

Council delay plan to improve the lives of people who use sign language

A new plan to improve the lives of people who use sign language has been delayed by Edinburgh Council following criticism it is not ambitious enough and won't "meet the needs of children".

A charity said the plan identified problems but not solutions and needed "more concrete targets," while a local parent said she was still having to fight for "the most basic of human rights" for her deaf child.

The council is required by law to draw up a new British Sign Language (BSL) Plan every six years setting out actions to ensure users can be "fully involved in daily and public life in Edinburgh, as active, healthy citizens" and are able to "make informed choices about every aspect of their lives".

It spans several themes such as accessibility, children, employment, transport and democracy. The latest document for 2024-2030 includes commitments to "improve awareness and access to BSL/English interpretation", "ensure that staff are appropriately qualified, skilled and knowledgeable to support BSL users effectively" and "continue to run deaf awareness staff training sessions".

However councillors have postponed publishing it – meaning the

authority will now miss the Scottish Government's deadline – after serious concerns were raised at the policy and sustainability committee on Tuesday, May 28.

Councillors said that issues raised by representatives of the deaf community at the meeting sparked “a lot of questions,” with one asking, “How did we get this so wrong?”

Mum Leigh Ferrand, whose profoundly deaf 13-year-old son attends a special school in the city, said she was begging the council to “consider some more concrete actions that can actually help these children access education through BSL”.

She said after “years of battles with Edinburgh Council” for “the most basic of human rights” she had been informed earlier this week that a dedicated sign language class would be stopped with her son “integrated back into hearing classes” along with other BSL speaking pupils at the school.

“We’ve been offered a communications support worker so at least our children can make their needs known,” she said. “We’ve had to beg the school to keep a social group for BSL speaking children and all of this time when you as Edinburgh Council are proclaiming success on your BSL plan and are about to propose a new one.”

Ms Ferrand claimed she was told by officials ‘maybe Edinburgh cannot meet your child’s needs’. She said: “That’s not what your plan suggests, it says that all children’s needs will be met in terms of education. So when you read this plan you can see why I’m here asking you to revise this and look at concrete actions. This is not happening.”

Mark Ballard, head of policy in Scotland for the National Deaf Children’s Society, said: “Our main point is this plan needs to be more concrete in what it’s actually going to deliver over that long six-year period. It needs to be more definite and it needs to be more ambitious.”

He told councillors Edinburgh needed more qualified teachers of the deaf and teachers of the deaf with strong BSL skills.

“At the moment Edinburgh has half as many teachers of the deaf as Fife, it’s got the same number as West Lothian,” he said.

“The plan highlights the problem but doesn’t explain how that’s going to be addressed.

“The plan highlights the isolation that BSL users can face in school . . . but the plan doesn’t deal with how that isolation will be addressed.

“This is not an ambitious plan, there could be so much more.

“We want this plan to actually be a living, breathing document that makes a difference for children, and that means there has to be more concrete targets that have to be developed so over the next six years we can measure implementation, whether it’s working, whether it’s not working and the plan doesn’t give us that at the moment.”

Council leader Cammy Day said: “Given what we’ve heard this morning I think we’ll ask to continue this report to allow you to meet with the officers to resolve some of these issues before we make a final decision on the BSL plan.”

The SNP’s Kate Campbell said she was “really shocked” at the deputations given, saying they raised “a lot of questions” for the council.

SNP group leader Simita Kumar asked: “How did we get this so wrong?”

Policy officer Elanor Cunningham said in response the council had just six months to create the new BSL plan following publication of the Scottish Government’s.

“It’s recognised broadly that this timescale is very limiting which is why we have taken the approach that we have, which is

to provide a high level report saying these are the actions we will take over the next six years and we will now develop a detailed implementation plan.”

By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter