



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba



Colin Beattie MSP
Member of the Scottish Parliament
For Midlothian North and Musselburgh Constituency

Karen Adam MSP, Convenor
Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee
Scottish Parliament

Dear Karen,

13th December 2024

Subject: Cross-party Group on Deafness – decision to end provision of Contact Scotland BSL from March 2025.

I am writing in my capacity as Convenor of the Cross-party Group on Deafness, with support from the group. We are deeply alarmed at our understanding of the Scottish Government's approach to Contact Scotland BSL and wish to see the current policy reviewed and reversed.

As you know, [Contact Scotland BSL](#) is the Scottish Government's national flagship service for Deaf and Deafblind people who use BSL as their first language. It enables thousands of people every year to access public services, providing independence and empowerment via online interpreting Video Relay Services, Braille displays, and speech synthesizers. It operates 24 hours a day, 365 days a year and is universally accessible and free at point of use. It handles on average between 3000-4000 calls every month, with high satisfaction rates among users. The service is essential to the day-to-day lives of Deaf and Deafblind people and their families, enabling independent access to civic society. It is one of the key successes of the BSL (Scotland) Act 2015 and is held up internationally as an example of good practice.

After ten years of successful provision of services, and strong key performance indicators, the Social Care and National Care Service Development Directorate within Scottish Government have issued a termination notice for the contract for Contact Scotland BSL. The termination notice states that there is no intention to retender service provision (or any variation thereof). Functionally, this means that Contact Scotland BSL will no longer exist beyond 31 March 2025, with no plans for alternative support – and thousands of Deaf and Deafblind people will be cut off from community and family life.

There is deep concern among Cross-party Group on Deafness members about both this decision, and the lack of transparency and consultation with Deaf and Deafblind people.

The [BSL National Plan 2023-2029](#) lists Contact Scotland BSL as a key long-term goal (#8):

“To remove accessibility as a barrier for BSL users in all aspects of life, recognising the importance of having accessible information in the right format at the right time, utilising technology and increasing people’s awareness of communication tools. We will [...] continue to promote the use of Contact Scotland BSL, Scotland’s BSL online interpreting Video Relay Service, making improvements to this service to ensure it meets the needs of BSL users.”

Deaf and Deafblind people already face barriers to social inclusion and connection every day. Closing the Contact Scotland BSL service will directly impact BSL users even further from having access to equitable services and will create additional costs which many people will not be able to meet. People will struggle to access medical appointments, support their children in education, access legal support and services, apply for jobs, access social care support, and contact family and friends. Contact Scotland BSL has transformed the lives of many Deaf and Deafblind people, allowing them to independently, autonomously, and with confidentiality, make calls for serious and important issues in their lives.

It is also worth noting that there have been widespread cuts to interpreter provision within local authority budgets across Scotland. In relevant impact assessments, Contact Scotland BSL has been repeatedly referenced as a support mechanism. While there is other assistive technology that BSL users can use to assist, competitors are all paid-for services; a fact which will exclude many Deaf and Deafblind people from using them, given widespread evidence on the [individual impact of accessibility costs](#).

As such, we would welcome the following:

1. Evidence of an **Equalities and Human Rights impact assessment** for this decision, and **transparent sharing of the information which has informed the decision**. At present, CPGD members and stakeholders across the sensory community, third sector, and health and social care indicate that the removal of Contact Scotland BSL will have significant adverse impacts on people’s access to services and to their human rights.
2. If there is no detailed impact assessment, informed by lived experience, relevant civic groups (e.g. NHS24, Health Boards, Local Authorities), and representative bodies like the British Deaf Association, then we request **an urgent exemption be made by Scottish Government, to provide a short-term extension to the contract for Contact Scotland BSL**. That extension could then enable appropriate consultation and either a properly planned tendering process or handover planning – without leaving Deaf and Deafblind people unsupported and excluded from public life.
3. **Engagement and consultation with Deaf and Deafblind BSL users and their families** on different options around the future of Contact Scotland BSL, with a commitment to responding to the information shared.
4. **An investigation by the Committee into the impact of the recent and**

widespread cuts to sensory support across Scotland, and how this has adversely impacted the human rights of Deaf, Deafblind, and visually impaired people.

Members of the CPG on Deafness would be very happy to provide further evidence to the Committee. We look forward to your response and stand ready to provide any support required to enable Deaf and Deafblind people to access their human rights.

Yours sincerely,

Colin Beattie MSP, Convenor of CPG on Deafness