



THE DONALDSON TRUST

Response to The Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body's
Call for Views on its *British Sign Language (BSL) Plan 2024-
2030*.

August 2024

About Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity describes the diversity of humans' brains and minds. A person who is, for example, autistic is neurodivergent; they are in a neurological minority, not the neuro-'typical' majority.

Other neurodivergences include: ADHD, dyscalculia, dyspraxia, dyslexia, dysgraphia, misophonia, Tourette's Syndrome, or differences in cognitive function.

About Us

Our work is built on an understanding that neurodiversity is not a medical construct; rather, it lies at the intersection of culture, mind, identity formation, and socio-political action.

The Donaldson Trust envisages a society in which neurodivergent people are understood, accepted, treated fairly, and valued.

Though there is much work to be done, we believe there are genuine opportunities to change society for the better. We aim to be at the forefront of driving that change – and making a difference *with and for* neurodivergent people and their families.

As the *National Body for Neurodiversity*, we will seek to lead by example. We exist to strengthen the public's understanding of neurodiversity, develop excellence in practice, and help neurodivergent people find their voice.

Alongside neurodivergent people and our partners across the third sector and academia, we write, campaign, and persuade in order to shape the policies being made on the issues most important to neurodivergent people and families.

We improve outcomes and representation via *Connect*. Our training and consultancy is accessed by organisations looking to build a culture of neuro-inclusion. We continue to develop our free, online information, support, and guidance resources to neurodivergent people, families, and professionals alongside it.

We continue to support children, young people, and adults through a variety of services based at our Linlithgow campus, where we enable every neurodivergent person to realise their goals & aspirations:

- **Sensational Learning Centre (SLC)**

We offer individualised, skills-based learning to children and young people with 'Additional Support Needs' (ASN) including sensory / communication differences.

A 'Grant-Aided Special School' (GASS), SLC is independent of local government.

- **Vibe**

Our wellbeing service for neurodivergent people ages 12-18, Vibe offers warm, low arousal spaces for neurodivergent young people to thrive and achieve their personal goals. The service focuses on reducing anxiety, developing life skills, literacy, numeracy, and growing self-esteem / resilience.

Vibe's activities mirror the interests and skills of the young people enrolled with a wellbeing framework and personal programme of skills development.

- **Gate**

Donaldsons' skills development and training offer for neurodivergent adults, Gate has been co-designed with those who benefit from it and offers a friendly environment where neurodivergent adults can relax and be themselves. Similar to other services, Gate takes an individualised approach to ensure trainees get the most from their time with us and achieve agreed goals and ambitions.

Trainees can learn skills through activities, or enrol in a vocational and accredited course, delivered by specialist staff / tutors. This includes art, cooking, and cybersecurity.

- **Treehouse**

Treehouse is a specialist wellbeing service offering bespoke, low-arousal environments to improve wellbeing and independence. Support is centred around individual studios, with the 'home-style' settings offering individualised spaces tailored to every person's needs. That allows people we support to participate in activities they co-design alongside their Wellbeing Practitioners.

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Established in the 1850's, The Donaldson Trust (formerly Donaldson's School) has provided supported education and care throughout its history and has now established itself in the neurodivergence space.

The full range of services offered by the Trust is found here:

<https://www.donaldsons.org.uk/>

**Together, we'll
find your voice.**

Overview

The Donaldson Trust is pleased to respond to the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body's *Call for Views* on the draft actions for its *British Sign Language (BSL) Plan*.

While our principal strategic focus as an organisation has transitioned toward neurodivergence over recent years, Donaldsons' historical connections to D/deaf communities means we retain a keen interest in supporting and advocating with and for D/deaf people. There are a significant number of young people, educators, and support staff with lived experience of D/deafness and hearing impairment who continue to be involved with our Grant-Aided Special School.

While preparing our response, we have sought and listened to the opinions and experiences of D/deaf people, as well as hearing BSL users with personal or work relationships to D/deaf people and those with hearing impairments.

