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Sign Language Bill (Northern Ireland) 2025

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This paper provides Members with analysis of the Sign Language Bill (Northern Ireland) 2025, introduced to the Assembly on 10 February 2025. It includes recommendations for further scrutiny and draws comparisons with equivalent legislation in Great Britain and Ireland.

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Key Points

1. The Sign Language Bill (Northern Ireland) 2025 was approved by the Executive on 23 January 2025 and introduced to the Northern Ireland Assembly on 10 February 2025. The second stage was completed on 18 February 2025.
2. The Bill contains fifteen clauses and seeks to enhance the rights and opportunities of all British and Irish sign language users in Northern Ireland to ensure greater accessibility to services and information in their preferred languages. It also recognises the deaf community as a cultural and linguistic minority group, reflecting the cultural and social models of deafness.
3. At present, deaf sign language users may have to identify as disabled to access communication services. No other linguistic minority must do this to access services in their language. Neither the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 nor Disability Discrimination Order (NI) 2006 is an appropriate legislative instrument for cultural and linguistic recognition, as neither supports deaf communities to develop deaf culture or provide early years classes for deaf children and their support networks.
4. Clause 3(1) of the Bill imposes a legally binding duty on all “prescribed organisations” — including all Northern Ireland departments and public bodies — to take “all reasonable steps” to ensure information and services are equally accessible to deaf individuals as to non-deaf individuals. This requirement applies irrespective of whether a user identifies as disabled, reframing accessibility as a linguistic right rather than a disability accommodation.
5. Northern Ireland’s Sign Language Bill is an enabling Bill, providing powers to the Department for Communities to make regulations approved by resolution, including negative resolution, of the Assembly. The negative resolution procedure provides minimal legislative oversight, as regulations are not debated unless specifically challenged by Assembly Members.
6. Further considerations include the lack of explicit identification of cross-cutting governance and delivery mechanisms to enable, for example, a joined-up approach to implementation across Executive Departments and give effect to

commitments given in other relevant strategies. An example of such a mechanism was a [national planning framework](#) mandated by the BSL (Scotland) 2015 Act.

7. As DfC's engagement with the deaf community is ongoing, no further formal consultation is planned for the Bill itself. Consultation on DfC's Sign Language Framework was conducted in 2016 and was not publicly reported on. However, this consultation may be considered outdated given the Bill's introduction in 2025. The lack of further formal consultation may limit opportunities for Members to address recent developments or concerns from the deaf community.
8. Considering clauses 5, subsection 3(b) and clause 8, subsection 1(b), where the Department must consult "with at least one person or group" representing the deaf community, the effectiveness of ongoing engagement methods in capturing diverse perspectives within the deaf community could be examined further.
9. The Sign Language Bill is being introduced at a challenging time for the Northern Ireland Executive Budget. The Bill's Explanatory and Financial Memorandum contains limited financial information. It notes there will be no immediate costs, but adds costs could incur at a later point should the Department for Communities use the enabling powers set out in the Bill. The reliance on secondary legislation may limit the Committee's capacity to scrutinise those costs in the future.
10. There are a number of apparent unknowns that make it difficult to estimate the financial impact of the Bill. Key provisions, including which public bodies will be designated as "prescribed organisations" and the guidance they will be required to follow are unknown at this point. Evidence from the Department suggests that the Bill will have implications across the public sector.
11. Additionally, it is unclear at this time: the extent other Northern Ireland Departments and Public Bodies are currently facilitating access to information and services from the deaf community; how "prescribed organisations" will interpret "reasonable steps" with regard to complying with the duties set out in the Bill; and the precise number of British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language users in Northern Ireland. Each of these factors may affect the impact the Bill has on the "public purse".

12. The Bill does not outline dedicated funding for promotion activities, which could hinder implementation. Although the Bill mentions promoting "the further development of deaf culture," it does not provide specific measures or requirements for cultural promotion.
13. The Bill mentions the continuing educational requirements of deaf children and young people but doesn't detail the specific supports to be provided. For example, a consideration about the provision of early years sign language classes is the number of qualified teachers of deaf children (TODs) in Northern Ireland. According to a [2024 CRIDE report](#), there are fewer than 50 qualified teachers of deaf children and over 1600 deaf children in Northern Ireland schools.
14. The reliance on negative resolution allows for changes to be made to the list of "prescribed organisations" without a full legislative review. This could lead to inconsistencies in how different public bodies implement their duties under the Act, potentially disadvantaging some BSL and ISL users.
15. The Bill mandates the Department for Communities to publish 5-yearly reports but does not specify metrics to be used to assess the impact of the legislation.

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1 Introduction

The Sign Language Bill (Northern Ireland) 2025 was approved by the Executive on 23 January 2025 and introduced to the Northern Ireland Assembly on 10 February 2025. The second stage was completed on 18 February 2025.

The purpose of the Bill is to recognise and promote British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL) as official languages of Northern Ireland, giving them equal status. The Bill's primary objectives include:

- **Official Recognition:** It formally acknowledges BSL and ISL as languages of Northern Ireland, ensuring they are treated with equal status and respect.
- **Promotion and Development:** The Department for Communities is tasked with promoting the greater use and understanding of BSL and ISL. This includes planning for classes taught by accredited teachers, particularly for deaf children and their families.
- **Cultural Development:** The Bill supports the development of deaf culture through the use of BSL and ISL, recognising the deaf community as a cultural and linguistic minority group.
- **Accessibility and Inclusion:** It requires prescribed organisations to take reasonable steps to ensure that their services and information are accessible to the deaf community, similar to those available to the hearing community.
- **Accreditation:** The Bill provides for the accreditation of BSL and ISL interpreters and teachers to ensure professional competence.

Overall, the Bill seeks to enhance the rights and opportunities of sign language users in Northern Ireland to ensure greater accessibility to services and information in their preferred languages.

2 Current legislative framework

Equality law in Great Britain was consolidated in the [Equality Act 2010](#). However, this legislation for the most part does not extend to Northern Ireland, which retains separate laws on individual grounds or characteristics. Northern Ireland therefore was not covered by the [British Sign Language Act 2022](#).

The [Disability Discrimination Act 1995](#), amended by the [Disability Discrimination \(Northern Ireland\) Order 2006](#) introduced provisions against discrimination by local authorities and in public transport and provides for the prohibition of discrimination against disabled people in the areas of employment and goods, facilities and services. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 states that suppliers of goods, services and facilities are expected to make “reasonable adjustments” by assisting or making changes to the way services are offered. In practice, this means that, by law, it is the service provider, not the deaf person, who must arrange a sign language interpreter if one is required. However, this means that deaf sign language users may have to identify as disabled to access communication services. In addition to the 1995 Act, other legislation for the protection of deaf people includes the [Northern Ireland Act 1998, where Section 75](#) provides for public authorities to have “due regard” for the promotion of equality of opportunity between those with a disability and those without. However, at a Communities Committee meeting on [Thursday 6 February 2025](#), DfC officials outlined how neither the DDA 1995 nor DDO (NI) 2006 was an appropriate legislative instrument for cultural and linguistic recognition, as neither supports deaf communities to develop deaf culture or provide classes for deaf children and their support networks.

The [Northern Ireland Sign Language Bill](#) as introduced, addresses this cultural-linguistic framework by formally recognising British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL) users as a protected minority group. The legislation mandates that public services employ “all reasonable steps” to provide accessible information and professional interpretation at no cost to users (clause 3, subsection 2a), decoupling linguistic access from disability classifications. This approach reframes sign language rights as a matter of cultural equity rather than medical accommodation, aligning with the [UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#)’ emphasis on “full and effective participation in society”. By requiring

proactive measures without necessitating self-identification as disabled, the Bill acknowledges deaf communities' dual status: as a marginalised linguistic group deserving targeted support and as a cultural collective with inherent rights to autonomy and expression.

2.1 Timeline of Northern Ireland Sign Language Bill Development

Below is a brief timeline of events leading to the introduction of this Bill:

1991 [World Federation of the Deaf](#) resolution calling on national associations to pursue the official recognition of sign languages.

1995 [Disability Discrimination Act](#) passed.

2004 Northern Ireland Secretary of State announces formal recognition of ISL and BSL.

2006 [The Disability Discrimination \(Northern Ireland\) Order 2006](#).

2009 UK ratification of the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) (UNCRPD).

2006 Equality Act 2010 (does not apply to Northern Ireland). DCAL commissions a consultation report on the strategic direction of its Sign Language Partnership Group.

2012 At a British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly meeting Senator Keane proposed a motion calling on the parliaments of Ireland and the United Kingdom to recognise their signed languages.

2014 DCAL commissions a [review report to assess the progress](#) of the 10-year Roadmap.

2015 Minister announces intention to publish and consult on a framework for promoting sign language.

2016 Pre-consultations completed. A [16-week public consultation](#) process launched.

2020 Annex E of [New Decade, New Approach Agreement](#) includes sign language legislation proposals. Minister announces [£430,000 of funding for Sign Language sector](#) impacted by COVID-19.

