf prospective students feel encouraged to apply to the University and we understand that we need to review this further with external organisations such as the Local Authorities. |

1. **Future Actions and Plans**
2. What actions are still required to be achieved from your institution’s BSL Plan?
3. What future additions & changes will be implemented in your institution’s BSL Plan?
4. What future engagement activities do you have planned with your BSL students?

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| **a)**The actions still to be achieved (with a completion date of 2024) include:* Working with local schools to aid the transition between school and university for BSL users so that BSL users don’t miss out on opportunities to attend Higher education
* Developing promotional videos for prospective students using BSL
* Continuing to work with local partners, particularly to lobby the Scottish Government for additional funding
* Undertaking a pulse survey with staff to ascertain level of interest in learning BSL (although this was tested to an extent through Inclusion Week 2019 and can be added to other surveys e.g. Staff Satisfaction survey)
* Working with the Rocking Horse Nursery to ensure that childcare facilities for University staff and students can be fully accessible to BSL users’
* Working with transport providers to ensure travel information is accessible and well-publicised to staff and students
* More detailed work with AUSA to ensure their societies and democratic processes are accessible to BSL users
* Keeping under constant review the impact of blended learning in response to the Covid-19 pandemic on BSL users

**b)**The University will be reviewing the Plan this year, in consultation with staff, students, partners and the BSL Working Group. The major addition to the Plan will be ensuring that the University’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic is accessible and communicated appropriately.**c)**We will continue to engage AUSA, and Student Support (who collate disability data) will continue to monitor whether any students who are BSL users join us. In that case, we will reach out to them. |

1. **FE/HE Institutions**
2. Did you work with other FE/HE institutions, BSL Lead Officers & Public Bodies to provide and receive support in implementing your BSL plan?
3. If yes, please provide a summary.
4. Has your institution's Outcome Agreement been updated to reflect their corresponding BSL Plan?

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| 1. **and b)**

The University worked with the other local institutions in the development of the Plan, meeting with Deaf Action together and sharing results of consultation. We all shared a poignant learning experience, for example, through meeting with a BSL community group via Aberdeen City Council (an initiative which University of Aberdeen led on). The Group, (comprising older people) were very honest about their own school experiences and how they had felt ‘left behind’ and abandoned by the education system and that their opportunities to progress to further or higher education were severely limited. This particular group used BSL only to communicate and the Lead interpreted key aspects of our Plan for the group and facilitated a question and answer session. As part of the review of our Plan, we will seek to meet with the Group again to share ideas and progress. The University is part of an HEI/FEI BSL Plan Peer Network which has mainly been accessed through Microsoft Teams. This is a recent initiative and has been helpful in sharing experiences and ideas. The University will include ongoing engagement with this network in the review of its BSL Plan.**c)**Yes, the University’s Outcome Agreement with the SFC contains a link to the BSL Plan and provides information about progress to date. |

1. **Deaf Action**

a: Do you feel you have a good understanding of Deaf Action’s role in supporting FE/HE institutions with their BSL Plans?

b: Is there any specific support that you would like to receive from the BSL Officers at Deaf Action, and to what extent?

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| **a)**Initially the University was informed that Deaf Action would support it in developing its Plan and providing routes for consultation opportunities. The University engaged with Deaf Action over e-mail and face-to-face, but, received limited guidance. The University was then contacted several times to ask how it was progressing with developing the Plan, which was appreciated, but again didn’t receive concrete guidance and since then there has been limited contact.Deaf Action did provide some comments on the University’s draft Plan, noting that it was comprehensive, and this was very much appreciated.**b)**The University would be interested in gaining further information about how Deaf Action can support it to accelerate progress in this area.Deaf Action could provide examples of good practice, link universities up where appropriate for example if they are aware that they are facing the same challenges or if one has achieved progress in an area which other universities are struggling with. Deaf Action could provide more opportunities for consultation and/or share their own experiences of gaining knowledge about the accessibility of the HE sector to BSL users. We are aware from Deaf Action that examples of good practice from HE/FE sectors will be shared through the summary which will be submitted to the Scottish Government and we will take these on board where appropriate. Deaf Action could support the HE sector in gaining additional resource for this area and signposting to other organisations which could assist. |