



Heriot-Watt University

British Sign Language

Local Plan

2024-2030

Heriot-Watt University BSL Local Plan

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1. Foreword

- 1.1** Heriot-Watt University is proud of our reputation as an internationally leading University in BSL and Deaf Studies. Our academic team of sign language and deaf studies researchers and postgraduate research students continues to grow, and we are committed to encouraging more deaf people to join our university as students or staff. Our bicentennial fundraiser in 2021 supports a programme of scholarships for deaf students and researchers across our Scottish campuses.
- 1.2** Our aspirations for the inclusion of deaf people were exemplified in our ambitious BSL Local Plan for 2018-2024. While progressing our plan has been challenging and much of the work is still ongoing, we are proud of the achievements we have made. From incorporating BSL interpretation as standard at large events such as graduations, inaugural lectures, and Open Days and Offer Holder Days, to promoting Heriot-Watt as a BSL resource across the wider community, we are thankful to those who have played a role in delivering our progress. We have stayed aligned with the core commitments outlined in our plan and will continue to carry this through our new plan.
- 1.3** Our Local Plan for 2024-2030 will continue to evolve, as we respond to our diverse community. The plan was developed in consultation with BSL users and those who will play a key role in delivering actions. I am looking forward to supporting acceleration of this progress.

Professor Malcolm Chrisp
Deputy Principal (Education & Student Life)

2. Contact Details

- 2.1** For any information relating to our BSL Local Plan 2024-30 please contact: equality@hw.ac.uk
- 2.2** Our BSL Local Plan can be found at www.hw.ac.uk/services/equality-diversity/bsl-local-plan.htm

3. Background

i) National Context

- 3.1** The Scottish Government's British Sign Language (BSL) National Plan 2023-2029 builds on their work since the first BSL National Plan was published in 2017. It sets out their strategy to tackle barriers faced by BSL users 'to help make Scotland the best place in the world for BSL users to live, work, visit and learn.'¹
- 3.2** Public bodies such as Heriot-Watt University are required to develop, consult on, and publish a clear, measurable plan, reviewed and renewed every 6 years. This is known as an 'Authority Plan' or Local Plan.
- 3.3** Our Local Plan must:
- Set out the measures we intend to take, including the timescales within which the measures are to be taken.
 - State how, when and to what extent we have taken the measures set out in our previous plan.
 - Try to achieve consistency with the most recently published National Plan.
- 3.4** The Scottish Government is clear through its National Plan that all BSL users have a fundamental right to equal access, opportunity, representation, and inclusion. It also recognises the 'rich, vibrant, diverse and unique culture'¹ of BSL communities as something to be considered in BSL plans.

ii) Heriot-Watt University Context

- 3.5** Heriot-Watt is a leading university globally in the fields of BSL and Deaf Studies. We house the largest number of Deaf Studies researchers in a single institute in all of Europe and the UK. Our reach in the deaf academic community is global, with our in-house interpreting team and academic BSL team attracting international visiting scholars.
- 3.6** Heriot-Watt has strong links with the wider deaf community. The University has a Memorandum of Understanding with local charity Deaf Action and provides free interpreting support to the annual Edinburgh Deaf Festival. Members of our BSL community are board members for the British Deaf Association and Association of Sign Language Interpreters UK.
- 3.7** In 2022, Heriot-Watt signed a Memorandum of Understanding with three other Edinburgh-based universities. This formalised our commitment to working collaboratively to strengthen BSL and Deaf Studies education and research.