2025 [Sign Language Bill Introduced](#)

3 Summary of Models of Deafness

This summary outlines three predominant models that influence sign language legislation and policy development relevant to scrutiny of Northern Ireland's Sign Language Bill.

3.1 Three Models:

3.1.1 Cultural Model

The cultural model conceptualises sign language users as a cultural and linguistic minority community rather than a disability group. This perspective was first formalised when Carl Croneberg and others compared deaf and hearing cultures in their “Dictionary of American Sign Language” in 1965¹. The concept of “Deaf Gain”² followed from Carol Padden and Tom Humphries 2005 book “Inside Deaf Culture”, which recognised that the deaf community possesses its own distinctive behaviours, values, knowledge, and fluency in sign language. The cultural presents a stark contrast to a medical perception of deafness as a deficit or loss. Proponents of a cultural model advocate for dedicated deaf clubs and schools, seeing them as essential institutions for preserving sign languages and nurturing deaf culture. This approach emphasises the positive aspects of deaf identity rather than framing deafness as a condition to be overcome.

3.1.2 Social Model

The social model, as described by the Law Society of Scotland to a House of Lords Select Committee,³ noted that disability arises because society's norms are built around non-disabled people, resulting in services and facilities that fail to accommodate disabled individuals. This model identifies societal structures, environmental design, attitudes, and exclusions as the primary disabling factors that prevent deaf people from fully enjoying their fundamental rights and freedoms.

¹ William Stokoe, Dorothy Casterline and Carl Croneberg. [A Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles](#). United States: Gallaudet Press, 1965.

² Carol Padden and Tom Humphries. [Inside Deaf Culture](#). Harvard University Press, 2006.

³ 24 [HL Paper 117 Written evidence from the Law Society of Scotland \(EQD0063\)](#) 2016

According to this perspective, sign language users experience less or no disability when they have proper access to sign language. Advocates of the social model promote both integrations of people with disabilities with their non-disabled peers and the concept of [“Universal Design”](#), which the UNCRPD defines as creating products, environments, and services usable by all people without requiring specialised adaptations except where necessary for particular groups.

3.1.3 Medical Model

The medical model has traditionally approached deafness as an impairment for individuals to overcome. This perspective assumes that disabilities like deafness inherently diminish the quality of life, and therefore focuses on "fixing" or mitigating the condition through interventions such as cochlear implants, hearing aids, assistive listening devices, and lip reading. This model has historically dominated policy approaches, and there continues to be debate about whether legislation like the UNCRPD, the Disability Discrimination Act, and the Equality Act reflect a medical or social understanding of disability. The medical model primarily emphasises clinical solutions rather than societal adaptations or cultural recognition.

3.2 Best practices in sign language legislation:

Considering the cultural and social understandings of sign language legislation and based on international examples ([New Zealand](#), [Finland](#), [Austria](#), [Hungary](#)), best practices⁴ in sign language legislation include:

- Legal recognition and promotion of national sign languages
- Provisions for education in national sign languages
- Teaching of national sign languages
- Funding and accreditation of interpreters
- Promotion of deaf linguistic and cultural identity
- Involvement of the deaf community in decision-making processes

⁴ British Deaf Association; [Legal Status for BSL and ISL](#), 2014

3.2.1 Considerations for Northern Ireland's Sign Language Bill

When scrutinising the Sign Language Bill, Members may wish to consider:

1. Which model(s) the legislation primarily reflects.
2. Whether the Bill adequately recognises cultural aspects alongside accessibility needs.
3. How directly the deaf community has been and are involved in its continual development.
4. How the Bill aligns with international best practices.

This information should help inform scrutiny of the proposed legislation's approach, terminology, and provisions.

3.3 Consultation – Nothing about us, without us

In the Bill's explanatory and financial memorandum (EFM), it states that there is no further formal consultation planned for the Bill. A 2016 consultation exercise is described in the EFM as follows:

- The Bill's policy proposals were subject to an extensive and fully BSL/ISL inclusive sixteen weeks public consultation in 2016.

DfC officials have confirmed via correspondence⁵ with RalSe on 11 February 2025, that a consultation report was not published following the 2016 consultation. From consultation responses published online by organisations such as the British Deaf Association (BDA)⁶, the questions included in the 2016 consultation stated draft Bill proposals and asked if the consultee agreed. For example:

⁵ DfC correspondence with RalSe, 11 February 2025

⁶ BDA [Sign Language Framework Response – Northern Ireland BSL/ISL Framework](#), 2016

Question 1: It is proposed that Irish Sign Language and British Sign Language be recognised and defined as Official Languages in the north in such a way as to guarantee services through Irish Sign Language and British Sign Language on a par with those available through English. **Do you agree with this proposal?**

The secondment to DfC from the BDA of a deaf sign language user during the development of Bill proposals, and engagement with the Sign Language Partnership Group (SLPG) was also described in the EFM. The SLPG is chaired by the Department for Communities. Its membership has not been possible to confirm by RalSe at the time of writing. Given the best practice approach of “nothing about us, without us” and the amount of consultation that may be required in the preparation of frameworks, regulations, reporting mechanisms, sign language classes and teacher/interpreter accreditation provisions, Members may wish to further consider the [proposed mechanisms for consultation](#) and mitigations against the risks of “consultation fatigue” for members of the SLPG and the broader deaf community in Northern Ireland.

Potential scrutiny point:

Members may wish to consider asking DfC officials about terms of reference for the SLPG. During the second reading of the BSL 2022 Sign Language Act, the UK Government agreed to the creation of [a non-statutory board of BSL users](#) to advise the UK Government on matters relating to sign language.

4 Clause by clause analysis: Northern Ireland Sign Language Bill 2025

4.1 Clause 1 – Official recognition of sign languages

The Northern Ireland Sign Language Bill is unique in its dual recognition of both BSL and ISL, reflecting the bilingual nature of the local Deaf community. The Northern Ireland Sign Language Bill, introduced on 10 February 2025, establishes statutory obligations for public bodies to ensure accessible service provision for British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL) users. This legislative framework moves beyond symbolic recognition, embedding requirements for linguistic accessibility across public services.

Statutory Duties Under Part 1 of the Bill - Mandatory "Reasonable Steps" Requirement

Clause 3(1) of the Bill imposes a legally binding duty on all “prescribed organisations” — including all Northern Ireland departments and public bodies—to take “all reasonable steps” to ensure their information and services are equally accessible to deaf individuals as to non-deaf individuals. This requirement applies irrespective of whether a user identifies as disabled, reframing accessibility as a linguistic right rather than a disability accommodation.

The Irish Sign Language Act includes enforceable rights, mandating free interpretation services, while Scotland’s legislation bridges symbolic recognition with practical implementation through mandatory planning frameworks.

Clause 1 of the Northern Ireland Sign Language Bill provides important symbolic recognition for both BSL and ISL.

4.1.1 Different approaches to sign language legislation

According to the [British Deaf Association](#), different approaches to sign language legislation internationally have included:

- Constitutional Recognition
- Official Recognition
- Legal Recognition

The Northern Ireland Sign Language Bill includes official and legal forms of recognition.

4.1.2 Comparison of NI Bill to Legislation in Ireland, Scotland, and Great Britain

Appendix 1 of this paper includes a summary table comparing provisions proposed for sign language legislation in Northern Ireland with sign language acts passed in Scotland (2015), Ireland (2017) and Great Britain (2022).

4.1.3 Different approaches to recognition:

The NI proposals include recognition, protection, and promotion of ISL and BSL.

- The Irish Sign Language Act 2017 recognises the right of ISL users to use their native language, placing a duty on public bodies to provide free interpretation.
- The British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 recognises different forms of BSL.
- The British Sign Language Act 2022 recognises BSL users as a linguistic minority rather than solely a disability group, though the Act operates alongside the Equality Act 2010's "reasonable adjustments" requirements. It does not override existing duties but supplements them by mandating proactive measures to integrate BSL into public communications.
- A [British Sign Language \(BSL\) \(Wales\) Bill](#) seeks to expand protections offered in the British Sign Language (BSL) Act 2022, with an aim to establish a BSL language commissioner, with powers similar to the Welsh language commissioner. At the time of writing, a draft of the Welsh Bill had not been published.

4.1.4 The Role of the Department for Communities (DfC)

DfC is the lead department for BSL and ISL, with the function falling under its cultural and linguistic policy remit. DfC provides chair and secretariat roles to the Sign Language Partnership Group (SLPG), comprised of representatives from the deaf community and Executive departments.

4.2 Clause 2 – Promotion of interests by lead department

The Sign Language Bill (Northern Ireland) 2025 requires the Department for Communities to promote British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL),

but there are some potential considerations with the language used to describe this approach.

The Bill states that the Department must promote "to such extent (and in such manner) as the Department considers appropriate". This leaves room for interpretation and may result in inconsistent or insufficient promotion efforts.

