

BATOD Position statement

QToDs and levels of British Sign Language

BATOD recognises the central importance of British Sign Language (BSL)¹ within the Deaf community and its significance for many deaf² children and young people (CYP) across the United Kingdom (UK). As the professional body representing Qualified Teachers of Deaf Children and Young People (QToDs), BATOD is committed to ensuring that QToDs possess the knowledge, skills, and cultural understanding necessary to meet the diverse communication needs of deaf CYP.

This position statement outlines BATOD's stance on the appropriate level of BSL competence for QToDs, the rationale underpinning current qualification requirements, and the wider professional and cultural considerations that inform this position.

A key constitutional aim of the Association is included, ie "To encourage and assist in the training of Teachers of Deaf Children and Young People including mandatory qualification training and post-qualification continuing professional development".

BATOD's position

1. BSL is a vital language for many deaf CYP, and QToDs must have an appropriate level of BSL knowledge and cultural understanding to support these CYP and their families effectively.
2. The current mandatory qualification (MQ) requirement in England (BSL Level 1 prior to qualification, with progression to Level 2 within three years, and Level 3+ when working with children using BSL) is appropriate and evidence based, balancing workforce sustainability with the needs of deaf CYP. In Scotland, the draft Scottish Guidance on appropriate qualifications and teacher competencies for teachers of CYP who are blind or partially sighted, deaf, or deafblind propose "British Sign Language (BSL) SCQF [Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework] Level 3 (BSL Signature Level 1) for teachers of children and young people who are deaf at the point of gaining the appropriate qualification, and SCQF Level 5 in BSL (Signature Level 2 BSL) within the following year".
3. Higher level BSL competence should be required when QToDs work with CYP who predominantly use BSL, ensuring that provision is responsive and proportionate. Funding should be in place for this.
4. QToDs are not BSL teachers and BATOD affirms the essential role of Deaf BSL professionals in delivering high-quality BSL teaching to deaf CYP and their families.

¹ In Northern Ireland, BSL and Irish Sign Language are recognised.

² The term 'deaf' denotes all levels and types of deafness.

5. Access to Deaf Studies is essential, and BATOD supports continuing professional development (CPD) such as the Deaf Studies programme to strengthen cultural competence across the profession.
6. BATOD will continue to review this position as the BSL Act and the recommendations from the BSL Advisory Board and wider societal changes improve access to BSL learning and Deaf community engagement.

Current qualification requirements

In England, under the existing framework, ToDs undertaking the MQ must achieve **BSL Level 1 prior to qualifying** as a QToD. In 2023 the revised MQ was published, and the following requirements now apply:

- **4K7:** Trainees must *understand the structure and characteristics of BSL and its key role in the Deaf community and Deaf culture in the UK.*
- **4S7a:** Trainees must *hold a minimum of an accredited BSL Level 1 qualification and have plans to complete Level 2 within three years.*
- **4S7b:** Where a trainee is *working with a child who predominantly uses BSL*, they must develop *higher level BSL skills of at least Level 3.*

In Scotland, the draft Guidance on appropriate qualifications and teacher competencies for teachers of CYP who are blind or partially sighted, deaf, or deafblind propose “British Sign Language (BSL) SCQF Level 3 (BSL Signature Level 1) for teachers of children and young people who are deaf at the point of gaining the appropriate qualification, and SCQF Level 5 in BSL (Signature Level 2 BSL) within the following year”.

These requirements reflect the diversity of deaf CYP’s communication needs and ensure that QToD training programmes maintain parity and consistency across the UK.

Rationale for the current requirements

Consultation findings (England)

During the MQ consultation process, it became clear that:

- requiring **BSL Level 2 prior to entry** would significantly reduce the pool of applicants to ToD training programmes
- many trainees already enter programmes with **BSL Level 2 or above**, but this is not universal
- the profession needs a flexible framework that supports both recruitment and high-quality provision.

The resulting MQ requirements (**4S7a** and **4S7b**) therefore balance:

- the need for QToDs to develop appropriate BSL skills
- the need to maintain a viable and diverse pipeline of future QToDs.

Diversity of deaf CYP

QToDs work with a wide range of deaf CYP, including those with:

- unilateral deafness
- auditory processing disorder (APD)
- mild or moderate levels of deafness
- who do not use BSL as a primary language

For many of these CYP, BSL is not central to their communication profile. The profession must therefore ensure that BSL requirements are proportionate and aligned with the needs of the CYP being supported.