¹ Scottish Government British Sign Language (BSL) National Plan 2023-2029

- 3.8 Work on the BSL Local Plan is overseen by a Steering Group including senior leadership from the University Executive, expertise from the BSL team in the Department of Languages and Intercultural Studies, and the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) function.
- 3.9 The BSL Local Plan is sponsored by a member of the University Executive, previously the University Secretary and now the Deputy Principal (Education and Student Life). This role oversees activities across the equality and diversity agenda, particularly related to our Pioneering in Education strategic theme.
- 3.10 Our plan is integrated into Heriot-Watt's Global Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (GEDI) agenda, existing as a workstream within the programme. A GEDI Committee overseeing the agenda was established in 2022. The Committee reports directly to the University Executive.
- 3.11 All GEDI workstreams, including the BSL Local Plan, are aligned to EDI Strategic Theme Articulations. These articulations express how EDI flows through the four themes that underpin the University's Strategic Plan (*Figure 1.*).
- **Flourishing Communities:** The lived-experience of our diverse communities shape the world around us, enhance our everyday activities, and influence how we shape tomorrow.
 - **Pioneering in Education:** For education to contribute toward creating a sustainable, just and enjoyable world, our student body needs to mirror our diverse communities. By leveraging this diversity, we strengthen the learning experience. We empower our learners through inclusive practice, maximising opportunity for all.
 - **Excelling in Research and Enterprise:** Our research and enterprise culture embraces difference, embedding inclusivity in our approach. We actively support academic progression, championing diversity.
 - **Globally Connected:** We are multinational; our global community supports better connections, encouraging greater opportunities across Heriot- Watt and beyond.

Figure 1: EDI Strategic Theme Articulations



4. Progress on BSL Local Plan 2018-2024

4.1 We acknowledge that while significant progress has been made in some areas of our 2018-2024 Plan, many of our ambitions remain unmet. Our achievements include:

- Some improvements to BSL accessibility of our corporate website and intranet: the 'contactSCOTLAND' external service is promoted to users through staff and student specific webpages (HR Policies, Recruitment and Training; Student Disability guidance; and the main University contact page). BSL videos are embedded into Equality & Diversity webpages.
- BSL interpretation is now standard at large events including Open Days and Offer Holder Days, graduations, AGMs, inaugural professorial events, and All Staff Executive Briefings.
- BSL awareness and training: BSL Cafes and an Introduction to BSL course has been offered, Deaf Awareness sessions have been delivered to specific teams.
- An increased number of deaf undergraduate and postgraduate research students.
- Enhancement of our reputation as a Centre of Excellence: our interpreting service and graduates were utilised by the Scottish Government for communication throughout the Covid-19 pandemic; we have sponsored interpreting support to the annual Edinburgh Deaf

Festival, and we attract international visiting scholars from the deaf academic community.

- Signing a Memorandum of Understanding with three other Edinburgh-based universities to formalise our commitment to working collaboratively to strengthen BSL and Deaf Studies education and research.
- Signing a Memorandum of Understanding with local charity Deaf Action to forge a unique partnership for the support of interpreting students' skills development, support of the charity's projects and community development goals and identification of research priorities.

Whilst they are achieved, these actions will continue to be monitored as ongoing 'mainstreamed' actions.

- 4.2** Work is still outstanding to ensure that our deaf staff and students are fully supported – for example through BSL accessibility of our safeguarding app and HR processes. Consultation (described in section 5.) has demonstrated that general deaf awareness in our community remains low, with many hearing colleagues expressing willingness to improve the inclusion of deaf people in their business areas but lack understanding of how to do this. Where actions are outstanding, these have been considered and where relevant, included in our newly refreshed plan.
- 4.3** Actions were progressed where there was clear ownership and ongoing engagement with action owners. Actions owned by our interpreting service were mostly achieved, however we want to avoid an overreliance on our small interpreting team or the academic BSL team, and instead ensure that actions are embedded across the institution as they are a university-wide responsibility. These learnings have been considered in our implementation plans (section 7.) and new actions.

5. Engagement and consultation

- 5.1** The development of our BSL Local Plan was overseen by the BSL Local Plan Steering Group. To support development, a BSL Officer was seconded from Deaf Action to join the group. The remit of the Steering Group was to:
- develop an outline plan based on learnings from delivering the previous plan, and consultation with BSL users and functions responsible for delivering actions,
 - seek endorsement from the GEDI Committee and University Executive,
 - and make final amendments ahead of publication.
- 5.2** A consultation session was held on 3 April 2024 to ensure that our plan is informed by BSL users. Input was also sought from functions in the university covering Communications, Student Recruitment, HR Operations, and Professional and Organisational Development. We are open to comment and feedback throughout the lifespan of the BSL Local Plan.