The Bill does not outline dedicated funding for promotion activities, which could hinder implementation. Although the Bill mentions promoting "the further development of deaf culture", it does not provide specific measures or requirements for cultural promotion. Ireland's Sign Language Act created enforceable rights for sign language users, such as free interpretation services. Apart from a 5-year reporting cycle, the NI Bill does not set concrete goals or deadlines for promotion activities, potentially reducing accountability.

Much of the practical implementation depends on guidance to be issued by the Department, which may lead to delays or inconsistencies in promotion efforts. These issues may perhaps limit the effectiveness of the Department's promotion efforts and the overall impact of the Bill on the status and use of BSL and ISL in Northern Ireland.

The use of "or" instead of "and" in Clause 2(1)(b) and Clause 2(2) of the Northern Ireland Sign Language Bill potentially introduces interpretative risks that could undermine the legislation's intent to ensure equitable support for British Sign Language (BSL) **and** Irish Sign Language (ISL). A public body might argue that providing services in either BSL or ISL fulfils the duty, even if a user requires the other language. This potentially contravenes the Bill's aim to recognise both languages as equal. Also, the phrase "necessary **or** convenient" in Clause 2(1)(b) compounds ambiguity.

In Clause 2(2), one sign language could be prioritised over the other in class offerings, citing the "or" as discretionary. By contrast, Scotland's BSL Act 2015 uses "and" when referencing language promotion duties, ensuring parity between English

and BSL. According to research by Parks and Parks⁷, cited by [DfC in its EFM](#), deaf families in Northern Ireland use both BSL and ISL depending on regional or community contexts. The "or" perhaps does not account for scenarios where bilingual education is required, potentially running contrary to [CRPD Article 24](#) (education rights). The UK-wide BSL Act uses "and" when linking duties to promote BSL with other equality frameworks, ensuring cumulative obligations.

A consideration about the provision of sign language classes is the number of qualified teachers of deaf children (TODs) in Northern Ireland. According to a [2024 CRIDE report](#), there are fewer than 50 teachers of deaf children and over 1600 children reported as deaf in Northern Ireland schools. Of the Teachers of deaf children in Northern Ireland, 61% of posts were occupied by fully qualified TODs, 17% were occupied by teachers in training for the mandatory qualification, and 23% were occupied by qualified teachers without the mandatory qualification and not in training.

4.2.1 Provision of qualified teachers for deaf children

[DfC's Sign Language Framework](#) highlighted a lack of supply of ISL/BSL teachers qualifying to meet the demand for sign language classes. In 2014, the Department of Education provided funding for a two-year postgraduate certificate of education course for [15 deaf ISL/BSL teachers at Ulster University](#). This was a one-off funding stream.

The provision of online classes requires consideration of people who are at particular risk of not accessing the service and its benefits, these may include: older members of the deaf child's support network, those living in remote rural areas with poor internet infrastructure, people who are not competent or confident in the use of technology, and those in low-income households with limited access to suitable digital devices.

In its consultation response to DfC's 2016 Sign Languages Framework proposals, [The National Deaf Children's Society \(NDCS\)](#) highlighted its provision of a [Family](#)

⁷ Jason Parks and Elizabeth Parks, [A survey report of the deaf people of Northern Ireland](#). SIL International. 2012

[Sign Language course](#) as an early-stage intervention for deaf children and their families. The NDCS also noted that the [SEN-statemented attachment](#) of a classroom learning support coordinator (LSC) to a deaf child limits the contact time with [a qualified Teacher of the Deaf](#). NDCS recommended regulating the training of LSCs of deaf children and ongoing training provisions as pedagogy and technology develop.

Potential scrutiny point:

Members may therefore wish to consult with DfC officials about whether future **teaching** resources have been modelled to provide classes for deaf children and their support networks, particularly if BSL/ISL classes are to be offered to all, as discussed at the Communities Committee meeting on 6 February 2025.

4.2.2 Provision of qualified BSL/ISL teachers

Considering long-term workforce planning and teacher training of ISL/BSL teachers, Members may wish to note that in October 2024, plans to introduce a BSL GCSE in Welsh schools were suspended by Qualification Wales, due to several challenges, including a shortage of qualified BSL teachers.⁸

4.3 Clause 3 – Organisations to take reasonable steps

Clause 3 of the Northern Ireland Sign Language Bill focuses on requiring organisations to take “reasonable steps” to ensure accessibility for the deaf community. Here's a comparison of NI provisions with other jurisdictions:

Sign Language Bill (Northern Ireland) 2025 - Clause 3:

- Requires “prescribed organisations” to take “reasonable steps” to ensure information and services are as accessible to the deaf community as they are to others.

⁸ BBC Wales News, [Sign Language GCSE scrapped](#), October 2024

- Does not specify exact measures, leaving interpretation of "reasonable steps" to guidance issued by the Department for Communities.

British Sign Language Act 2022 - Section 3

- Requires the Secretary of State to issue guidance on the promotion and facilitation of BSL use.
- Does not impose direct obligations on organisations to take steps for accessibility.

British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015

- Requires public bodies to develop BSL plans aligned with the National BSL Plan.
- More prescriptive than the Northern Ireland Bill in mandating specific actions from a list of public bodies.

Irish Sign Language Act 2017 (Ireland)

- Mandates public bodies to provide free ISL interpretation for accessing statutory entitlements and services.
- Creates enforceable rights for ISL users, which is not present in the Northern Ireland Bill.

Considerations:

The [best practice guidance on providing public services to deaf sign language users currently on the Department for Communities website](#)⁹ was published between 2006 and 2007 by the former Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. At this time, Peter Hain MP was Northern Ireland Secretary of State and Maria Eagle MP was Minister for Culture, Arts and Leisure in Northern Ireland. It could be suggested that the Northern Ireland Bill takes a middle-ground approach, mandating action from organisations but leaving the specifics to guidance, potentially allowing for more flexibility but perhaps risking inconsistent implementation.

⁹ DCAL [Best practice guidance on providing public services to deaf people who use British Sign Language or Irish Sign Language](#). 2006-2007.

4.4 Clause 4 – Organisations to be listed in regulations

Clause 4 of the Sign Language Bill (Northern Ireland) 2025 focuses on listing “prescribed organisations” in regulations, which will be subject to the duties outlined in the Bill, such as taking “reasonable steps” to ensure accessibility for BSL and ISL users. The clause allows for future amendments to the list of prescribed organisations through regulations, enabling adaptability over time.

The BSL 2022 Act does not include a clause equivalent to Clause 4. Instead, it applies broadly to [ministerial government departments](#) and requires them to report on their promotion and use of BSL in public communications. The BSL 2022 Act does not explicitly list or regulate specific organisations; its obligations are limited to government departments, leaving other public bodies unaffected.

The Scottish Act applies broadly to all “listed authorities,” which are defined in [schedules to existing legislation](#). These listed authorities are required to develop local BSL plans aligned with [Scotland’s National BSL Plan](#). The scope of listed authorities is fixed but comprehensive, covering a wide range of public bodies.

[The Irish Act imposes a general duty on all public bodies](#) to provide free ISL interpretation services for statutory entitlements and services. The Act applies universally to all public bodies without requiring a specific list or regulations. The Irish Act creates enforceable rights for ISL users. It could be suggested that Northern Ireland’s Clause 4 may lead to uneven implementation depending on which organisations are listed and how effectively they comply with their duties.

Clause 4 of the Northern Ireland Sign Language Bill 2025 allows the Department for Communities to make regulations listing prescribed organisations subject to the [negative resolution procedure](#), meaning they automatically become law unless annulled by a resolution of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Below are some considerations with this approach:

- The negative resolution procedure provides minimal legislative oversight, as regulations are not debated unless specifically challenged by Assembly Members. This could result in insufficient scrutiny of which organisations are included or excluded from the list of prescribed bodies.

- Decisions about which public bodies are obligated to comply with accessibility measures for BSL and ISL users may not receive adequate public or parliamentary examination.
- The flexibility to list prescribed organisations via regulations could lead to some public bodies being omitted, either unintentionally or due to lobbying pressures. Without robust scrutiny, there is a risk that certain sectors (e.g., private contractors delivering public services such as care homes and early years provisions) may not be held accountable for accessibility obligations.
- The reliance on negative resolution allows for changes to be made to the list of prescribed organisations without a full legislative review. This could lead to inconsistencies in how different public bodies implement their duties under the legislation, potentially disadvantaging some BSL and ISL users.
- While Clause 4 mandates consultation with stakeholders when drafting regulations, the negative resolution process does not ensure that stakeholder feedback will be adequately considered or debated in the Assembly.
- Deaf community representatives may feel excluded from meaningful participation in shaping how and where the legislation is applied.

The use of the negative resolution procedure in Clause 4 raises considerations about limited scrutiny, potential exclusion of key organisations, inconsistent implementation, and insufficient stakeholder involvement. Other jurisdictions, such as Scotland and Ireland, avoid these issues by applying their legislation universally or through pre-defined lists of public bodies.

