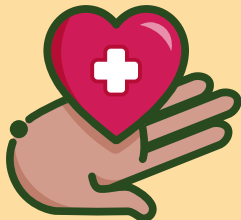
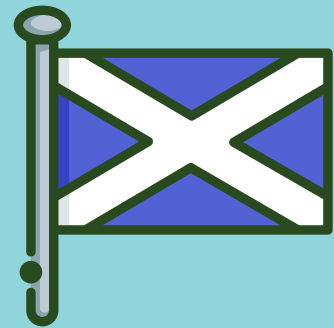




Scottish Parliament 2026

RNID: LOUD AND CLEAR



RN
I:D | Supporting people
who are deaf, have
hearing loss or tinnitus



INTRODUCTION

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RNID is the national charity making life fully inclusive for deaf people and those with hearing loss or tinnitus. Together, we campaign for an inclusive society. We connect people to practical advice and fund research to pioneer new treatments for hearing loss and tinnitus.

In Scotland, one in three adults are deaf or have hearing loss – that's over 1.5 million of us¹. With an ageing population, this is set to increase. In the UK, more than 50% of people over 50 years old have some degree of hearing loss - rising to almost 80% of people over the age of 80². And yet, people who are deaf or have hearing loss can face barriers in every part of their lives, be it accessing healthcare services, employment, or shops on the high street.

In recent years, the needs of our community have been deprioritised. We're calling on the next Scottish Government to take action and address this major public health issue.

This document outlines what is needed from government and policy makers to make life fully inclusive for deaf people and those with hearing loss or tinnitus in Scotland.

¹[Prevalence of deafness and hearing loss - RNID](#). Our hearing loss population estimates are calculated using the most robust data available on the prevalence of hearing loss in the UK, combined with population estimates from the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

²Ibid

³Ibid

⁴Ibid

⁵[Facts and statements on health - RNID](#)

⁶Ibid

⁷The 2022 Census Data for Scotland found BSL was used as a main language by 3000 people. The BDA estimate there are 12,556 BSL users in Scotland, and 7,200 of these are Deaf.

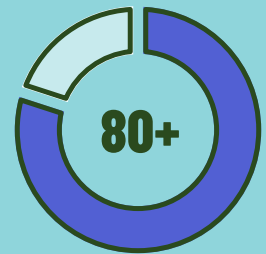
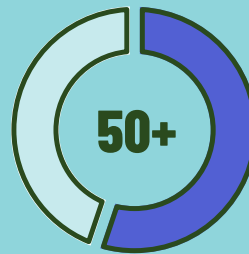
1.5m adults in Scotland



are deaf, have hearing loss or tinnitus³

Over half the population

aged 50 or more have hearing loss, rising to nearly 80% of the over 80s⁴



Almost 900,000



Scots could benefit from using a hearing aid⁵

Over 200,000



have hearing loss severe enough that they would struggle to hear most conversational speech⁶

It is estimated that there are between 3,000-7,000 deaf BSL users in Scotland⁷



RNID's vision

Is for a Scotland where deaf people and people with hearing loss are fully included, and treated with respect, dignity and understanding.

To achieve this, we are calling on the next Scottish Government to adopt our four key asks:



1. Ensure consistent access to quality audiology services across the NHS

The problem: Audiology services in Scotland are in crisis. In recent years, they have faced severe challenges, including staff shortages and inadequate funding to meet demand.

Patients report routine waits of up to 18 months for an appointment, with some people waiting years.

This can cause a severe impact on people's health and quality of life, including interrupted education and early forced retirement.

In 2022, the Scottish Government commissioned an Independent Review of Audiology Services in Scotland (IRASS)⁷. This review was established as a result of failings in the provision of hearing services to children but also set out to explore the multiple, systemic problems within adult audiology services in NHS Scotland. These include: long waiting times, a shortage of trained health care professionals and a failure to track the outcomes of patients who use audiology services. The IRASS report was published in 2023 and made 55 recommendations to the Scottish Government, covering oversight of audiology services, governance, leadership, quality standards, and education and training.

Yet despite this hard-hitting report, which demanded urgent action from the Scottish Government, many people in Scotland are still missing out on the support they so urgently need. Adults across Scotland continue to face long waits, inconsistent care, and a lack of support that can have lasting consequences.

