

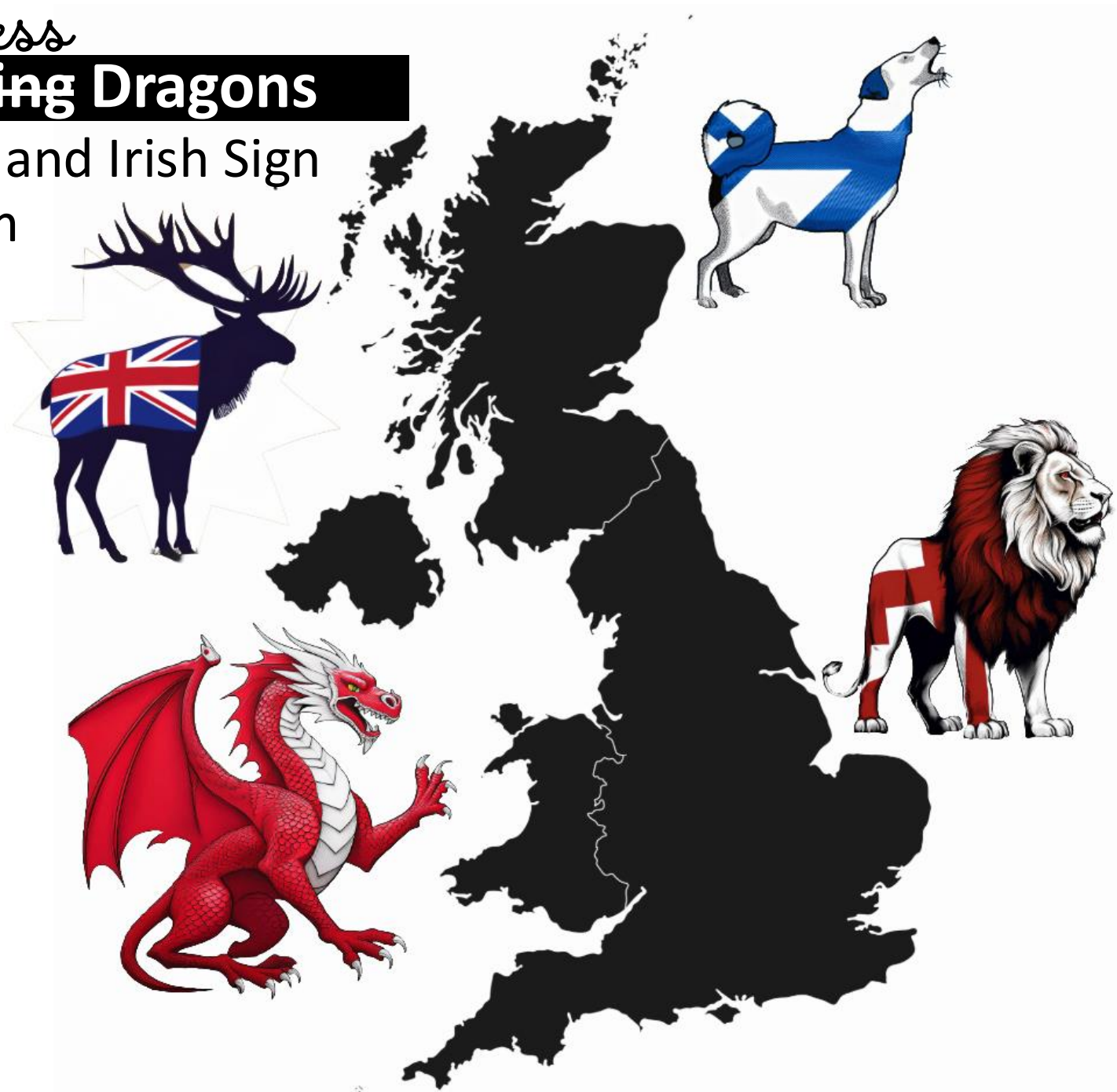
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From Barking Dogs to Roaring Dragons