- 5.3** The University Executive Sponsor has supported the documentation through development to formal approval.

6. Strands of our BSL Local Plan 2024-2030

- 6.1** To achieve consistency between the Scottish Government's BSL National Plan, we have mapped our actions to the relevant priority areas listed: Delivering the BSL National Plan 2023-2029, BSL Accessibility, Children, Young People and their Families, Access to Employment, Health and Wellbeing, Celebrating BSL Culture, BSL Data, Transport, Access to Justice, Democratic Participation. Many of our actions cut across several priority areas.
- 6.2** We have also replicated the National Plan's approach to have short, medium, and long-term actions. We have defined the terms as follows:
- Short-term (1 year) - activity/practice already exists but needs to be communicated, or actions that can quickly be arranged
 - Medium-term (2-3 years) - actions that require planning and new systems or processes to be set up
 - Long-term (3-6 years) - actions that need financial investment and longer-term planning

7. Implementation and monitoring

- 7.1** Implementation and monitoring of the BSL Local Plan will be part of our oversight processes and governance structures for EDI, outlined in section 3.
- 7.2** The Steering Group will continue to oversee the Plan and provide expertise. Implementation structures will be strengthened with the addition of an Implementation Group consisting of the EDI function; Student Disability and Student Union representatives; and responsible action owners named in the Plan.
- 7.3** The timescales of the actions will be reviewed annually and progress on the Plan will be reported annually to the appropriate University committee/s. Objective 14 has been included to ensure that effective implementation and monitoring measures are in place to deliver the rest of the Plan.

8. BSL Local Plan Action Plan 2024-2030

Ref	Objective	Identified challenge + baseline	National Plan strand/s	Success measures	Owner	Start-end
1	Heriot-Watt website is easy to access and navigate, and provides option for a BSL interface with links to videos for key web content	Website does not allow seamless access for BSL users. contactSCOTLAND link is embedded across some pages, and Equality & Diversity webpages have BSL videos embedded.	BSL Accessibility	*Key information on website includes BSL videos, embedded use of contactSCOTLAND, and reference to the in-house BSL interpreting service where appropriate *Guidance created for future 'key content'	Web Team	Short-medium
2	Internal visual media routinely embeds BSL interpretation	All staff and all student media does not include BSL interpretation. This includes all staff/student news and digital signage.	BSL Accessibility Celebrating BSL Culture	*All Staff media embeds BSL videos for key content *All Student media embeds BSL videos for key content *Routine use of BSL on digital signage	Internal Comms	Short
3	All internal staff events and relevant meetings where Deaf staff are required to attend (in person or virtual) provide BSL interpretation as part of our duty of care	Open employee meetings & training events are not always accessible for BSL users. All Staff Executive Briefing and School of Social Sciences meetings are currently interpreted.	Access to Employment	*Key messaging, in person or virtual, includes BSL interpretation	Corporate Comms	Short

4	SafeZone is fully accessible for BSL users	SafeZone does not fully provide support to BSL users because of the way the system alerts users. Currently the app includes a texting option.	Health & Wellbeing	*Successful rollout of updated SafeZone with positive feedback from BSL users	Safe Guarding	Medium
5	Employees with BSL as a first language are fully supported and able to access all induction and employment-related information	Current HR processes are not accessible for BSL user employees, besides embedding of contactSCOTLAND link in some policies and webpages.	Access to Employment	*contactSCOTLAND link & link to in-house BSL interpreting service embedded as standard across all HR policies and processes *HR employment information assessed for accessibility in consultation with BSL users *Programme of BSL content development created and progressed following consultation *Induction and e-learning materials accessible for BSL users	HR Operations	Short-medium
6	Frontline staff, everyday contacts and BSL users are supported to 'chat', in a welcoming and supportive environment	People throughout the University community are not confident in communication between Deaf and hearing colleagues.	BSL Accessibility Celebrating BSL Culture	*BSL learning development programme in place targeted at student-facing staff *Regular BSL conversation sessions in place for participants to engage in informal conversation	Professional & Organisational Development BSL academic team	Short
7	Staff have a clear understanding of how to support BSL users and good practice for accessible events, content, curriculum delivery, and services	There is a lack of knowledge in making sure BSL users are able to access events/materials/everyday business	BSL Accessibility	*Accessibility guidance developed to ensure clear understanding of how to source support for BSL users, including best practice on communication platforms *Locally developed and delivered 'Working with Interpreters' sessions for key areas *Intranet site developed for staff to be	Professional & Organisational Development Interpreting Service EDI	Short