Overall, we are encouraged by the progress The Scottish Parliament continues to make on the promotion and inclusion of D/deafness and D/deaf people across its workstreams since the creation of their 2018-24 Plan. It is important, however, that a new Plan is strengthened in several areas. We speak to these in our response. They are:

- **Recognising a 'skilling-up' of hearing staff as the most important step to foster D/deaf inclusion.**
- **Greater detail on realising the (positive) twenty-one draft actions.**
- **Consideration of neurodivergence alongside D/deafness, in recognition of the commonality in experiences between the two groups and the social-communicatory basis for both.**
- **Considering ways in which the Parliament could act as a 'role model' for the inclusion of D/deaf people across the broader public sector – especially given the role it can play in civic life.**
- **Integrating the history of D/deafness and D/deaf people (in Scotland) into 'outreach' resources developed for the public, including schools' visiting Parliament.**

In keeping with the consultation document, we have sought to frame this response along the four 'values' referred to; however, we have offered a number of comments that may cut across the themes.

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Stewardship

Actions 1-8

We believe that increasing the visibility of D/deafness and BSL is foundational for ensuring D/deaf people are able to participate in and engage with parliamentary services, both at Holyrood and off-site / online. We know (across society) that familiarity between groups generates understanding; and understanding promotes acceptance and inclusion. This is as true of the D/deaf and neurodivergent people with whom we work as it is any marginalised group.

We support all eight of the actions proposed for the 2024 Plan, in principle; however, there are additional, realistic steps that can be taken to strengthen inclusion further. Additionally, we believe that more detail needs to be included at this stage to both ensure buy-in from communities and emphasise the practical relevance of this work to staff teams.

Chamber and Committee Business should be accompanied by BSL interpreting as standard, as opposed to only covering higher profile Chamber Business and topics perceived as salient to D/deaf people. Scotland's D/deaf communities are as diverse as Scotland itself; there is no Chamber Business more important than any other, and many D/deaf people have just as much in common with their community of place as the D/deaf community of interest.

Though that would represent a not insignificant financial investment, it is an investment in D/deaf inclusion, too. Parity between BSL and English would deliver a real statement of intent and place the Parliament as a leader in D/deaf inclusion in Scotland; moreover, wide-spread coverage of Business in BSL can play a role in developing visibility of D/deafness amongst hearing people and thus help build understanding and inclusion.

Similarly, we believe that investing in educational resources connected to D/deafness, D/deaf people and their culture and experiences can positively impact hearing people visiting Parliament. As well as the practical benefit of digital, online, and printed BSL resources for those who actively need it, systematically building 'a presence' for content connected to D/deafness is an effective way to ensure visibility.

Facilities, too, have a role to play here, and we are encouraged that D/deaf people will be involved in ensuring Parliament's visitor-facing functions are

inclusive of D/deaf people. One recurring theme from our engagement has been the benefit of 'help points' to D/deaf people and the role a dedicated physical space has – particularly with respect to accessing resources and interpretation. Another is that Parliament retain BSL users to lead tours of the building as a matter of course. The Donaldson Trust would be happy to facilitate engagement between the relevant teams in Parliament and our staff / supported people to explore these themes further.

That co-production should be mirrored in the digital / online offer, too; again, we are happy to work with the Parliament to promote this. The existing online 'hub' for users of BSL was well received by people we engaged. They thought that it offered a good platform on which to build and, if further developed alongside other comments we have made in our response, will positively impact on D/deaf engagement.

Inclusiveness

Actions 9-10

In England & Wales, only 37% of people for whom BSL is their main language are in employment ¹, representing a significant 'employment gap' between Deaf people and the population at-large. This mirrors the outlook with respect to other differences with social-communicatory 'barriers' to inclusion; for instance, the autism employment rate (in Scotland) has been recorded as low as 16% ². We know that people in these groups want to work but can be faced with many barriers when trying to access work, including: stigma; discrimination; a lack of knowledge and understanding about BSL and Deaf lived experiences amongst colleagues, and insufficient reasonable adjustments from employers.

Our engagement told us the need for personalisation is paramount, both when at interview and in post. Reasonable adjustments (communication support like 'Easy Read' documents or text messaging, etc.) are important; however, it is just as important that implementation does not become 'tick-box', and the adjustments are personalised to the D/deaf individual following meaningful consultation with them pre-interview or appraisal. This work is replicable for a range of differences with a similar social-communicatory basis, including neurodevelopmental differences such as autism or ADHD.

