



Department
for Education

GCSE British Sign Language (BSL) Proposed Subject Content

Government consultation

Launch date 15 June 2023

Respond by 08 September 2023

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Introduction

1. In 2018, the Department for Education committed to introducing a GCSE in British Sign Language (BSL). This commitment was made following a proposal from Signature¹ as well as campaigning by the National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) and deaf young people, such as Daniel Jillings. Our initial timeline for developing the GCSE was severely delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Department has since worked closely with subject experts, and stakeholders, to gather input and develop draft subject content ready for public consultation. The Department would particularly like to thank Signature, NDCS, Institute of British Sign Language (IBSL), British Deaf Association (BDA), British Association of Teachers of the Deaf (BATOD), and Association of British Sign Language Teachers and Assessors (ABSLTA) for their constructive input to date.
2. The introduction of a GCSE in BSL is a landmark moment which will give students an unparalleled opportunity to work towards a rigorous qualification that is internationally recognised and accepted in school and college performance tables. Our aim is that by providing this new GCSE pathway more schools and colleges will choose to teach BSL which will, in turn, increase the number of BSL users and advance equality of opportunity.
3. The Department believes this GCSE will provide students with a knowledge rich, coherent, satisfying and worthwhile course of study. The GCSE assumes no prior knowledge of BSL, but will be accessible for students who use BSL as their first language. This should enable all students to develop their ability to communicate using BSL with other signers on a range of topics. The Department anticipates interest in this GCSE to be far reaching and those wishing to study it will come from a variety of backgrounds. Our intention is that the GCSE will support students to progress on to further academic and vocational study, training or employment.
4. The Department is now seeking views on the proposed subject content via this public consultation.

Who this is for

- Secondary teachers
- Head teachers and principals
- Awarding organisations
- Students
- BSL users
- Deaf individuals and those with hearing loss
- Initial teacher training providers

¹ Signature is an awarding body for deaf communication and language qualifications in the UK.

Issue date

5. The consultation was issued on 15 June 2023.

Enquiries

6. If your enquiry is related to the policy content of the consultation, you can contact the DfE BSL GCSE policy team by e-mail: BSLGCSE.consultation@education.gov.uk
7. If your enquiry is related to the DfE e-consultation website or the consultation process in general, you can contact the DfE Ministerial and Public Communications Division by email: Consultations.Coordinator@education.gov.uk or by telephone: 0370 000 2288 or via the [DfE Contact us page](#).

Additional copies

8. Additional copies are available electronically and can be downloaded from [GOV.UK DfE consultations](#).

The response

9. This consultation closes at 5pm on 8 September 2023. The results of this consultation will be published on GOV.UK once the responses have been reviewed and analysed.

Confidentiality of your responses

10. Information provided in your response to this consultation, including personal information, may be subject to publication or disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, the Data Protection Act 2018 or the Environmental Information Regulations 2004.
11. If you want all, or any part, of a response to be treated as confidential, please explain why you consider it to be confidential.
12. If a request for disclosure of the information you have provided is received, your explanation about why you consider it confidential will be taken into account, but no assurance can be given that confidentiality can be maintained. An automatic confidentiality disclaimer generated by your IT system will not, of itself, be regarded as binding on the Department.
13. The Department for Education will process your personal data (name and address and any other identifying material) in accordance with the Data Protection Act 2018 and, your personal information will only be used for the purposes of this consultation. Your information will not be shared with third parties unless the law allows it.
14. You can read more about what the DfE does when we ask for and hold your personal information in our personal information charter: [DfE personal information](#)

[charter](#).

15. Please also see the privacy notice published alongside this consultation.

About this consultation

16. The Department is consulting on the proposed subject content requirements that will form the basis of the new GCSE in BSL. These requirements are designed to become a regulatory document which will set out in technical language the knowledge, understanding and skills needed for the GCSE. The subject content provides the framework for awarding organisations to create the detail of qualification specifications; these specifications will set out for teachers in more detail what students will study. Any awarding organisation that offers the GCSE will provide resources to support schools, and stakeholder organisations can also support its teaching.