Potential scrutiny point:

Members may wish to seek delegated powers advice from the Examiner of Statutory Rules

4.5 Clause 5 – Department to issue guidance

Clause 5 of the Sign Language Bill (Northern Ireland) 2025 focuses on the Department for Communities issuing guidance about the effect of the Act and related matters. The Northern Ireland Bill takes an approach to guidance that emphasises

stakeholder involvement and regular review, which is not as evident in similar legislation of other jurisdictions. In summary, Clause 5:

- Requires the Department for Communities to issue guidance on the effect of the Act and additional matters related to BSL “**or**” ISL, and deaf community interests.
- Allows the Department to review and revise guidance.
- Mandates consultation with “prescribed organisations” and “**at least one** person or group appearing to the Department to be acting on behalf of the deaf community” when devising or reviewing guidance.
- Requires prescribed organisations to “**have regard**” to the guidance when providing information and services.

British Sign Language Act 2022

- Requires the Secretary of State to issue guidance about the promotion and facilitation of BSL use.
- Does not specify consultation requirements or review processes.
- Applies to a range of entities, including government departments and public bodies.

British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015

- Does not have a direct equivalent to Clause 5.
- Instead, requires the creation of a National BSL Plan and corresponding authority plans.
- Guidance is implicit in the National Plan rather than being a separate requirement.

Irish Sign Language Act 2017

- Does not contain a specific clause on issuing guidance.
- Focuses more on direct provision of ISL services rather than guidance.

Northern Ireland's Bill is more specific about the content and process of issuing guidance compared to the BSL Act 2022. Northern Ireland mandates consultation with stakeholders, which is not explicitly required in other jurisdictions. Northern Ireland's Bill includes provisions for reviewing and revising guidance, which is not

specified in other Acts. Northern Ireland's guidance applies specifically to "prescribed organisations". Northern Ireland's guidance includes matters related to deaf community interests, which is not explicitly mentioned in other Acts.

Potential scrutiny points:

Members may wish to consider some of the language used. For example, as with Clause 2 the use of **BSL “or” ISL** may have unintended outcomes, as previously outlined.

Section 3(b) may require further consideration, where the Department must consult “with **at least one** person or group” while there is more than one sign language used in Northern Ireland (Parks and Parks, 2012).

4.6 Clause 6 – Best practice to be in guidance

Clause 6 of the Northern Ireland Sign Language Bill provides a detailed framework for issuing best practice guidance, emphasising practical steps like accessibility measures and action plans. It contrasts with the more general advisory approach in the BSL 2022 Act and Scotland's structured planning framework. While it offers flexibility and stakeholder engagement, it does not specify enforceable mechanisms like those found in Ireland's legislation, which prioritises direct service provision over advisory measures.

In comparison to Clause 4 of the Northern Ireland Bill, Clause 6 refers to a broader category of “public bodies” as well as “prescribed organisations”. It also defines “public bodies” as “persons or groups exercising functions of a public character”.

Potential scrutiny point:

Members may wish to ask DfC officials for clarification about the scope of this definition. For example, how does this affect private contractors carrying out services on behalf of a public body?

Compared to Clause 4, where consultation with “at least one” representative for the deaf community was mandated, there is no mention of this process in Clause 6. Also, the opportunity for members of the deaf community to choose a preferred mode of communication service is not described in this clause.

Opportunities for a “joined-up” approach to communication service provision is another consideration. During a [Communities Committee meeting on 4 March 2021](#), witnesses from the deaf community described how local users must access different video relay service (VRS) applications to connect with different public services. In Scotland, one VRS system is used for all public services in the jurisdiction. In a [2021 report on remote sign language service provided by HSC](#), a regional communication service was recommended and HSC has since engaged the [same VRS service provider as Scotland](#). However, not all deaf sign language users are comfortable or have access to the technology required to use video relay systems. The HSC 2021 report suggested:

Groups of people who are at particular risk of not accessing the service and its benefits include: older people, those living in remote rural areas with poor internet infrastructure, people who are not competent or confident in the use of technology, and those in low-income households with limited access to suitable digital devices.

Potential scrutiny point:

Members may wish to ask DfC officials what assurances there are to provide a choice of communication modalities based on the individual users' needs, considering English language users can choose between communication by post, telephone or email etc., when contacting public bodies.

4.7 Clause 7 – Department may make regulations

The Sign Language Bill contains enabling clauses that grant powers to the Department for Communities to make regulations and issue guidance. However, these clauses do not appear to fully support the practical implementation of official

status for Irish Sign Language (ISL) and British Sign Language (BSL) in Northern Ireland for the following reasons:

- **Limited statutory requirements:** The Bill recognises ISL and BSL as languages of Northern Ireland with equal status, but it does not impose explicit statutory requirements on public bodies to provide services in these languages.
- **Broad regulatory powers:** The Bill grants the Department for Communities power to make regulations and issue guidance, but these are not specifically tied to enforcing the use of sign languages in public services.
- **Lack of enforceable rights:** Unlike legislation such as Ireland's Irish Sign Language Act 2017, the Northern Ireland Bill does not create enforceable rights for sign language users to access services in ISL or BSL.
- **Focus on promotion rather than implementation:** The Bill emphasises promoting the use and understanding of sign languages, but does not mandate their use in official contexts.
- **Discretionary nature of duties:** The Bill requires “prescribed organisations” to take “reasonable steps” to make information and services accessible, but this leaves significant room for interpretation.

While the enabling clauses provide some flexibility for future implementation and includes “persons or groups appearing to be acting in the interests of the deaf community”, as well as “prescribed organisations”, they may not “confer functions (...) on Northern Ireland Departments” and therefore may not directly support the practical realisation of official language status for ISL and BSL in Northern Ireland. Without clarity, the approach in the Bill may provide symbolic recognition and promotion rather than creating a robust framework for official language use in public services and daily life. Also, the absence of a deadline for implementing regulations creates uncertainty and may increase the risk of delay.

4.8 Clause 8 – Procedure for making regulations

The approach described in Clause 8 differs from other jurisdictions, which rely on different mechanisms (reporting, national plans, direct service provision), to achieve objectives. The Northern Ireland Bill has a specific clause dedicated to the procedure

for making regulations, whereas the legislation in England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland does not. This highlights a different approach to implementation. Clause 8 places an emphasis on consultation before regulations are made, which is in keeping with international best practices for the provision of sign language legislation. Where regulations made under Chapter 2 limit or modify Part 1 of the Bill, they require approval by “a resolution of the Assembly” (subsection 3). According to delegated powers advice from the Assembly’s Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Committee for the Economy in 2022,¹⁰ – “the power to amend primary legislation by secondary legislation is known as a Henry VIII power and is a significant delegation of legislative power. It should not be used merely to provide flexibility or convenience and should be subject to a higher level of Assembly scrutiny procedure”. Assembly procedures in relation to Statutory Rules are set out in Appendix 3 of this paper.

Potential scrutiny point:

Members may wish to seek delegated powers advice on this Bill from the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

The requirement for a justification statement (subsection 2) adds another layer of accountability if the regulations are intended to limit the scope of the Act. While the Bill mandates consultation, the requirement to consult with “at least one person or group appearing to the Department to be acting on behalf of the deaf community” may require further consideration by Members, given that Northern Ireland uniquely recognises two distinct sign languages: BSL and ISL.

These further considerations may include:

- Consulting with only one representative may not adequately capture the diverse perspectives and needs of both BSL and ISL users. These are distinct linguistic and cultural communities.

¹⁰ Northern Ireland Assembly. [Advice of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Committee for the Economy on delegated powers: The Small-Scale Green Energy Bill](#). 19 January 2022.

- The chosen representative may be more familiar with one sign language (either BSL or ISL). This could lead to unequal consideration of the needs of users of the other language.
- BSL and ISL users may have distinct cultural identities and experiences. A single representative might not fully encompass or articulate the nuances of both communities.
- A single representative might face pressure to prioritise the interests of one language community over the other. Even when acting in good faith, they may be perceived as favouring one group.
- Engaging with multiple representatives from both the BSL and ISL communities could encourage dialogue and collaboration, potentially leading to more comprehensive and inclusive policies that better serve the entire deaf community in Northern Ireland.
- One individual may lack the necessary expertise to understand the intricacies and nuances of both BSL and ISL. Each language has its own grammar, vocabulary, and cultural context.
- Consulting only one group or person could be seen as a token gesture, rather than a genuine effort to engage with the diverse perspectives within the deaf community.

To address these concerns and ensure fair and comprehensive input on sign language legislation and policies in Northern Ireland, it may be more appropriate to:

- Mandate consultation with multiple representatives from both the BSL and ISL communities. This would ensure that both languages and cultural perspectives are adequately represented during the regulation-making process.
- Specify the process for selecting these representatives to ensure they are representative of their respective communities and have the necessary expertise to provide informed feedback.
- Provide resources and support to enable representatives to effectively participate in the consultation process.