Audiology services play a crucial role in providing support and treatments to improve people's hearing health, and it is essential that people receive timely access to quality services when they need them.



Hearing loss is significantly under-diagnosed and under-treated. Despite hearing aids being free and available to those who can access NHS audiology services, an estimated 2 in 5 people across the UK who could benefit from them do not have them⁸.

Untreated hearing loss can lead to barriers in employment, socialising, and access to everyday services, increasing the risk of falls, social isolation, depression, and cognitive decline⁹. Untreated hearing loss is also associated with a higher risk of dementia. All these negative consequences, and the associated costs to society, are avoidable.

⁷[Independent Review of Audiology Services in Scotland - gov.scot](#)

⁸[Facts and statements on health - RNID](#)

⁹Ibid

What does the Scottish Government need to do?

With an ageing population, the incidence of hearing loss is rising, and the need for timely access to audiology services has never been more acute. The next Government must take urgent action to address the crisis, and provide audiology services with the resources and governance needed to make change. They should:

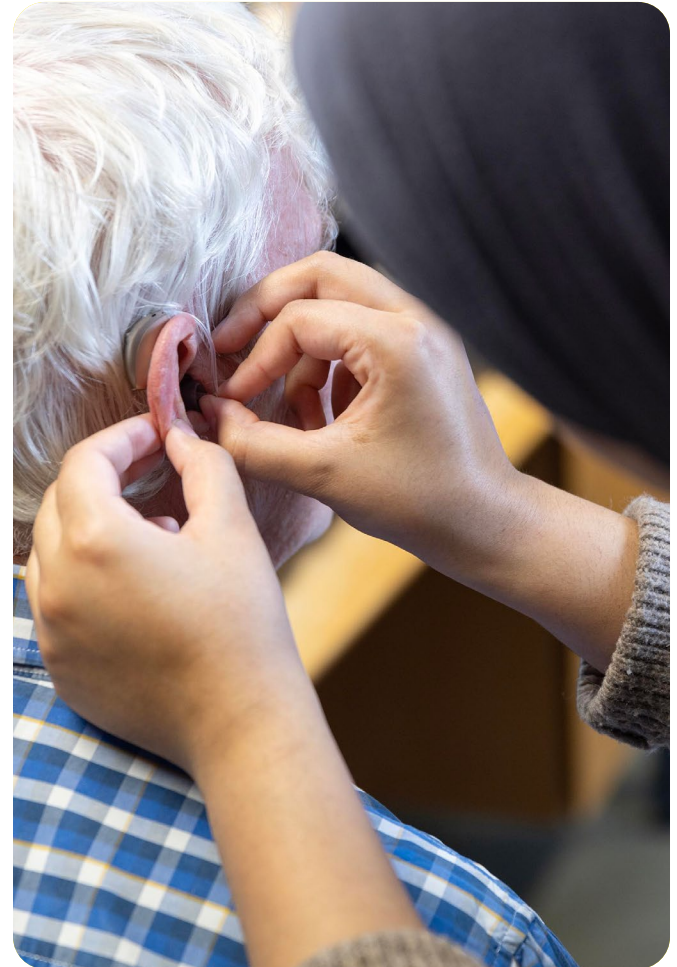
ASK 1: Fully implement the recommendations of the Independent Review of Audiology Services, providing audiology services with the financial resources to ensure that people receive timely access to care.

In December 2023, the Scottish Government accepted all 55 recommendations of the IRASS report, committing to improve audiology services for people who are deaf or have hearing loss. Yet progress has been far too slow, and, more than two years on, many of the report's recommendations remain undelivered. It is clear that audiology has been deprioritised by the Scottish Government.

Responsibility for meeting the review's recommendations has now been moved to NHS Scotland – but with too little oversight, and no ring-fenced new funding for services from the Scottish Government.

In December 2024, the Scottish Government published a report updating progress on the IRASS and streamlining its recommendations¹⁰. However, there is no clear evidence of fulfilment of some of the recommendations that have been marked as complete, nor is it clear how other recommendations will be reported on or seen through to delivery.

Urgent areas for change include addressing service waiting times, the publication of performance against safety and quality standards, and addressing audiology workforce shortages.



¹⁰[Independent Review: Scottish Government report on implementation of recommendations – Audiology Services in NHS Scotland- all-ears.nhs.scot –](#)

ASK 2: Ensure routine and transparent public reporting of audiology referral-to-treatment waiting times for NHS Scotland’s Health Boards, alongside clear targets for improvement.