17. Whilst the responsibility for specifying the subject content of the GCSE lies with the Department, the determination of assessment arrangements is the responsibility of Ofqual, the independent regulator. Ofqual is therefore consulting in parallel on the GCSE assessment arrangements, including assessment objectives. In order to understand how students will be expected to engage with the subject it is important to consider both the content and the assessment objectives. Ofqual's consultation can be found on their website.

18. The Department believes that the subject content we are presenting for consultation represents a substantial, engaging and worthwhile programme of study. It is the product of detailed engagement with our subject experts, as well as with sector stakeholders.

19. One of the issues the Department has carefully considered is the GCSE's target audience. Our view is that there is likely to be a diverse range of students who will wish to study the GCSE. This may include amongst others: deaf students who wish to study a qualification in their first language; hearing students who have deaf relatives and use both BSL and spoken languages at home; and students who have no prior knowledge of BSL but have an interest in studying the GCSE. Given this likely far reaching interest, the Department has concluded that the GCSE should be designed for students with no prior knowledge of BSL, but should be accessible to all students, both those who use BSL as their first language and students with little or no prior knowledge of BSL. This will give all students the opportunity to develop fluency in communicating using BSL, as well as receiving a world class, credible and well respected qualification.

20. Making the GCSE accessible to the widest audience will also increase the cohort of students who can enter the qualification, making it more economically viable for awarding organisations to develop specifications and offer the qualification. Other options, such as a GCSE aimed only at those with detailed prior knowledge of BSL, or developing two GCSEs (one for those with prior knowledge of BSL and one for those with no prior knowledge) could result in a GCSE that is not economically viable and is therefore not developed by awarding organisations. This is because a

GCSE solely for current users of BSL would likely attract a much smaller cohort of students and having two GCSEs would risk dividing the cohort.

Proposed subject content

21. The proposed subject content focuses on knowledge and understanding of British Sign Language, building a core of commonly used vocabulary from the established lexicon, and developing an understanding of grammar and the productive lexicon of BSL. This element will make up 85% of the qualification, to ensure students can undertake a comprehensive study of the language and are consequently able to communicate confidently using BSL.
22. The study of the language is divided into three areas, all of which require students to apply their knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. Our expectation is that the combined requirements of these three areas will enable students to understand and communicate confidently using BSL. The areas are as follows:
 - Comprehension – so that students can follow and understand signs, signed sentences and signed texts in standard BSL including conversations between proficient signers;
 - Production – so that students can independently produce signs accurately and construct clearly articulated BSL sentences including signing simple sentences, providing descriptions of people and places, and telling stories; and
 - Interaction – interacting in BSL with other BSL signers including initiating and taking part in a conversation, asking and answering simple questions and exchanging information.
23. Our intention is that students will study a substantial number of signs so that, by the end of the GCSE, they are fluent enough to be able to confidently communicate using BSL in real life situations. In practice, students taught this proposed subject content are likely to study approximately 800 signs during the GCSE. As detailed in annex A, at least 750 signs will be from the established lexicon.
24. To complement these 750 signs, the proposed subject content also requires students to know the 26 letters of the British two-handed manual alphabet and numerals, both cardinals and ordinals. Taken together, these form the basic requirements that all students will need to be able to communicate confidently in BSL. Regional variants and base signs (including modifiers and negations) of a specific sign will count as one sign in the prescribed number of signs. This will further increase the size of the vocabulary students will gain, which will increase fluency and confidence in communicating using BSL.
25. As detailed in annex B, we propose that students will be expected to develop and use their knowledge and understanding of BSL grammar progressively throughout their course. Students will be required to apply their knowledge and understanding of grammar, appropriate to British Sign Language.
26. The proposed subject content states that the vocabulary set out in Annex C is an advisory list, which gives awarding organisations flexibility in the selection of their vocabulary. This flexibility is important because as BSL evolves over time, new signs will come in to use and other signs may become less used. The selected vocabulary

will take into account sign frequency (provided in Annex C where available) and semantic relevance, and should be specified according to topic and purpose of communication in a vocabulary list of signs from the established lexicon.