While the Bill's inclusion of consultation is a positive step, the current wording is insufficient to guarantee equitable representation and consideration of the needs of

both BSL and ISL users in Northern Ireland. It could be argued that strengthening the consultation requirements so that there is representation from both language communities may increase the degree of inclusiveness in the legislation.

4.8.1 Different approaches to consultation with deaf communities

In Northern Ireland, DfC chairs the Sign Language Partnership Group, which includes representatives from each Department, as well as members of the deaf community.

Potential scrutiny point:

Members may wish to seek further information about the long-term plans for the membership of this group.

[A BSL Advisory Board](#) was established following the passage of the British Sign Language Act 2022. It advises the government on issues impacting BSL users and the deaf community, including the use of BSL in public communications and increasing the number of BSL interpreters. The BSL Advisory Board consists of representatives from the deaf community, chosen for their expertise and diversity. The Board contributes to the development of guidance on BSL promotion and facilitation across government departments. It helps ensure that government departments comply with their reporting duties under the Act.

The BSL (Scotland) Act 2015 requires the development of a [national plan for BSL](#), which involves consultation with deaf stakeholders and organisations. While not a formal advisory board, the Scottish Government engages with deaf organisations to implement the national plan and promote BSL.

The Irish Sign Language Act 2017 does not establish a formal advisory board but mandates that public bodies consult with deaf organisations when implementing ISL-related policies. Public bodies must engage with the deaf community to ensure that ISL services meet their needs, effectively acting as an informal advisory mechanism.

Again, the absence of a deadline for implementing regulations creates uncertainty and increases the risk of delays.

4.9 Clause 9 – Department to publish 5-yearly reports

Northern Ireland's 5-year reporting period falls between the more frequent 3-year requirement in England and Wales and the less frequent 6-year requirement in Scotland. The Irish Language Act 2017 emphasises direct action and legal obligations. Also, Section 10 places an obligation on the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to report not later than 3 years after enactment, and every 5 years thereafter.

Northern Ireland's Bill grants the Department for Communities discretion in determining the report's format and manner of publication, which provides flexibility but could also lead to inconsistencies. The Northern Ireland Bill requires an evaluation of the impact, which is relatively broad. The BSL 2022 Act focuses specifically on actions to promote BSL, while the Scottish Act centres on progress against its national BSL plan.

Clause 9 is consistent with the general trend of including reporting mechanisms in sign language legislation, as seen in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland. However, the specific details (frequency, scope, format) vary across jurisdictions.

The consultation procedures around the creation of reports in the Northern Ireland Bill are also not stated. DfC's [2016 Sign Language Framework and draft Bill proposals](#) were consulted upon in 2016. However, correspondence¹¹ from Department for Communities officials noted:

“The DfC Consultation Report for the 2016 Sign Language Framework has not been published. The 2016 Sign Language Framework has not yet been approved by an Executive due to the previous periods when the Assembly did not sit, the urgent response to COVID and the priority to focus on the Sign Language Bill. The 2016 draft Framework is being refreshed and will include appropriate references to the Bill. Ministerial approval will be required for referral for Executive approval due to its cross-cutting nature.”

¹¹ DfC email correspondence with RaISe. 11 February 2025.

As discussed in a [House of Commons debate](#) following the first-year review of the enactment of its Sign Language Act, the effectiveness of sign language legislation depends not only on its implementation but also on continuous monitoring and improvement.

At the Second Stage debate, Minister Lyons suggested he would consider an initial shorter reporting cycle:

“It will be an independent report in collaboration with Departments, the deaf sector and the Sign Language Partnership Group. A number of Members raised the issue of the five years. That was to give time for the legislation to bed in and to properly review it. However, I am more than open to considering amendments to that or, perhaps, looking at what we can do one, two or three years in, rather than a full review, although that can be considered. We could also look at the possibility of doing an initial report, perhaps an internal one, as to how the legislation is working.”

If the 5-yearly assessment mandated in the Northern Ireland Bill is a "report", there may be a risk that it will become an administrative exercise. Whereas a "review" may be more likely to:

- Identify specific barriers to access for BSL and ISL users.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of different strategies for promoting sign language use.
- Assess the impact of the Bill on the lives of deaf individuals in Northern Ireland.
- Generate concrete recommendations for strengthening the Bill and its implementation.

If the term "report" is retained, the Bill or its accompanying guidance could specify, for example, that the report should include a critical analysis of the Bill's impact, identification of areas for improvement, and actionable recommendations. The reviewing process could incorporate input from the deaf community and other relevant stakeholders, similar to the consultation process used in developing the Bill. Reviews could highlight areas where the legislation may fall short or where additional measures are needed to achieve its objectives. Based on the evaluation and

stakeholder feedback, the reviews may include specific recommendations for policy changes or legislative amendments. Following each review, the Department for Communities may consider developing action plans to address the identified issues and implement recommendations. This approach is similar to [evaluation reports published by the HSC Board](#) to assess the effectiveness of new communication services adopted during the Covid-19 pandemic. The HSC Board commissioned its Patient Client Council to engage with deaf sign language service users to explore what difference video relay communication services made to engagement with health services.

Potential scrutiny point:

Members may wish to consider whether Clause 9 of the Northern Ireland Bill provides for meaningful evaluation of progress or a reporting mechanism to summarise achievements.

4.9.1 Approaches to reporting and monitoring elsewhere

Table 1 provides a comparison of different approaches to reporting used In Scotland, Ireland and Great Britain following the introduction of sign language legislation. Where Scotland and GB have “reported” on what has been achieved, the Irish National Disability Authority published feedback from public evaluation surveys and provided an overview that includes a description of what is not working since the introduction of the ISL Act in 2017.

Table 1: Comparison of reports following the enactment of sign language Acts in Scotland, Ireland and Great Britain

| Sign Language Report | Key findings |
|--|--|
| Scottish Government BSL Progress Report (2021) | Summarises what actions have been achieved and progressed but lacks an evaluation of what has not worked. Example: The Scottish Government established an expert advisory group in 2019 to develop plans to promote BSL use in schools. |

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>¹²National Disability Authority – Report on the operation of ISL Act (December 2021)</p> | <p>Summarises ISL users’ responses to public and parent-focused surveys. Highlights what is and is not working and what needs to change.</p> <p>Examples:</p> <p>Public feedback gave an overall impression that not much has changed since the ISL Act was introduced. Key services that attracted public feedback about inadequacies to access through ISL were health, policing, local and state politics, heritage, social and cultural events, media and education.</p> |
| <p>BSL usage in UK Government Communications Report 2023-2024</p> | <p>An update report, rather than a review:</p> <p>Examples: A non-statutory board of mainly BSL users was established in March 2023. During 1 May 2023 to 30 April 2024, the BSL Advisory Board met 4 times.</p> <p>The reporting duty is mainly focused on information intended to be shared with the wider public.</p> <p>From the first to the second reporting period, an increase from 76 to 176 BSL government communications during the second reporting period, with 6 more departments reporting BSL activity.</p> |

More regular reviews may generate a more robust evidence base and inform future policy decisions and prioritise resource allocation. It may provide concrete data about the deaf sign language community and the Bill's impact on accessibility, interpreter availability, educational opportunities, qualified teacher resources, and other provisions.

4.10 Review of Bill costs

This section reviews the potential “public purse” implications for Northern Ireland emerging from the Bill, as stated in the Explanatory and Financial Memorandum. To provide context to that review, the section begins by providing some contextual information on the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland’s budgetary position.

¹² The NDA’s report highlighted issues with the numbers of interpreters available to provide communication services for deaf ISL users in Ireland. In 2023, Ireland had 83 accredited interpreters for a community of over 5000 deaf ISL users. Also, public survey responses suggested that the wording in the ISL Act, where “public bodies ‘shall do all that is reasonable’ to provide interpreters” – facilitates public bodies to avoid providing ISL interpretation based on costs.

4.10.1 Budgetary Context

The Sign Language Bill has been introduced at a challenging time for public finances in Northern Ireland in 2025/26 and beyond. Those challenges arise from a number of factors impacting the Northern Ireland Executive Budget for years, and ultimately the Executives' allocation to each Northern Ireland Department, including that of the DfC. Those factors include:

- The [Chancellors Autumn Budget 2024](#), which set out some of the multi-year pressures facing the United Kingdom Government. For further details, please see RalSe Briefing Paper 47/24: "[Chancellor's Autumn Budget 2024: initial considerations for Northern Ireland](#)".
- The subsequent statement by the Chancellor on [29 January 2025](#), which confirmed a Spring Statement on 26 March 2025 and reiterated the Chancellor's commitment to holding a major annual fiscal event.
- The forthcoming conclusion of the [United Kingdom Spending Review](#), in [June 2025](#), which will seek to "restore spending control in the medium term, setting spending policy in line with the [United Kingdom G]overnment's wider fiscal strategy".¹³
- Northern Ireland Departmental bids for both [resource and capital](#) in 2025/26, exceeded the budget available to the Executive.
- In August 2024, the DoF undertook a Budget 2025-28 Information Gathering Exercise, requesting returns from all Departments. This marked the state of the Northern Ireland Executive Budget cycle 2025/26 planning stage.
- The [Draft Executive Budget 2025/26](#) and accompanying [written statement](#) by the Minister for Finance, which highlighted ongoing "pay and inflationary pressures" and "growing demands" on public services.
- Ongoing work across Departments to facilitate the Executive's implementation of the December 2023 political agreement and related February 2024 funding package – such as the [Interim Fiscal Framework](#),

¹³ HM Treasury, Fixing the foundation: public spending audit 2024-25 (2 August 2024) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fixing-the-foundations-public-spending-audit-2024-25/fixing-the-foundations-public-spending-audit-2024-25-html>

the [Budget Sustainability Plan](#) and the accompanying [Budget Improvement Plan Roadmap](#).