Waiting times are a key indicator of quality of any NHS service but the NHS in Scotland does not currently make waiting times for audiology services public. RNID community members report routine waits of 6-18 months from audiology referral to initial assessment – with some individuals waiting years¹¹. It’s a situation that can cause significant disruption and difficulty to those affected.

Until 2019, the NHS in Scotland published monthly waiting times, from initial referral to treatment¹².

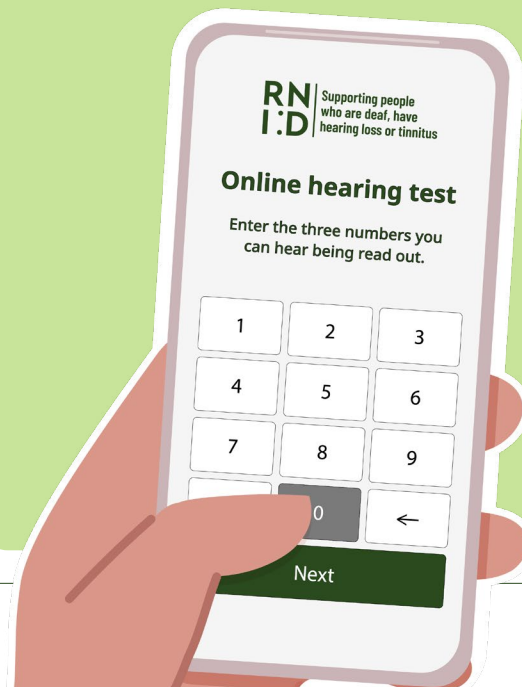
The Scottish Government must now reinstate open publication monthly audiology referral to treatment waiting times for NHS Scotland’s Health Boards, as recommended by the IRASS, alongside clear performance indicators and targets for improvement. This transparency is essential to monitor progress and ensure equitable access to timely hearing care.



RNID’S ONLINE HEARING CHECK

RNID has a free online hearing check which enables anyone to check their hearing in just three minutes. The check, which measures how well you can hear speech over background noise, is for anyone aged 18 or over who has not been diagnosed with hearing loss. After completion, the check indicates whether people need to see a health professional about their hearing and provides our advice on what to do next.

The RNID Hearing Check demonstrates the ease of embedding a routine digital check – a hearing check could be included within Scotland’s new “MyCare” NHS App when it is fully rolled out from April 2026.



¹¹Reports from RNID community, and 2024 Freedom of Information Requests to Scottish Health Boards from the RNID

¹²[Audiology Waiting Times – closed - Search the datasets - National Datasets - National Data Catalogue - Health intelligence and data management - Resources and tools - Public Health Scotland](#)

ASK 3: Ensure that sensory policy is prioritised within the Scottish Government, appointing a policy lead for audiology, and implementing the promised update to the “See Hear” strategy, the framework for meeting the needs of people with sensory impairment in Scotland.

The Independent National Audiology Review found that audiology had a lack of profile, highlighting an absence of national leadership and strategic planning.

Yet in recent years audiology has had no single policy home within the Scottish Government, whilst input from the third sector and people with lived experience has been sidelined. The Scottish Government must appoint a dedicated National Audiology Lead to provide strategic oversight, drive implementation of the IRASS recommendations, and ensure audiology is treated as a clinical priority. A single policy lead for audiology within the Scottish

Government would address the current lack of coordination, improve national accountability, and enable meaningful engagement with the third sector, ensuring safe, effective, and sustainable audiology services across NHS Scotland.