The Legal Recognition of British and Irish Sign Language in the United Kingdom

Presented by

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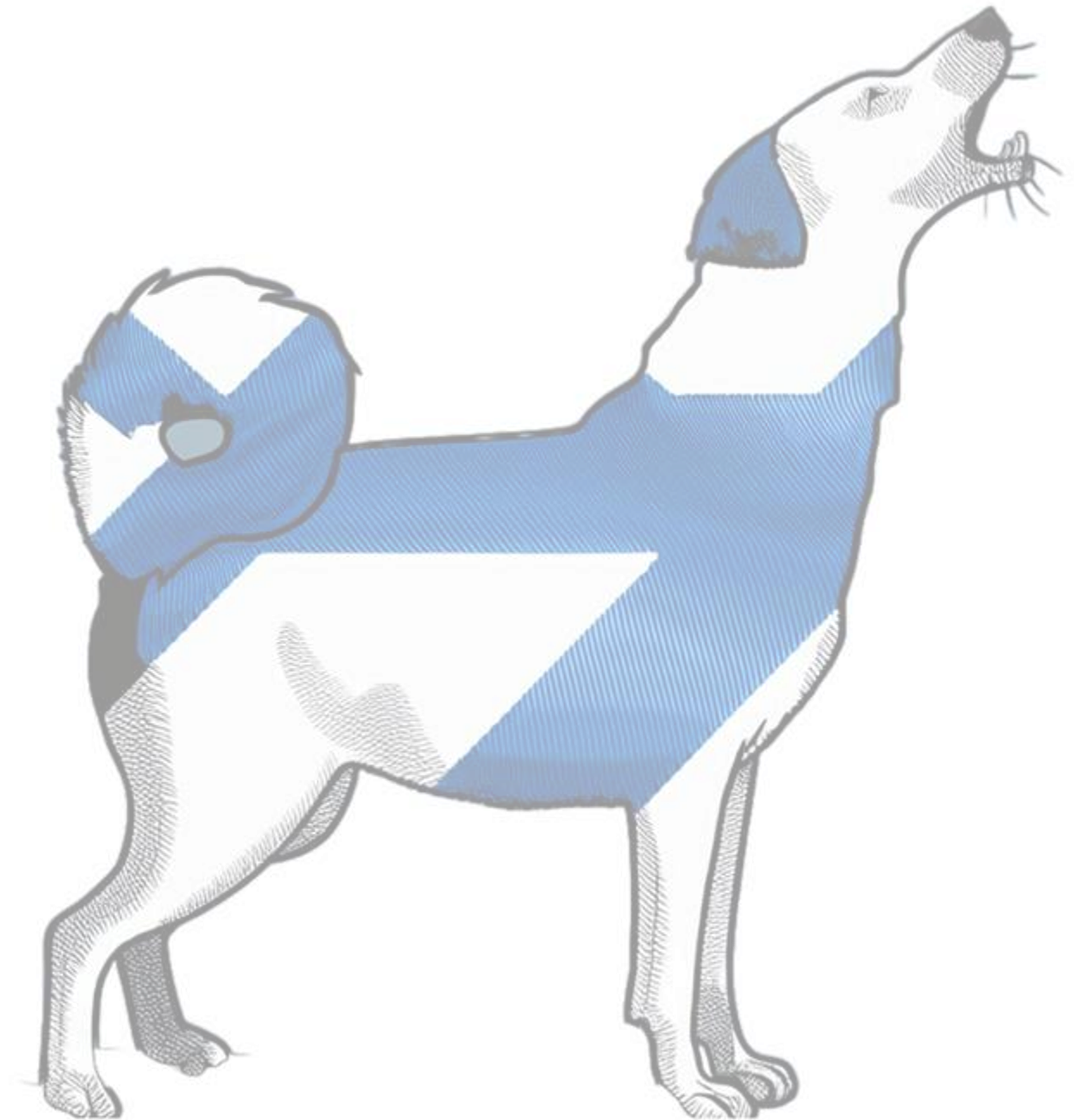


21 February 2025

BSL (Scotland) Act 2015

- Aims to promote use and understanding of BSL
- Requires the Scottish Government to prepare and publish a national plan in relation to BSL, which is expected to set out their BSL strategy
- Requires public authorities
 - to prepare and publish own BSL plans
 - setting out measures to be taken in relation to the use of BSL
- Scottish Government must publish national plan every six years
- Similar to Gaelic, Act does not establish any rights in education, even though this was a key concern of deaf campaigners

(De Meulder et al, 2019; Wilks, 2020; Wilks & O'Neill, 2021, 2022)



National Plan 2017-2023

10 long-term goals, 70 actions

"Make Scotland the best place in the world for BSL signers to live, work, and visit."