Potential scrutiny points:

How will the DfC ensure the proposals are affordable in light of ongoing pressures faced across the Executive?

How have the DfC factored the potential costs arising from the proposals into their return to the Department of Finance's Budget 2025-28 Information Gathering Exercise, for the 2025/26 and subsequent budgets?

How will the DfC ensure the proposals in the Bill, if enacted, will be brought forward in a sustainable way that complies with the Executive's agreed Budget Sustainability Plan?

4.10.2 Potential “public purse” implications of the Bill

This sub-section draws on the Bill as introduced, the accompanying EFM, and the related consultation on the policy proposals, as well as evidence sessions from the DfC and the Bill's second stage debate to look more closely at key potential “public purse” implications of the Bill; addressing:

- Paragraph 26 of the EFM accompanying the Bill as introduced
- The Bill's proposed use of secondary legislation to give full effect to the Bill, if Clauses 4-10 would be enacted as introduced
- Consultation on the Bill's proposals
- Some “knowns” and apparent “unknowns” at the time writing, with reasonably foreseeable potential financial implications.

4.10.3 Paragraph 26 of the EFM accompanying the Bill as introduced

Paragraph 26 of the EFM that accompanied the Bill on its introduction included limited information on the potential financial effects of the Bill – inclusive of those

estimated costs that the public purse would incur, if the Bill would be enacted as introduced. The EFM stated:

“There will be no immediate financial implications – outside of the current disability adjustments – because **the Bill takes enabling powers to implement duties which may incur costs at a later date.**”¹⁴ [Emphasis added]

The EFM added:

“There will be need to develop and fund the appropriate level of infrastructure and scheme to deliver on the intent of the Bill and these will be outlined by the Department for Communities which may by regulations make provision for these associated matters.”¹⁵

The subsections that follow explore the above-stated effects in greater detail.

4.10.4 Consultation on the Bill’s proposals

[Section 3.3](#), above, outlined the consultation processes that occurred before the introduction of the Bill. The EFM noted that the Bill’s policy proposals were subject to:

“...an extensive and fully BSL/ISL consultation in 2016 which demonstrated overwhelming support for the policy proposals for a Sign Language Bill. Full engagement with the Northern Ireland deaf community has been on an ongoing basis through a variety of avenues such as the cross-departmental/deaf sectoral Sign Language Partnership Group which is chaired by the Department for the Communities.”¹⁶

The Consultation document did not pose any direct questions to respondents on the potential financial implications of the proposals. As noted, in [subsection 3.3](#) of this paper the Department did not produce a consultation response document. It is unclear, therefore, to what extent, if any, respondents raised any potential financial implications in their responses.

¹⁴ The Sign Language Bill [EFM - As Introduced](#) (accessed 19 February 2025)

¹⁵ The Sign Language Bill [EFM - As Introduced](#) (accessed 19 February 2025)

¹⁶ The Sign Language Bill [EFM - As Introduced](#) (accessed 19 February 2025)

4.10.5 The Bill's proposed use of secondary legislation

As noted in [subsection 4.10.3](#) above, the EFM states that no “immediate financial implications” arise out of the Bill because it is an enabling Bill, giving the Department of the Communities power to introduce regulation in a range of areas aimed at improving accessibility of public services and information for people in the deaf community. As explained above, the Bill, as introduced, proposes giving the DfC the power to introduce such regulations in three areas:

- Clause 4 of the Bill (see [subsection 4.4](#), above, for further details) would give the Department the power to list the public bodies who are to be defined as “prescribed organisations” through regulations. The Clause states that this would include “all the Northern Ireland Departments”. In evidence to the Committee on 6 February, the Department stated that it would also include “all public bodies”, including “councils, arm’s-length bodies, and all Departments”. The final list is to be determined. Clause 4 also states that this regulation would be introduced using the negative resolution procedure.¹⁷
- Clause 7 (see [subsection 4.7](#), above, for further details) would give the Department the power to “for the purposes of the Bill, as the Department considers appropriate”. This may include “the offering or facilitation of the use of BSL and ISL” and/or “accessibility to people in the deaf community to information and services through the use of BSL **or** ISL”. The Clause, if enacted, would give the power to make regulations on “prescribed organisations” and to place limits on application of the Bill, and regulations resulting from the Bill, upon “prescribed organisations” (excluding Northern Ireland Departments). Such limits may consider the “scale of [the “prescribed organisation’s] resources or the nature of their functions”. The Bill does not explicitly state which resolution method regulations introduced in Clause 7 would use. Clause 8 states that they

¹⁷ The Sign Language Bill [Bill - As Introduced](#) Clause 4 (accessed 19 February 2025)

“may not be made unless a draft of them has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, the Assembly”.¹⁸

- Clause 10 of the Bill as introduced, would if enacted, require the Department to make regulations to introduce a scheme for the accreditation of teachers and/or interpreters of BSL or ISL. Such regulations would be subject to negative resolution.¹⁹

Please see [Appendix 3](#) for details of the different resolution methods used in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The Northern Ireland Assembly guide “Deconstructing Legislation: A practical guide to legislative scrutiny” recommends that where secondary regulation is used:

“Given the practical realities of the allocation of Assembly Business...it should be remembered that if the opportunity is not taken at the time of passing the Bill to scrutinise the policy completely and effectively, it may be difficult or impossible to take that opportunity later.”²⁰

Furthermore, the guidance notes that while the affirmative resolution procedure offers greater opportunity to scrutinise secondary legislation than the negative resolution procedure, recommending its use for “potentially controversial powers”, it adds that a debate on an affirmative motion:

“...is significantly less effective as a method of scrutiny that consideration of provisions of a Bill.”²¹

In 2021, the House of Lords Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee reviewed the use of the United Kingdom government’s use of secondary legislation, rather than primary legislation to “set out its legislative intent”. The Report stated:

¹⁸ The Sign Language Bill [Bill - As Introduced](#) Clause 7 (accessed 19 February 2025)

¹⁹ The Sign Language Bill [Bill - As Introduced](#) Clause 10 (accessed 19 February 2025)

²⁰ Greenberg, D, Northern Ireland Assembly, Deconstructing Legislation: A practical guide to legislative scrutiny

²¹ Greenberg, D, Northern Ireland Assembly, Deconstructing Legislation: A practical guide to legislative scrutiny

“Over recent years, Bills – which become Acts of Parliament and which are subject to robust scrutiny in their passage through Parliament – have often provided only the broadest outlines of the direction of policy travel, with all the details that will have a direct impact on individual members of public left to secondary legislation. And the more that is left to secondary legislation, the greater the democratic deficit because, in contrast to primary legislation, there is relatively scant effective parliamentary scrutiny of secondary legislation; it cannot be amended; in some cases, it may become law without any parliamentary debate; and, because the decision to accept or reject is all or nothing, very rarely will the Houses reject it.”²²

Given the Bill's reliance on secondary legislation and the lack of substantive financial information in the EFM, the Committee may wish to probe the Department further on its decision to utilise secondary legislation in this way.

²² [Delegated powers and the impact on parliamentary scrutiny: Debate on two committee reports - House of Lords Library](#)

Potential scrutiny points:

Why has the Department decided to use secondary legislation to deliver the above elements of the Bill?

On what basis has the Department decided upon the legislative procedure to be used for each regulation proposed in the Bill?

Will the DfC be carrying out any consultation, and/or costs/benefits analysis, on the proposed regulations set out in the Bill to their introduction in the Assembly?

When will the DfC forward drafts of the proposed regulations set out in the Bill to the Northern Ireland Assembly?

4.10.6 Some “knowns” and apparent “unknowns” at the time of writing

As noted in [section 4.10.3](#), above, the Bill if enacted would place a duty on public bodies, to be designated as “prescribed organisations” to “ensure information and services are accessible to the deaf community”. As is also noted above, details on which public sector bodies would be designated as “prescribed organisations”, the exact application of the Bill on non-Departmental public bodies, and the nature of the DfC’s best practice guidance, is yet to be determined. For these reasons, it is not possible at the time of writing to estimate the public purse implications of the proposals. It is, however, clear at this stage that the introduced Bill and its proposed related secondary legislation, is cross-cutting and would, if enacted, have budgetary implications across the public sector in Northern Ireland.