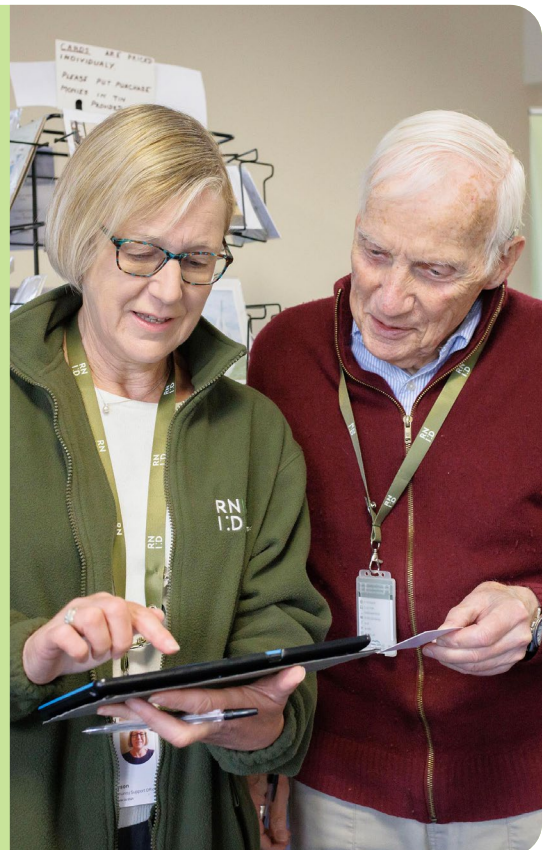
In addition, the Scottish Government should publish the previously promised revision to the [“See Hear” Strategy](#)¹³, Scotland’s national framework for meeting the needs of people with sensory impairments. This update would help to reflect the current needs of the community, embed lived experience, and ensure cross-portfolio accountability.

RNID NEAR YOU: how RNID support our communities in Scotland

Over the last year RNID has supported over 10,000 people in Scotland through our RNID Near You service. Trained RNID Near You volunteers offer community-based, face-to-face help with hearing checks, hearing aid maintenance, as well as peer support, information and advice.

Its aim is to deliver a holistic service to adults who are deaf, have hearing loss or tinnitus, helping them to access support in their own community. While RNID Near You is not a replacement for timely access to the full range of NHS audiology services, it can minimise the need for people to visit audiology or GP services unnecessarily.

Our RNID Near You service delivers across five NHS Scotland Health Board areas - Greater Glasgow and Clyde, Lothians, Fife, Scottish Borders and Shetland Isles. We have recently begun a pilot to access and support residents in Care Settings in the Scottish Borders.



¹³<https://www.gov.scot/publications/see-hear/>

2. Ensure equal access to the NHS for deaf people and people with hearing loss

The problem: For too long, deaf people and those with hearing loss have been failed by health services that don't meet their communication needs. Equal access to healthcare is a human right. Yet, right now, the NHS in Scotland frequently fails to meet these basic needs. This must change.

Under the Equality Act 2010¹⁴, the NHS in Scotland is required to make "reasonable adjustments" to remove barriers facing deaf people or people with hearing loss when accessing services, including providing information in an accessible format. This could include things like providing an accessible alternative to the telephone to book appointments or receive test results, or providing communication support, such as a British Sign Language (BSL) interpreter.

Yet research by RNID¹⁵ has shown the NHS in Scotland is often failing to comply with the Equality Act and make reasonable adjustments to meet the needs of patients across Scotland who are deaf or have hearing loss, to allow them equal access to NHS services. RNID have calculated that almost 900,000 people across Scotland have hearing loss significant enough to be affected by this issue. In 2025, RNID launched Still Ignored – The Fight for Accessible Healthcare¹⁶, calling UK governments and NHS services to take action to meet the requirements of equality legislation for accessible information and communication. As part of the research for this campaign, which surveyed people across the UK, we examined the experiences of people who are deaf or have hearing loss living in Scotland when accessing NHS services.

Our evidence shows that:

- Nearly a quarter (24%) of people who are deaf or have hearing loss cannot contact their GP in an accessible way.
- Only 63% leave NHS appointments feeling they have fully understood the information given

about their health, while over a quarter (27%) say they do not.

- 64% have never been asked about their information or communication needs
- Nearly a third (31%) have had to rely on their partner to relay information or interpret for them at an appointment, and 29% have had to use other family members or friends to do this, removing their right to privacy and dignity in their own healthcare. 14% say they have had to rely on their children.

RNID's research showed that this failure of the NHS in Scotland to provide accessible healthcare can have serious consequences for deaf people and those with hearing loss:

- A third (33%) experienced barriers in accessing healthcare when being told about medication or treatment, and 29% when being given a diagnosis.
- Similarly, nearly a third (32%) experience barriers when being given test results, when understanding the outcome of an appointment, and when discussing symptoms or a problem with a healthcare professional.
- Nearly a third (31%) have avoided seeking help for a new health concern, and 7% people have avoided calling an ambulance or attending A&E.