Public services – ensure accessibility across all public services

Health and Mental Wellbeing – improve BSL access in health and mental health services

Transport – make public transportation fully accessible to BSL signers

Justice system – ensure BSL users can fully engage with legal and court systems

Culture and arts – promote BSL inclusion in cultural and artistic spaces

Education and family Support – embed BSL support in early years, schools, and post-school education

Vocational training and employment – increase career opportunities and workplace accessibility

Social security – ensure BSL accessibility in social security services

Democratic and public life – promote participation of BSL signers in political and civic spaces

BSL interpretation and Infrastructure – address interpreter shortages and improve access

- Broad claims, little data
- Education improvements – BSL qualifications expanded, but student participation unknown
- Employment support lacks follow-up – 608 deaf individuals supported but no job placement data
- Health services still developing – NHS provides BSL materials, but user feedback missing
- Cultural access limited – some BSL event inclusion, but little evidence of effectiveness
- Interpreting crisis unresolved – interpreter shortages acknowledged, but no action plan
- Inconsistent public body compliance – some authorities failed to publish BSL plans, with no enforcement

National Plan 2023-2029

10 long-term goals, 45 actions

"Make Scotland the best place in the world for BSL signers to live, work, visit, *and learn.*"

BSL data strategy – establish sustainable data collection for informed policymaking

BSL professional shortages – address the lack of interpreters and tutors to improve access

Early language and development – mitigate language deprivation and enhance early-years support

Public services accessibility – embed BSL into everyday public service provision

Health and social care – ensure BSL-accessible services for social and healthcare needs

Education and family support – strengthen support for children, young people, and families

Employment and workplace inclusion – improve job accessibility and career opportunities for BSL signers

Transport and justice access – enhance accessibility in transport and the legal system.

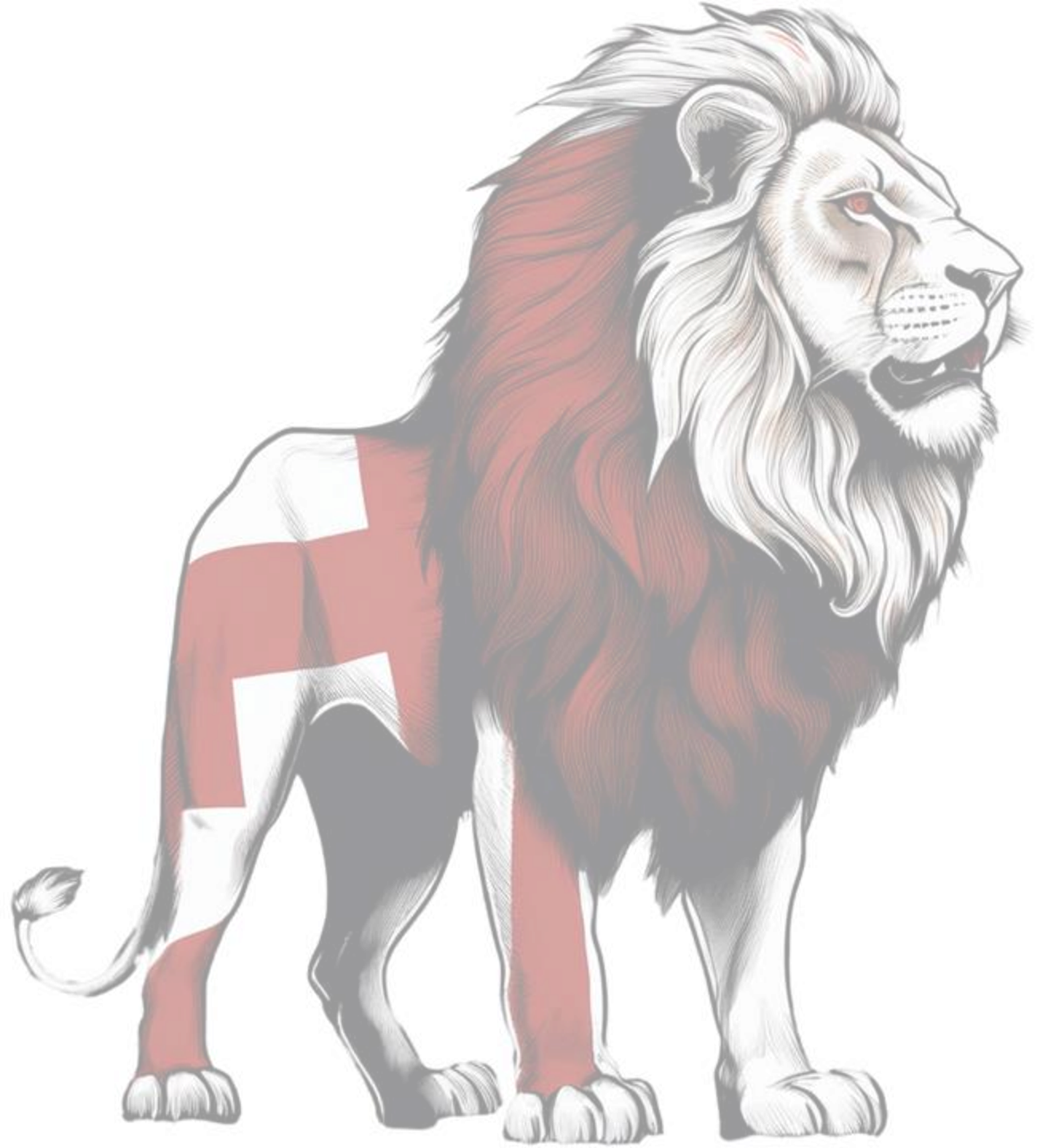
Cultural and heritage promotion – celebrate and expand Scotland's BSL culture in arts and heritage