Potential scrutiny points:

What discussion has DfC had with other Departments and public sector organisations about their ability to fund any potential financial implications of the duties in the Bill?

Commenting on the Bill in evidence to the Committee on 6 February 2025, however, the Department stated that it would “argue very hard for a decent amount of funding to be provided”, noting that the Department spends “around half a million pounds per year” on current programmes for the deaf community and that:

“In the grand scheme of things, not very much money is needed to make a profound difference to the lives of some of the people who live here.” ²³

More recently, during the second stage debate on the Bill, commenting on Clause 2 of the Bill on “making...arrangement for ensuring the availability of classes” for “deaf children, guardians, and carers”, the Minister noted that the DfC currently spends “over £25,000 in a variety of family sign language courses for deaf children, their families, and their professional support network”. ²⁴

All the above-noted sources - the Bill, its accompanying EFM, the 6 February 2025 evidence session by the Department, and the Bill’s Second Stage debate - indicate the types of cost that might arise from the Bill and subsequent secondary legislation. As noted, if enacted as introduced, the Bill would place a duty on a prescribed organisation to ensure services and information are accessible to individuals in the deaf community. Such organisations would also be required to offer or facilitate the use of BSL and ISL. The evidence session of 6 February 2025, cites some examples of this already happening within Northern Ireland’s public sector. For example, Officials highlighted work the Department carried out alongside the Health and Social Care Board to set up a “new, free, remote interpreting service for BSL and ISL users”. The service was funded by both the DfC and the Department of Health and the initially temporary service has become “a permanent resource across all health and social care services”. ²⁵

²³ Northern Ireland Assembly [Minutes Of Evidence Report](#) Committee for Communities, (6 February 2025)

²⁴ Northern Ireland Assembly, Official Report, [Sign Language Bill Second Stage](#) (18 February 2024)

²⁵ Northern Ireland Assembly [Minutes Of Evidence Report](#) Committee for Communities, (6 February 2025)

During the Second Stage Debate on the Bill, the Minister for Communities also referenced the types of expenditure that the Bill would require. The Minister stated:

“I am aware that the success of the legislation depends on an infrastructure of support for the deaf community, particularly through the building of interpreter capacity to deliver on access to services, which begins with access to information about those services.”²⁶

The Minister noted too that the DfC “continues to fund accredited BSL/ISL courses across Northern Ireland from level 1...to level 6, which is degree-equivalent”.

An unknown factor is the extent to which other Departments and public bodies are already offering services and information in an accessible way to the deaf community. Similarly, it is not clear at this time what resource would be required to roll out existing resources such as the interpreter service to other public bodies. It would be anticipated that any increase in service would likely result in staffing, operating, and potentially start-up costs. There remains a significant degree of uncertainty around the scale of such costs, especially when the best practice guidance for prescribed organisations is still to be produced. Additionally, the extent to which such organisations are currently facilitating access to the deaf community is likely to determine the additional work required to meet the new guidance once established.

Potential scrutiny points:

What assessment has the DfC made of existing steps public bodies have carried out to improve accessibility for the deaf community?

What assessment has the DfC made of the level of improvements required across the public sector to ensure that the duty outlined in the introduced Bill would be met if enacted?

²⁶ Northern Ireland Assembly, Official Report, [Sign Language Bill Second Stage](#) (18 February 2024)

Two other “unknowns” further complicate an assessment of the potential public purse impact of the Bill at the time of writing. First, Clause 3 (1), places a duty on “prescribed organisations” to take “all reasonable steps” to ensure their information and services are accessible to the deaf community and to “offer or facilitate” the use of BSL and ISL to that community. The Bill further states, at Clause 3(2)(b):

“...nothing in this section implies that prescribed organisations are prevented from taking into account matters of affordability to them, as well as taking into account wider factors influencing them (including as involving practicability) when determining how in their respective circumstances to comply with this section.” ²⁷

At the time of writing, it is unclear how prescribed organisations would interpret “reasonable steps” and Clause 3(2)(b) of the Bill when fulfilling their duties as set out in the introduced Bill; and how that interpretation would impact the public purse.

Potential scrutiny point:

Will the DfC provide further clarity on the meaning of “reasonable steps” to assist “prescribed organisations” in their interpretation of Clause 3?

Second, the EFM that accompanied the Bill’s introduction noted that:

“Whilst there is robust data held on the number of deaf and hard of hearing people in Northern Ireland, there is no such data for the number of sign users.” ²⁸

The EFM cites research by the former Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) from [2015](#) which estimated that there were “at least 5,000 people in Northern Ireland who use sign language as their preferred means for communication”. In their evidence to the Committee on 6 February 2025, Department officials noted that:

“It is proving difficult to be anywhere near definitive about how many Irish Sign Language users and how many British Sign Language users there are... We have

²⁷ The Sign Language Bill, [Bill - As Introduced](#) Clause 3 (accessed 19 February 2025)

²⁸ The Sign Language Bill, [EFM - As Introduced](#) (accessed 19 February 2025)

struggled to determine definitive numbers, even after all our stakeholder work, and that also makes it slightly difficult to determine budget numbers. Doing that will be part of the journey through the next stages of the process.”²⁹

Potential scrutiny points:

When will the Department be in a position to share an up-to-date estimate of the numbers of BSL and ISL users in Northern Ireland with the Committee?

When will the Department be in a position to provide the Committee with an assessment of the effect of the above – that is, an estimation of the resources that would be required to fulfil the duties outlined in the introduced Bill?

4.11 Clause 10 – Accreditation of teachers and interpreters

The Northern Ireland Bill takes a comprehensive approach to professional standards by mandating an accreditation scheme for both teachers and a different accreditation scheme for interpreters. This is unique among the compared sign language Acts.

The Northern Ireland Bill allows for fees but also provides flexibility for automatic accreditation in certain circumstances, which may be beneficial for recognising existing qualifications or experience.

While the Irish Sign Language Act 2017, requires registration and regulation of interpreters, it does not provide as much detail on the process as the Northern Ireland Bill. The Sign Language Acts in England, Wales, and Scotland focus more on recognition and planning, while the Northern Ireland Bill and Irish Act include more operational details about service provision and professional standards.

²⁹ The Sign Language Bill, [EFM - As Introduced](#) (accessed 19 February 2025)

As described in [sub-section 4.10.3](#), the use of negative resolution for regulations in the Northern Ireland Bill could potentially limit scrutiny of each of the accreditation schemes' details.

While Clause 10 of the Northern Ireland Sign Language Bill provides a detailed approach to ensuring professional standards for BSL and ISL teachers and interpreters compared to the other jurisdictions, this could place a significant responsibility on the Department for Communities to develop and maintain effective accreditation schemes for each profession. However, [DfC officials speaking at a Communities Committee meeting on 6 February 2025](#), suggested that the Department envisioned “docking in” with other accreditation schemes for operational efficiency.

4.11.1 Numbers of qualified interpreters in Northern Ireland

Table 2 illustrates changes in the number of sign language interpreters in Northern Ireland from the first official recognition of sign languages in 2004 to 2025.

Table 2: Number of qualified interpreters in Northern Ireland from 2004 – 2025

| Year | Number of interpreters in Northern Ireland |
|--|---|
| 2004 – The Council for the Advancement of Communication with Deaf People (CACDP) in Northern Ireland ³⁰ | 5 fully qualified BSL interpreters and 1 ISL interpreter. |
| 2015 - Association of Sign Language Interpreters Northern Ireland (ASLI NI) | 23 registered interpreters and 3 trainee interpreters. This includes electronic or manual note-takers, speech-to-text reporting, and LSP with Deaf Blind Manual. |
| 2025 – DfC briefing to Communities Committee on 6 February 2025 | 39 registered interpreters 4 training at Foyle Deaf Association 20 BSL and ISL MA students at QUB. |

³⁰ [HoC Parliamentary Question](#), 2004

4.11.2 Best practice process of accreditation of interpreters

In best practice guidance published by the Equality Commission in collaboration with RNID³¹ in 2004, it was suggested that BSL/English interpreters “should” be registered with the [Council for the Advancement of Communication with Deaf People \(CACDP\) – now called Signature](#), via its Independent Registration Panel (IRP), and/or be members of the [Association of Sign Language Interpreters](#) (ASLI). At the time of publication of the Equality Commission and RNID guidance, the CACDP register had three registration categories – member, trainee and junior trainee. ASLI categories included – licensed and associate, and the Scottish ASLI had two registration categories – qualified and trainee. Details of the Irish Sign Language accreditation for interpreters is not included in the guidance.

In the Irish Sign Language Act, Section 7 states:

“A court or a public body, in compliance with its obligations under this Act, shall not engage the services of a person providing Irish Sign Language interpretation unless the person’s competence has been verified by having been accredited in accordance with an accreditation scheme funded by the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection.”³²

Following the Act’s enactment, the [Sign Language Interpreting Service for Ireland](#) (SLIS) researched and developed the now independent [Register of Irish Sign Language Interpreters](#) (RISLI). Both are funded by the [Citizens Information Board](#).