Our research showed that people who are deaf or have hearing loss avoid seeking NHS treatment, don't understand the information they are given and, ultimately, feel unable to manage their own physical and mental health because of failures of the NHS to provide accessible healthcare.

¹⁴[Equality Act 2010](#)

¹⁵<https://rnid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Healthcare-Survey-Research-Note-Scotland.pdf>

¹⁶<https://rnid.org.uk/get-involved/campaign-with-us/fight-for-accessible-healthcare/>

What does the Scottish Government need to do?

The Scottish Government must ensure that people who are deaf or have hearing loss have safe and equal access to NHS services, through ensuring that all NHS staff are aware of their obligations to provide accessible healthcare.

The next Government should:

ASK 1: Introduce new guidance and staff training for NHS Scotland's Health Boards on how they should meet people's communication needs, supporting Health Boards to meet their legal obligation to provide equal access to healthcare.

The Scottish Government have stated that Scotland's public bodies want more practical support and guidance, informed by lived experience, to help them meet people's communication needs. This is also supported by research by the Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland (the ALLIANCE)¹⁷¹⁸.

RNID strongly support the ALLIANCE's wider "More than Words" campaign¹⁹, which calls for the provision of inclusive communication by all public bodies in Scotland as a human right, and for legislation and training to enforce this. From RNID's own research, we know how vital it is that NHS staff are supported by specific guidance and staff training setting out what action health services need to take to provide inclusive communication to the patients who need it.

In England, NHS services are subject to the Accessible Information Standard²⁰²¹ – a document that sets out people's rights to equal healthcare under the Equality Act, including what must practically be done to make NHS and social care services accessible to people with disability and sensory loss. In Wales, the equivalent guidance

is the All Wales Accessible Communication and Information Standards²².

But in Scotland, no such specific guidance exists for health services to help them meet the communication needs of patients with sensory loss and other disabilities.

Without clear, enforceable guidance and mandatory staff training for the NHS on the provision of inclusive communication, as exists in other UK nations, Scotland's health boards are unlikely to be able to meet people's needs.



¹⁷[More than Words: ALLIANCE report on the provision of inclusive communication by public bodies in Scotland - Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland](#)

¹⁸[Systemic change' needed for inclusive communication](#)

¹⁹<https://www.alliance-scotland.org.uk/more-than-words-communication-for-all/>

²⁰<https://rnid.org.uk/information-and-support/support-for-health-and-social-care-professionals/accessible-information-standard/>

²¹[NHS England » Accessible information standard](#)

²²<https://www.gov.wales/accessible-communication-and-information-standards-healthcare>

ASK 2: Introduce a new public sector equality duty on inclusive communication, which would strengthen the right to equal healthcare under the Equality Act 2010.

Currently, the Equality Act 2010 is not working well enough to protect the rights of people in Scotland to inclusive communication when accessing the NHS and other public services.

In 2021, the Scottish Government began to consider the need for improvements to the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) in Scotland²³. The PSED is a duty in the Equality Act on public bodies like the NHS to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination and promote equality.

In 2023, recognising the vital importance of sharing information in a way that everybody can understand, the Scottish Government committed to creating a new Scottish Specific Public Sector

Equality Duty²⁴ that sought to ensure inclusive communication is embedded across the work of listed authorities, like NHS Scotland health boards.

But in 2025, this important promise was dropped, despite acknowledgement from the Scottish Government that feedback on this proposal had been overwhelmingly positive from public bodies and the equality sector.

RNID believe it is essential that the next Scottish Government take action to strengthen the legal right to inclusive communications across healthcare and other public services, including for people who are deaf or have hearing loss.



²³[Public Sector Equality Duty review - Scottish Government consultations - Citizen Space](#)

²⁴[Letter from the Minister of Equalities, Migration and Refugees](#)

3. Guarantee equal opportunities in the workplace

The problem: Urgent action is needed to meet the Scottish Government's commitment to halving the disability employment gap by 2038 and to guarantee equal employment opportunities for deaf people and people with hearing loss.