Accountability and co-production – work closely with BSL signers for transparent progress tracking

- 71% compliance rate – most authorities met deadline, but only 62% provided BSL versions
- Reliance on third parties – many plans focus on Contact Scotland BSL rather than direct public service responsibility
- Education and healthcare prioritised – stronger commitments to early language acquisition and mental health services
- Gaps in employment, transport, and justice – lack clear commitments
- Need for co-production – advocates for ongoing engagement with BSL signers in policy development
- Transparent reporting and data collection – calls for clearer metrics, better service quality tracking, and stronger accountability
- Deafblind services require more support – urges additional resources and recognition for deafblind needs

BSL Act 2022

- Came into force 28 June 2022
- Recognises BSL as language of England, Wales and Scotland
- Northern Ireland expressly not covered
- Requires SoS for DWP to prepare and publish BSL reports every 3 years
- SoS has duties to promote and facilitate use of BSL
- Each government department also required to do so in communications with public
- Guidance for promotion or facilitation
- Non-statutory board, BSL Advisory Board
- Predominantly covers England



The impact of the BSL Act 2022

BSL Advisory Board

- 17 members appointed by the Minister for Disabled People for 3 years
- Subgroups - media, interpreters, cross-government communication, health and social care, education
- Meetings and transparency issues - 7 meetings held, but lack of full records and delayed statutory guidance make assessing impact difficult

Limited transparency, uncertain effectiveness, and an unclear role in shaping BSL policy

National reports

- Two reports published – June 2022-April 2023 and May 2023-April 2024
- Reports lack specificity and accountability
- Number of recorded activities doubled from 76 (2022-23) to 176 (2023-24)
- Engagement inconsistent across departments (Home Office and DWP increased; 5 departments none)
- No clear criteria for what is translated; random selection of content (e.g., cost of living, royal events, domestic violence)
- Reports conflate BSL with disability rather than language
- No centralised strategy – different departments producing separate BSL guidelines with no cohesion