				aware of in-house expertise, how to access service, and guidance (including use of Teams/ Zoom)		
8	Heriot-Watt is marketed as the University of choice for prospective students and staff	Our offers for Deaf staff and students are unique but not well publicised.	Children, Young People and their Families Access to Employment Celebrating BSL Culture	*Website promotes our in-house interpreting service *Positive experiences of Deaf staff and students are spotlighted *Strategy developed to attract more Deaf undergraduate students across all disciplines, including targeting influencers *Promote Heriot-Watt as a supportive community with networks and events for BSL users *Use of events calendar to highlight BSL use in events/activities *Specific and targeted publicising of BSL events – opt-in contact list *Development of BSL glossaries for technical vocabulary associated with programmes of study being undertaken by students who use BSL, where no signs currently exist *Improve access to work experience placements for BSL users *Explore option of offering shared accommodation to student BSL users – BSL language residency scheme *Develop BSL interface for use during Clearing	Student Recruitment Staff Recruitment Marketing BSL academic team	Medium-Long

9	Deaf students have their support needs identified early and are supported to access the full range of opportunities on offer at Heriot-Watt throughout their student journey	There is a need to better join-up information sharing to ensure the right facilities are in place for Deaf students. Deaf students are not always able to access support/opportunities in place across the University.	BSL Accessibility Access to Employment Celebrating BSL Culture Children, Young People and their Families	*System developed to flag need for BSL support across student journey *Pilot sessions with BSL interpretation at student service areas are developed, run and evaluated *Key information that students need to access are available in BSL *Interpreting provision is consistent	Academic Registry/Student Life Student Wellbeing	Short-medium
10	The University rolls-out a positive BSL/Deaf Friendly symbol across all schools/services/functions	There is a gap in demonstrating accessibility of HWU to BSL users/Deaf people	BSL Accessibility Celebrating BSL Culture	*Consult and involve BSL users on recognised and supported symbol *Symbol used across media and events to acknowledge BSL use	Implementation Group	Short
11	BSL/Deaf culture is embedded in learning and teaching	Provision of learning and teaching should better demonstrate BSL use across the curriculum <i>and</i> in access	Celebrating BSL Culture	*Scoping undertaken alongside project to decolonise the curriculum (diversifying the curriculum)	LTA BSL academic team	Long
12	Heriot-Watt aims to support Deaf inclusion on our global campuses	There is currently no consistent support in place for our Deaf staff and students to work or study on our overseas campuses. Our reach is global given our campuses in Malaysia and Dubai, however our work on BSL/Deaf	Celebrating BSL Culture	*Scoping undertaken to determine possible actions	Globally Connected GEDI theme	Long

		inclusion has so far mainly been restricted to the UK.				
13	Establish BSL/Deaf culture survey for staff and students	Lack of data on the needs of our community.	BSL Data Celebrating BSL culture Democratic Participation	*Biannual BSL/Deaf Culture Staff & Student Survey established *Repository of data developed for regular review *Focus groups held for additional detail where needed *Data analysed and presented to Steering Group and Executive team	Implementation Group	Medium
14	The BSL Local Plan is well known across Heriot-Watt and adequately resourced	Lack of capacity of delivering team hindered progress on previous plan.	BSL Data Celebrating BSL culture Democratic Participation	*Implementation Group set up and meets regularly to monitor delivery *Dedicated staff resource in place to support implementation of the plan *Staff are aware of the BSL Local Plan and their role in delivery *Annual monitoring of progress via surveys *Annual monitoring via University committee *Public reporting every 2 years on progress on BSL Local Plan	Implementation and Steering Groups	Short