Higher level BSL skills and workforce realities

Access to BSL learning opportunities

Achieving fluency in BSL, particularly at Level 3/ SCQF Level 6 and above requires;

- Regular immersion in the Deaf community
- Frequent opportunities for naturalistic language use
- Access to Deaf BSL users who can provide informal feedback
- Funding to pay for BSL classes and exams

Many QToDs do not have access to:

- Local, regular BSL classes
- A local Deaf community
- Opportunities for sustained language immersion
- Funding to support their BSL classes

These structural barriers limit the feasibility of requiring high level BSL competence for all ToDs at the point of qualification. BATOD recognises that the BSL Act may improve access to BSL teaching and Deaf community networks over time, and this position may evolve accordingly. Also, in the context of QToD supporting deaf CYP who use BSL/ISL, BATOD supports the recommendation suggested by the BSL Advisory Board (2025) ‘Exclusion of deaf and deafblind British Sign Language users from health and social care in the UK’ recommend “Improve BSL competencies of professionals working with deaf children: Dedicated funding for BSL learning to ensure all qualified teachers of the deaf and speech and language therapists specialising in working with deaf people are trained to BSL level 3 and working toward level 6, upskilling the current and future workforce”.

BATOD also supports the National Deaf Children’s Society (NDCS) recommendation that staff eg teaching assistants, have the knowledge and skills to support the pupil, including at least a Level 3 BSL qualification or equivalent for pupils who require signed support.

Across the UK

In Scotland, ‘Guidance for schools on the qualifications and experience required by staff delivering the BSL Awards’ state “A lead teacher [GTCS (General Teaching Council for Scotland) registered]:

- who is teaching on his/her own ... the lead teacher should hold a qualification indicating competence in BSL. As a minimum, the qualification held should be at least the level above the level of the qualification they are teaching.
- ... assisted by a BSL specialist who is not a qualified teacher. In this case the lead teacher will provide the pedagogical input to the delivery while the specialist will provide the subject expertise. As the specialist will be providing the subject knowledge, it will be the specialist that must hold a qualification and/or experience in BSL at least a level above the level of the qualification being taught.”

The Independent report (BSL Alliance) (Scotland) states “The Scottish Government should develop a plan in partnership with BATOD and organisations representing BSL users for the delivery of Action 17 of the British Sign Language Nation Plan 2023–29 – ‘Support opportunities for teachers of the deaf and teachers working with deaf and deafblind children

and young people in obtaining qualifications up to SCQF Level 10” www.alliance-scotland.org.uk/blog/news/how-do-we-reverse-the-fall-in-the-number-of-qualified-teachers-of-deaf-children-and-young-people-in-scotland/

In England, a BSL GCSE has been proposed; however, no awarding body has yet agreed to take it on. “As stakeholders [NDCS, British Deaf Association, BATOD, Signature, Association of British Sign Language Tutors and Assessors (ABSLTA)], it has been agreed that we would recommend BSL GCSE teachers have at least a Level 4 BSL qualification, working towards Level 6 BSL by 2030. There should also be flexibility in enabling and supporting those teaching the BSL GCSE to achieve their QTS [qualified teacher status] by 2030. Signature is currently working with this group of stakeholders to provide more understanding on the current teaching workforce in England.”

In Wales a BSL Skills Suite qualification has been established. In Northern Ireland, no BSL/Irish Sign Language (ISL) skill qualification has been established, yet.

Distinction between QToDs and BSL teachers

Even when QToDs achieve higher level BSL qualifications (Level 3+/ SCQF Level 6), they are **not** BSL teachers or Deaf BSL instructors. Teaching BSL is a distinct professional discipline requiring:

- Native or near native fluency
- Specialist pedagogical training
- Deep cultural and linguistic knowledge.

Deaf children and their families must have **free, regular access to Deaf professionals** who are fluent or native BSL users. BATOD strongly affirms that BSL teaching should be delivered by Deaf professionals wherever possible.

Strengthening cultural competence: Exploring Deaf Studies

In response to feedback, BATOD is piloting ‘**Exploring Deaf Studies**’ as a regular CPD offer for QToDs and other professionals to extend access to Deaf cultural knowledge through a modular programme.

This CPD aims to:

- Provide foundational understanding of Deaf culture, identity, and community



- Enhance ToDs' ability to work respectfully and effectively with Deaf CYP and families
- Ensure cultural competence even when BSL is not the primary communication mode of the children they support.

This initiative reflects BATOD's commitment to culturally informed practice across the profession.

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BATOD NEC welcomes feedback on this publication. Contact BATOD National Executive Officer, Teresa Quail, via exec@batod.org.uk

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