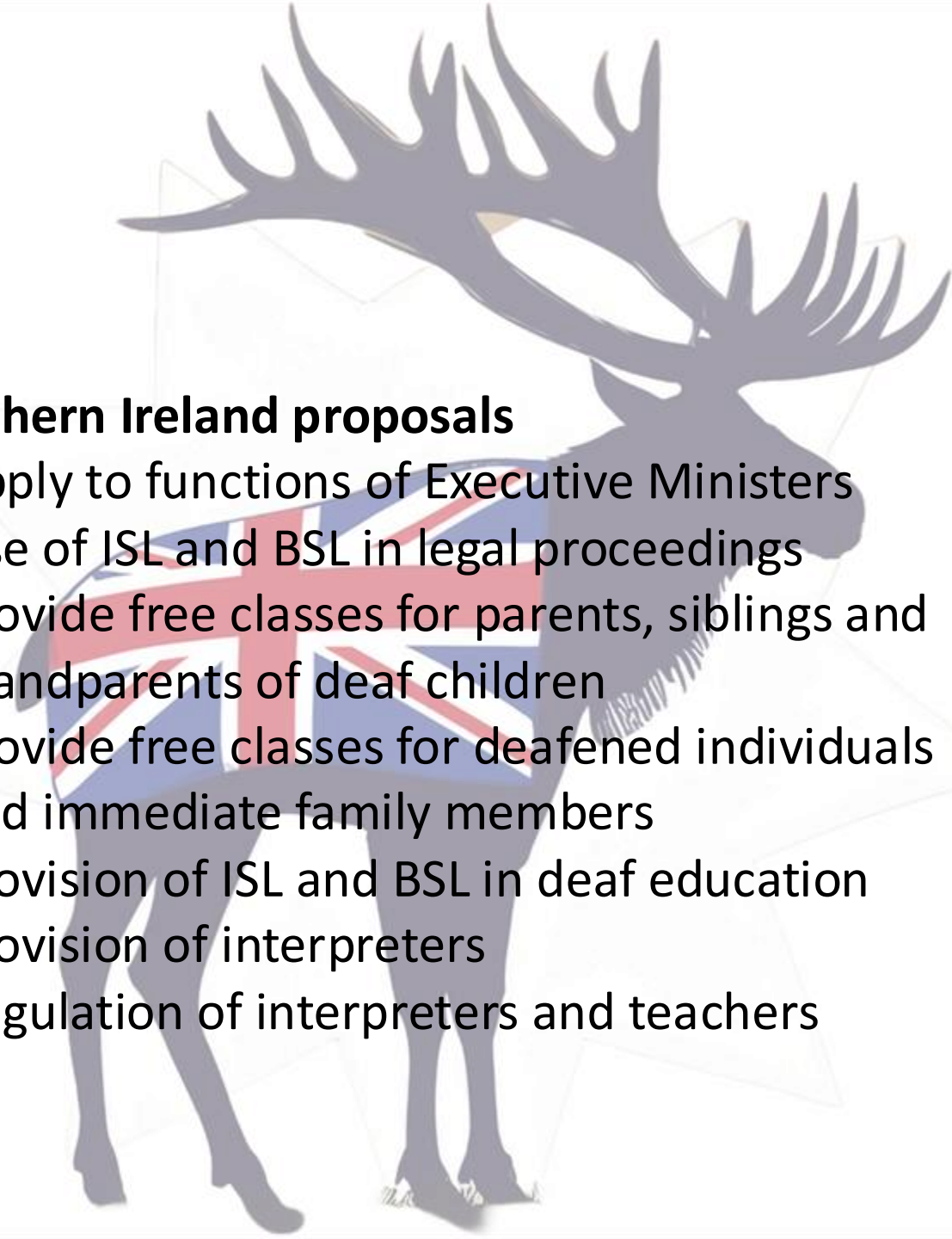


A BSL Act for Northern Ireland?

- BSL and ISL recognised as minority languages in March 2004 by then SoS for Northern Ireland
- Sign Language Framework in March 2016 contained policy proposals for legislation
- Power-sharing executive collapsed in January 2017, rebuilt February 2024
- Referenced in New Decade New Approach agreement in January 2020
- Communities Minister Gordon Lyons outlines plan for development of SLs in February 2024
 - Develop policy, increase number of interpreters
 - Executive approval to introduce bill to assembly
 - Funding for Foyle Deaf Association to provide interpreter training
 - Talks with Queens' University to provide academic route to qualification
- NI Executive has agreed to introduce bill to Assembly in February 2025

Northern Ireland proposals

- Apply to functions of Executive Ministers
- Use of ISL and BSL in legal proceedings
- Provide free classes for parents, siblings and grandparents of deaf children
- Provide free classes for deafened individuals and immediate family members
- Provision of ISL and BSL in deaf education
- Provision of interpreters
- Regulation of interpreters and teachers