27. The proposed subject content reflects that BSL has regional variations. Students of BSL will be expected to use the grammar of standard BSL, and should have awareness of regional lexical variation. Students may use regional lexical variation, as appropriate, in productive and interactive tasks providing that task requirements are fully met.
28. As outlined earlier, the Department proposes that 85% of the GCSE focuses on teaching students how to comprehend, produce and interact using signs. The Department also believes – and feedback from stakeholders has stressed – it is important for students to gain knowledge and understanding of the history of BSL to enable them to contextualise their language study. For this reason, we propose that the remaining 15% of the subject content covers knowledge and understanding of the history of BSL.
29. This section of content requires students to study the development of BSL, from its origins and the first references to signing in Britain, to the present day. This is a separate aspect of the subject content to the study of the language and will help facilitate knowledge and understanding of the language of BSL. It is important that students understand the significance of BSL history and understand how the use of BSL has evolved. The Department therefore proposes that the subject content will cover how new vocabulary enters the language, as well as that it is distinctive from, has influenced, and has been influenced by other languages, including American Sign Language and English.
30. The Department is seeking your views on the proposed subject content. Ofqual will consult separately on assessment arrangements.

Respond online

31. To help us analyse the responses please use the online system wherever possible. Visit [DfE consultations on GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/consultations) to submit your response.

Other ways to respond

32. If for exceptional reasons, you are unable to use the online system, for example because you use specialist accessibility software that is not compatible with the system, you may request and complete a word document version of the form. Alternatively if you would like to submit a video response in BSL, please contact us at the email address detailed below and we will send you further instructions of how to do this.

33. **By email:**

BSLGCSE.consultation@education.gov.uk

34. **By post:**

GCSE and A level Policy Team
Department for Education
3rd Floor
Sanctuary Buildings
20 Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

Please only use this option in exceptional circumstances.

Deadline

35. The consultation closes at 5pm on 8 September 2023.

Equalities Impact Assessment

36. An equalities impact assessment (EIA) has been conducted and is published alongside this consultation. The EIA will be kept under review and if new relevant information comes to our attention, it will be considered and factored into the EIA.

Questions

37. The questions that will form this consultation have been split into the following categories:

- Personal information
- Subject aims
- Subject content
- Annex A - BSL Terminological Definitions and Parameters
- Annex B - Grammar requirements for British Sign Language at GCSE
- Annex C - BSL vocabulary
- General
- Equalities

38. You may want to answer all or just some of the questions, as some questions may not be particularly relevant to you. In either case, your answers will be carefully considered. The subject content is published alongside this consultation which can be used for your reference should you wish. A brief rationale for certain inclusions has also been included underneath questions where appropriate.

Q1 – Q11: Personal information

The following eleven questions are about your personal details and contact preferences. It would be helpful if you would first give some information about yourself as context to your other responses.

1. What is your name?

First Name

Last Name

2. What is your email address?

If you enter your email address you will automatically receive an acknowledgement email when you submit your response.

Email address:

Please note: It is helpful to have your email address if we want to contact you about your answers to the questions in this consultation. You do not have to give your email address, and your views will be considered whether or not you give your email address.

3. Are you happy to be contacted directly about your response?

(insert options): Yes; No

The Department may wish to contact you directly about your responses to help our understanding of the issues. If we do, we will use the email address you have given above.

4. Are you responding as an individual or part of an organisation?

(insert options): Individual; Organisation

5. If you are responding as an individual, how would you describe yourself?

Choose an item: (insert options): Student; Parent; Teacher; Head teacher; other.

If 'other' selected, please specify here:

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6. Do you identify as being deaf or as having hearing loss?

(insert options): Yes; No

7. Is BSL your main or preferred language?

(insert options): Yes; No

8. If you are responding for an organisation, what type of organisation is this?

Choose an item: (insert options): Awarding organisation; School; College; stakeholder organisation; Other

If 'other' selected, please specify here:

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9. What is the name of your organisation?