¹ 2021, ONS Census Data (England & Wales)

² 2021, Scottish Government, *Towards Transformation*

Support for a Deaf person's colleagues is important, too, since differences in communication preferences (particularly between a 'hearing' office and Deaf people) can contribute significantly to social isolation. A meaningful attempt to involve Deaf people in the 'life' of the workplace will enable inclusivity and improve overall wellbeing. D/deaf people we engaged with said that facilitating introductions or networking between Deaf staff and hearing staff would help to break down barriers between groups, as can openness about Deaf presence in a workplace. Communicating the needs and preferences of Deaf colleagues to others in an open & honest manner and making Deafness visible are effective tools for driving understanding and inclusion.

There is space for another action under *Inclusiveness* beyond engagement with MSPs, particularly around inclusivity for parliamentary / MSP's staff.

Excellence

Actions 11-16

Given its unique place in Scotland's civic life, we believe that Parliament is well-placed to lead by example and play a prominent role in raising standards for D/deaf inclusion, and D/deaf people's overall experience of accessing services in the public sector.

The actions that are proposed are positive steps, though we believe that a greater level of detail is needed, particularly with 12, 14. Those we spoke to were especially receptive to collaboration between the two respective language Development Officers and having a BSL Dictionary. They saw the latter as one element of an overall expansion of the online 'hub' offer, and thought it essential that the resources were available in several formats, brought together in one place: transcripts, 'Easy Read', (BSL) images / graphics, signed video featuring an interpreter, etc.

What is inclusion for D/deaf people is (as is the case for many adjustments) good for society overall. Similarly, adjustments made for people with other sensory differences (such as autism and ADHD) can be positive for D/deaf people, too. The common experiences of D/deaf and neurodivergent people should see the Parliament exploring joint projects applicable to these two groups. We would be happy to engage on that, including supporting development of a broader strategy on sensory difference. We know the Parliament has and continues to take practical steps to improve the inclusion

of people with neurodevelopmental differences ³ (particularly through work in the Participation and Communities Team) and we believe there is benefit in progressing their positive work further.

Contact Scotland BSL was described as a “lifeline” in the discussions we have run. That service should be retained by the SPCB as a key element of its inclusion agenda. It provides real access in an inaccessible world.

Finally, there would be benefits to publishing a review of practices in legislatures across the world. Our engagement highlighted the United States and Ireland as prominent centres of Deaf culture. How, or if, public bodies in these two countries promote Deaf inclusion is a good start.

Respect

Actions 17-21

Training in BSL and D/deafness is a vital component of developing a working culture and service offer inclusive of D/deaf people. Our engagement highlighted that investing in staff training (for both parliamentary / SPCB staff) would help create a ‘baseline’ level of understanding of Deafness, Deaf culture, and the needs of D/deaf people overall. Staff in front-line roles (such as Reception staff, café / shop, PACT, and tour guides) should be offered an enhanced level of training with a focus on practical use for their respective staff roles – including an introduction to BSL. Each MSP office should have a ‘nominated contact’ for sensory inclusion, meaning each team retains a level of knowledge about adjustments and inclusion for social-communicatory difference. We would be happy to engage with Parliament on what this looks like; moreover, we would be keen to work with Parliament in re-developing existing literature that is available to neurodivergent visitors ⁴.

The Trust champions the use of assistive technologies to bridge communication differences between communities, including between a hearing and D/deaf person(s). For example, we support the retention of Contact Scotland BSL as a key aspect of the SPCB’s inclusion agenda. The service provides meaningful access for Deaf people in an inaccessible world.

Each of the actions under *Respect* could be re-drafted to reflect themes suggested above, especially those regarding staff offices / training.

³ <https://www.parliament.scot/visit/plan-your-visit/accessibility-guide>

⁴ We understand that the Parliament previously developed a guide for autistic people visiting The Scottish Parliament, in 2015.

Further Comments

The Parliament should publish two interim reports (every two years) and a 'final' report on progress it is making to realise the ambitions of the 2024-2030 document. The progress made should be evaluated action-by-action. An 'implementation plan' (or something to that effect) drafted in 2024 may be useful in breaking down some of the less tangible actions in to concrete steps, both for the benefit of teams tasked with implementing and members of the public with an interest in this work.



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