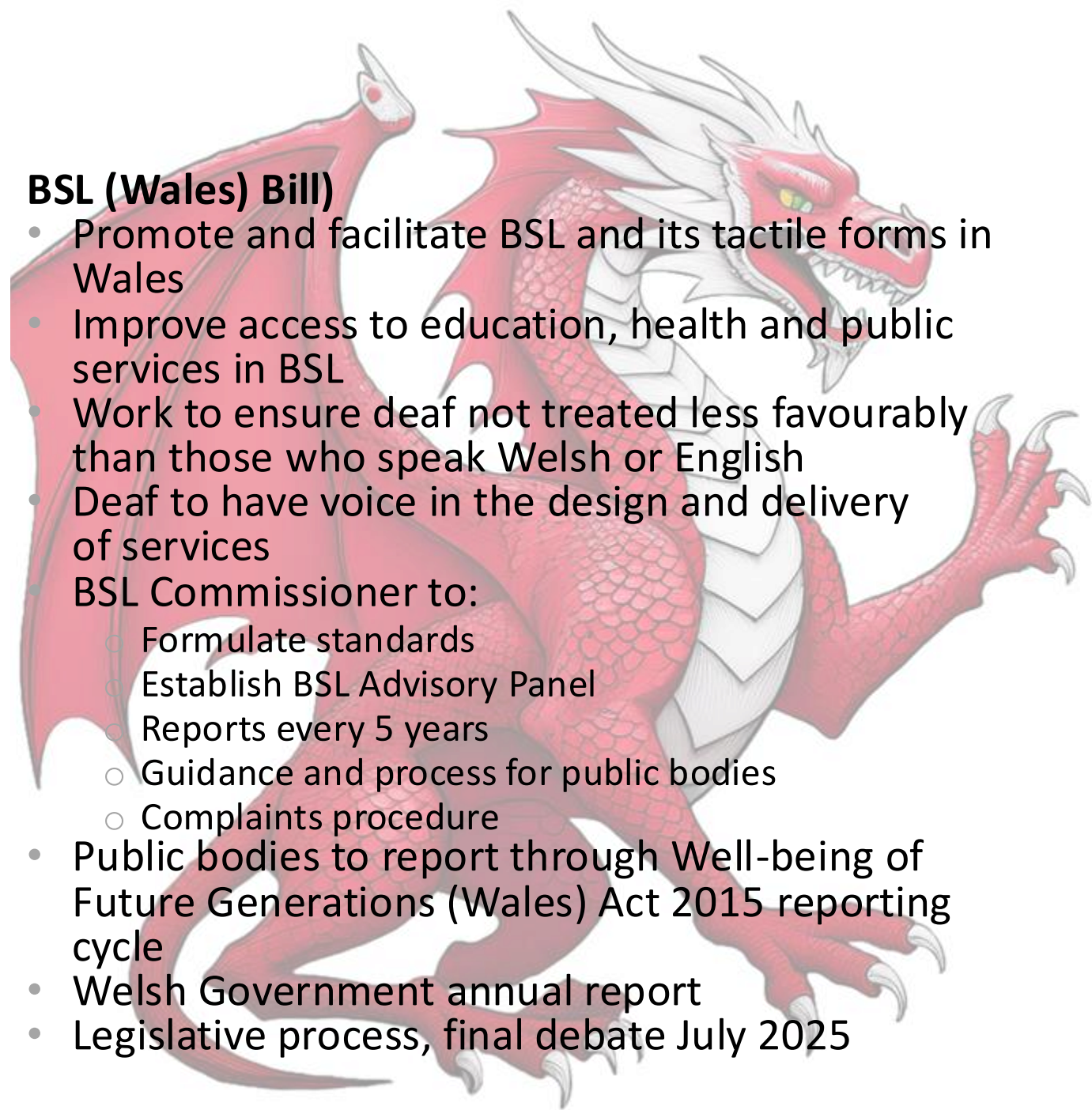


A BSL Act for Wales?

- Campaign for a BSL Act in Wales since 1999
- BSL Futures project 2006
- Deffo!, deaf youth forum Senedd petition in 2019 to improve access to education and services – no further action taken
- Motion by Mark Isherwood MS in February 2021
- Motion by Mark Isherwood MS in December 2022
- British Deaf Association's BSL audit of Welsh Government published 14 February 2023
- Mark Isherwood MS' BSL private member bill picked in ballot in April 2024
- 20 June 2024 – Senedd passed proposal, but Welsh Government opposes, campaign underway
- January 2025 – consultation ended, issues with process

BSL (Wales) Bill

- Promote and facilitate BSL and its tactile forms in Wales
- Improve access to education, health and public services in BSL
- Work to ensure deaf not treated less favourably than those who speak Welsh or English
- Deaf to have voice in the design and delivery of services
- BSL Commissioner to:
 - Formulate standards
 - Establish BSL Advisory Panel
 - Reports every 5 years
 - Guidance and process for public bodies
 - Complaints procedure
- Public bodies to report through Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 reporting cycle
- Welsh Government annual report
- Legislative process, final debate July 2025



Conclusions

Scotland – loud in presence, but lacking real bite with limited practical impact

England – powerful in symbolism but confined by legislative limits

Northern Ireland - slow but steady, political obstacles and delayed progress, but moving towards real change

Wales – muted yet determined community striving for recognition, BSL Bill has potential to be strong if passed



*Loud but
powerless*



*Slow steps
towards
change*



*Recognised
but
restrained*



*Muted but
determined*