There are an estimated 750,000 people of working age in Scotland who are deaf or have hearing loss. Almost a third (32%) of them are economically inactive, compared to 20% of people who are not disabled.²⁵

The employment gap for deaf people in Scotland who report British Sign Language (BSL) as their main language is especially stark: only 40% are working compared to 76% of the non-disabled population.²⁶

Deaf people, particularly BSL users, face persistent barriers to entering, remaining and progressing in the workplace. Negative attitudes and behaviours from employers and colleagues remain the biggest challenge and undermine efforts for inclusion at work. Many jobseekers and employers are not aware of the available support for employing deaf and disabled people.

Employment support is delivered by both the UK Government and local authorities in Scotland. The Scottish Government's No One Left Behind programme has made efforts to ensure there is 'no wrong door' for those seeking support, but the system lacks a centralised resource for jobseekers to understand what support is available.

While all 32 local authorities mention employment in their BSL plans, targets have already been missed to make information on employability services available in BSL, and

there is little to no information on whether local programmes are accessible to deaf people and people with hearing loss.²⁷ For individuals who already face communication barriers, this could be the difference between accessing the available support or not knowing where to turn.

While there are many examples of good practice across Scotland, the localised approach suffers from a lack of consistency and limitations on provision of services due to funding being tied to certain locations. The annual funding model also prevents the development of sustainable, long-term services. Programmes that support disabled people are restricted in their abilities to plan or invest in the necessary staff and structures to provide on-going support for people furthest from the labour market, due to the uncertainty of funding.

For many, employment is a gateway to independence, social inclusion, and wellbeing. When deaf people and people with hearing loss are excluded from the workplace, Scotland loses an investment in its people and businesses.

RNID call on the next Scottish Government to reinvigorate its commitment to halve the disability employment gap by 2038 and lead the UK in creating a system where tailored, localised employment support is easily accessible for deaf people and people with hearing loss and guaranteed for a better future.

²⁵National Records of Scotland (2022). Scotland's Census 2022. <https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/>

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷The Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland (the ALLIANCE), 'BSL (Scotland) Act 2015: Analysis of Local BSL Plans 2024 – 2030', p. 37: [Analysis of Local BSL Plans 2024-2030 – report published - Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland.](#)

What does the Scottish Government need to do?



ASK 1: Create an accessible, centralised digital Employability Hub that connects all available employment support in Scotland into one single resource for deaf and disabled jobseekers, employers, and support services.

We know that more deaf people and people with hearing loss could benefit from the employability services in Scotland. A centralised digital hub that brings together resources for jobseekers, employers, and support services would improve awareness and accessibility of a currently disjointed system.

For deaf people and people with hearing loss, an improved online resource would provide a full picture of available programmes and schemes, clearly signposting how to access support in their preferred communication style. The improved Hub would serve as a one-stop shop for potential service users, no matter how they begin the process of seeking support or what type of support best suits their needs.

A centralised Employability Hub would also extend the benefits of the Fair Work Tool. The Hub would support employers with guidance to meet their legal obligations regarding disabled staff and provides examples of best practice in building inclusive workplaces. Free access to guidance on hiring, retaining and developing disabled staff would address negative employer attitudes and behaviours stemming from a lack of experience or knowledge about working with disabled people.

An improved Employability Hub would also share information on programmes and contacts across different local authorities, to increase awareness of best practice in employment support services. A central resource would support knowledge sharing and oversight of a more consistent and transparent provision of programmes across the different localities.

ASK 2: Move towards a more sustainable funding model to ensure employment support services are able to operate for Scotland's future.

The Scottish Government's annualised funding model for employability services has created significant challenges for staff recruitment, strategic planning, and service delivery. Introducing guaranteed funding periods of three to five years would provide stability, enable long-term planning, and ensure services can continue supporting people into employment.

Extending funding periods would reduce risks for both service users and third-sector providers. Under the current system, uncertainty has at times forced providers to suspend support, undermining the quality of services, particularly

for those furthest from the labour market who often require assistance beyond 12 months. Some providers cannot operate under such financial risk, reducing the availability of specialist services. Others struggle to scale programmes or deliver wrap-around support, limiting progress toward closing the disability employment gap.

A sustainable funding model would create a stronger environment for specialist employability services, enhancing the ["No One Left Behind"](#) programme's ability to reach those most in need.