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10. What is your role within the organisation?

.....

11. Would you like us to keep your responses confidential and not list your name when publishing the consultation response on gov.uk? Please note this question applies to all (individuals and organisations).

(insert options): Yes; No

Q12: Subject aims

The next question asks about the aims of the GCSE subject content.

12. Are the subject aims easy to understand, clear and unambiguous?

(insert options): Yes; No

If no or you wish to give further detail on your views, please explain:

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Q13 – Q18: Subject content

The following seven questions are about the requirements set out in the subject content.

13. Overall is the proposed subject content easy to understand, clear and unambiguous?

(insert options): Yes; No

If no or you wish to give further detail on your views, please explain:

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14. The GCSE assumes no previous knowledge of BSL. With this in mind do you agree that the proposed subject content is at an appropriate level of difficulty?

(insert options): Yes; No

If no or you wish to give further detail on your views, please explain:

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15. Paragraph 8a of the proposed subject content details the requirements for the comprehension of BSL. Do you agree with these requirements?

(insert options): Yes; No

If no or you wish to give further detail on your views, please explain:

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16. Paragraph 8b of the proposed subject content details the requirements for the production of BSL. Do you agree with these requirements?

(insert options): Yes; No

If no or you wish to give further detail on your views, please explain:

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17. Paragraph 8c of the proposed subject content details the requirements for interaction in BSL. Do you agree with these requirements?

(insert options): Yes; No

If no or you wish to give further detail on your views, please explain:

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18. Paragraph 9 of the proposed subject content requires that specifications in BSL should enable students to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the history of BSL. Do you agree with the requirements on BSL history?

(insert options): Yes; No

If no or you wish to give further detail on your views, please explain:

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Q19 – Q20: Annex A – BSL Terminological Definitions and Parameters

The following two questions are about Annex A.

19. Are the proposed terminological definitions and parameters, set out in Annex A, easy to understand, clear and unambiguous?

(insert options): Yes; No

If no or you wish to give further detail on your views, please explain:

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20. In order to understand, produce and interact in BSL at GCSE, students will be expected to know:

- at least 750 signs from the established lexicon;
- the 26 letters of the British two-handed manual alphabet and numerals, both cardinals and ordinals (in addition to the 750 signs).

Do you agree with these proposed requirements?

(insert options): Yes; No

If no or you wish to give further detail on your views, please explain:

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Q21: Annex B – Grammar Requirements for British Sign Language at GCSE

The following question is about Annex B.

21. Are the proposed grammar requirements, set out in Annex B, easy to understand, clear and unambiguous?

(insert options): Yes; No

If no or you wish to give further detail on your views, please explain:

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Q22: Annex C – BSL Vocabulary

The following question is about Annex C.

22. Annex C provides a list of 1000 commonly used BSL signs from the established lexicon. The Department has proposed this is an advisory list from which awarding organisations can use to help select vocabulary when writing GCSE specifications. Do you agree that this list should be advisory?

(insert options): Yes; No

If no or you wish to give further detail on your views, please explain:

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Q23: General

The following question is general and allows you to provide feedback on anything that you wish to, which has not been asked.

23. Is there anything you would like to feedback that is not covered in the questions above?

(insert options): Yes; No

If yes, please explain:

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Q24-Q25: Equalities

The following two questions are about equalities.

In accordance with the Equality Act 2010, Ministers must have “due regard”, when making decisions, to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination; advance equality of opportunity; and foster good relations, in relation to protected characteristics. The Department for Education has been taking this requirement into account in developing the proposed draft subject content.

The relevant protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

24. Do any of the proposals have the potential to have a disproportionate impact positive or negative, on specific groups, in particular those who share a 'protected characteristic' (age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation)?

(insert options): Yes; No

If yes, please explain:

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25. How could the proposed subject content of the GCSEs be altered to:

- better eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Equality Act 2010;
- better advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a protected characteristic and those who do not;
- better foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

Please provide evidence to support your response.

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Department
for Education

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