4. Work with the BSL community to transform their life chances

The problem: In 2015, Scotland passed the UK's first piece of dedicated Sign Language legislation: the British Sign Language Act. The landmark legislation aimed to improve access to information and services in British Sign Language (BSL), and included obligations on Scottish Ministers to promote and facilitate the promotion of, use and understanding of BSL. Under the legislation, the Scottish Government is also obliged to publish a National BSL Plan every six years, to set out the actions they are taking. The Act requires listed authorities including Local Councils, NHS boards, colleges and universities and the Scottish Parliament to produce and implement their own individual plans for promoting and facilitating the use and understanding of BSL.

Despite being a national leader for sign language access, Scottish deaf BSL users continue to face barriers accessing services and information in BSL. Additionally, our research with Deaf BSL users found that 71% believe the public hold negative attitudes towards deaf people, and 34% of the public say they don't know how to communicate with a deaf BSL user. There also remain issues of accessing in-person interpreters in Scotland and the BSL Act needs to be strengthened through more coordination across listed authorities.



What does the Scottish Government need to do?

ASK 1: Improve implementation of the BSL Act, and ensure that BSL users are involved in implementing BSL Plans.

The Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee inquiry into the BSL Act described the progress that the Act has achieved as “uneven” and found that substantial inequalities remain.²⁸ Their report agreed that there had been inconsistencies in implementation of the BSL Act across listed authorities, and recognised concerns around how listed authorities are held to account.

Furthermore, the report highlighted how insufficient funding has been set aside to support the delivery of the second BSL Plan. With listed authorities already facing budgetary pressures, respondents to the Inquiry

expressed concern that BSL activities risk being deprioritised and the progress that has been made in improving equality is lost.²⁹

We want to see the next Scottish Government ensure that deaf BSL users are involved in the development and implementation of BSL Plans at both the national and local level, and that implementing the plans remain a priority. The Government must support listed authorities to meet their obligations under the plans and encourage them to share best practice to help even the access to BSL across Scotland. Only with continued support, will improvements continue to be made under the BSL Act.



²⁸Scottish Parliament, 'Report on British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015' (SP Paper 872) Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee) 2025 <https://bprcdn.parliament.scot/published/EHRCJ/2025/9/26/386f30b2-bc9f-4487-baca-6007506e08f0/EHRCJS062025R04.pdf> p.39

²⁹Scottish Parliament, 'Report on British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015' (SP Paper 872) Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee) 2025 <https://bprcdn.parliament.scot/published/EHRCJ/2025/9/26/386f30b2-bc9f-4487-baca-6007506e08f0/EHRCJS062025R04.pdf> p.7

ASK 2: Prioritise implementing the recommendations from the 2019 Landscape Review and develop greater opportunities for training BSL interpreters in Scotland.



The Scottish Register of Language Professionals with the Deaf Community (SRLPDC) reported in March 2025 that there were 61 registered BSL/English interpreters in Scotland, along with 2 deafblind manual interpreters and 8 trainee BSL/English interpreters.³⁰

In contrast, there were 2,619 people who reported in the Scottish Census that they used Sign Language as their main language. Interpreters are vital for helping deaf BSL users communicate and understand information, and limited access to them can have a detrimental effect on deaf BSL users' ability to access services. Additionally, ensuring there is a sustainable supply of interpreters being trained in Scotland will strengthen Scottish dialects of BSL, and reduce reliance on the interpreters based elsewhere in the country who may use slightly different signs.

The 2019 Landscape Review of Interpreting in Scotland made recommendations on how the Scottish Government can do more to improve access to services, including increasing the training and provision of interpreters and enhancing the standard of interpreter training.³¹ However, the latest BSL Plan does not include any actions for increasing interpreter training, and instead relies on increasing access to virtual interpreter services. This is not appropriate for all contexts, will contribute to the over reliance on interpreters based elsewhere in the UK who may sign with a different dialect of BSL, and risk erosion of the Scottish BSL identity.

The next Scottish Government must revisit the recommendations in the Landscape Review and take action to address the shortage of interpreters.

³⁰The Scottish Register of Language Professionals with the Deaf Community (SRLPDC), Report of the Trustees and Financial Statements for the Year Ended 31 March 2025, retrieved from <https://thescottishregister.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/SIGNED-SRLPDC-Annual-Accounts-2024-25.pdf> p.2

³¹Dr R. Mapson et al, 'British Sign Language Interpreting in Scotland: A Landscape Review' Queen Margaret University on behalf of the Scottish Government, 2019 <https://bslscotlandact2015.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Landscape-Review-2019-Final-with-31-January-revision.pdf>

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