Table 3 provides a comparison of approaches to legislating for the accreditation of sign language interpreters.

³¹ Equality commission for Northern Ireland and RNID, Guidance on providing BSL/English and ISL/English interpreters under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, June 2004

³² [Irish Sign Language Act 2017](#)

Table 3: Comparison of accreditation of teachers and interpreters

| Jurisdiction | Registration Framework | Mandatory Use of Registered Interpreters | Oversight Body |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|----------------------------|
| Northern Ireland | Accreditation system proposed | No statutory duty yet | Department for Communities |
| England | Voluntary (NRCPD) | No statutory duty | NRCPD |
| Scotland | Voluntary (SRLPDC) | No statutory duty | SRLPDC |
| Wales | Proposed legislation | Not yet determined | Not yet determined |
| Ireland | Mandatory (RISLI) | Yes, for public bodies | RISLI |

4.11.3 Numbers of qualified teachers (see [Section 4.2.1](#))

Qualifications for Teachers of the Deaf (TODs) are described by the [British Association of Teachers of Deaf Children and Young People](#). As outlined in [Section 4.2.1](#) of this paper, and considering that teachers of deaf children require different qualifications to sign language teachers of hearing students, Members may wish to consider what modelling DfC has carried out to plan for future teaching resources to provide classes for deaf children and their support networks, particularly if classes are to be offered to all, as discussed at the Communities Committee meeting on 6 February 2025.

4.12 Clause 11 – Members of the deaf community

Clause 11 offers a detailed and inclusive definition of the "deaf community" compared to similar legislation elsewhere. It captures a broad range of individuals who are connected to sign language and deaf culture.

An explicit inclusion of children of deaf parents is a unique aspect of the Bill. This recognises the importance of sign language for these families and the children's connection to the deaf community, regardless of their hearing status.

The inclusion of individuals with limited English skills is noteworthy. This acknowledges that proficiency in sign language can be a primary means of communication for some individuals, even if they have some hearing.

The Irish Sign Language Act's definition is more specific, focusing on individuals whose "preferred" means of communication is ISL. The Northern Ireland definition is broader, encompassing anyone who "relies" on sign language for communication. This is a subtle but important distinction.

Clause 11 of the Northern Ireland Sign Language Bill is a comprehensive and inclusive definition of the "deaf community". It goes beyond simply defining "deaf person(s)" and captures a wider range of individuals who are connected to sign language and deaf culture.

Potential scrutiny point:

The broader definition could have implications for who is considered a beneficiary of the Bill and who is included in consultations and policy decisions. However, how this is reconciled with Clause 5, where "one" representative of the deaf community is to be consulted with, maybe something Members wish to consider further.

4.12.1 British Sign Language Act 2022:

This Act does not have a similarly detailed definition of "deaf community." The focus is on recognising BSL as a language and requiring government departments to report on their efforts to promote BSL. The Act implicitly addresses BSL users but does not explicitly define the community.

4.12.2 British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015:

This Act also does not have a specific definition of "deaf community". The Act refers to "deaf individuals" and emphasises the creation and implementation of a National BSL Plan. The National Plan addresses the needs of deaf individuals, but the Act itself doesn't provide a legal definition.

4.12.3 Irish Sign Language Act 2017:

This Act does include a definition of "deaf person" - "deaf person means a person who is deaf, hard of hearing, or deafblind, and whose preferred means of communication is Irish Sign Language".

4.12.4 Why does this matter?

It could be argued that a clear and comprehensive definition of the deaf community is important for ensuring that the Bill targets its intended beneficiaries and promotes the rights and well-being of all individuals who "rely" on sign language in Northern Ireland. It could also avoid confusion about who is covered by the Bill.

4.13 Clause 12 – Different forms of sign languages

The Northern Ireland Bill is unique by explicitly recognising both visual and tactile/non-visual forms of BSL and ISL. This demonstrates an awareness of the diversity of needs within the deaf community, particularly deafblind individuals.

4.13.1 British Sign Language Act 2022:

The BSL Act 2022 does not explicitly define the forms of BSL. The Act refers to BSL as a language, implying a standard understanding, but it does not specify different forms such as visual or tactile.

4.13.2 British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015:

The Scottish Act does make references to BSL and its use by deaf individuals and Section 5 specifies which parts of the Act include reference to visual or tactile forms understood by some deafblind people.

4.13.3 Irish Sign Language Act 2017:

The Irish Act does not explicitly define the forms of ISL. It focuses on recognising ISL as a language and ensuring access to ISL interpretation, without specifying different modalities.

Considerations:

By including tactile forms, the Bill aims to ensure that deafblind individuals are not excluded from the benefits and protections offered by the legislation. Recognising tactile forms ensures accessibility for deafblind individuals, who may not be able to access visual sign language. According to DeafBlind UK, approximately 450,000 people are living with deaf blindness in the UK.³³ The absence of similar provisions in the other jurisdictions may reflect a less explicit focus on the specific needs of deafblind individuals in their sign language legislation.

4.14 Clause 13 – Everyday reliance on sign languages

The Northern Ireland Bill is unique in providing a detailed definition of reliance on sign language and its definition includes both necessity and convenience, which is more inclusive than other jurisdictions. The Bill explicitly mentions reliance in everyday activities, which is not specified in other legislation. The Bill addresses both BSL and ISL, reflecting the unique linguistic situation in Northern Ireland.

4.14.1 Northern Ireland Sign Language Bill 2025 (Clause 13)

This defines reliance on BSL or ISL as using the language wholly or substantially. It includes both necessity and convenience as reasons for reliance. It specifies "in the course of everyday activities"

4.14.2 British Sign Language Act 2022

This does not contain a similar clause defining reliance on BSL. It focuses on recognition of BSL as a language and reporting on its use by government departments.

4.14.3 British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015

This does not include a specific clause defining reliance on BSL. The Scottish Act emphasises the creation and implementation of national and local BSL plans.

³³ Deafblind UK: <https://deafblind.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/IMPACT-REPORT-Deafblind-UK-Annual-report-2023-2024-LOW-RES-ONLINE.pdf>

4.14.4 Irish Sign Language Act 2017

This does not have a comparable clause defining reliance on ISL. The Irish Act focuses on recognising ISL and ensuring access to ISL interpretation in public services.

In summary, Clause 13 of the Northern Ireland Sign Language Bill 2025 seeks to provide a comprehensive and nuanced definition of reliance on sign language compared to similar legislation in GB and Ireland. The intention of this detailed approach is to more precisely help to identify and address the needs of sign language users in Northern Ireland.

4.15 Clause 14 – Commencement

The Northern Ireland approach attempts to strike a balance between immediate recognition (Part 1) and a more managed implementation of the remaining provisions, perhaps given the complexity of the Bill and the need for “prescribed organisations” to prepare for their new duties.

Comparing commencement approaches in neighbouring jurisdictions:

4.15.1 British Sign Language Act 2022 Section 4: Commencement

The Act came into force on 28 April 2022, the day after it received Royal Assent. There is no provision for phased commencement or transitional arrangements.

4.15.2 British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 Section 8: Commencement

Came into force on the day after Royal Assent (9 October 2015). No provision for phased commencement or transitional arrangements.

4.15.3 Irish Sign Language Act 2017 Section 1(2): Commencement

The Irish Act was mandated “to come into operation on such day or days not later than 3 years after the passing of this Act”. It was enacted on 24 December 2017 and commenced on 23 December 2020. It allowed for different days to be appointed for different provisions.

4.15.4 Considerations

While the NI Sign Language Bill expresses a commitment to promoting BSL and ISL, the absence of a deadline for implementing regulations creates uncertainty and increases the risk of delays. Ireland's Sign Language Act allowed for phased commencement, giving the respective department's flexibility in bringing different parts of the Act into force over time. Northern Ireland explicitly allows for transitional provisions, which is perhaps intended to help manage the implementation of new requirements and minimise disruption. Immediate commencement in England, Wales, and Scotland signalled a commitment to rapid implementation.

In summary, Clause 14 provides a flexible approach to commencement, allowing for phased implementation and transitional arrangements. This contrasts with the immediate commencement in England, Wales, and Scotland but aligns with the approach taken in Ireland.

Potential scrutiny point:

Considerations may include: how the Department for Communities plans to appoint commencement dates and whether it does so in a timely and effective manner.

4.16 Clause 15 – Short title

Clause 15 is a conventional short title provision that is consistent with similar provisions in other sign language legislation. It effectively identifies the Act and its jurisdiction.

Appendix 1: Comparative summary table of sign language legislation

| Feature | Northern Ireland Sign Language Bill 2025 | British Sign Language Act 2022 (England & Wales) | Irish Sign Language Act 2017 | British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 |
|---------------------------------|--|---|---|---|
| Recognition and Aims | Recognises BSL and ISL as languages of Northern Ireland, granting them equal status; aims to promote use and understanding | Recognises BSL as a language of England, Wales, and Scotland | Recognises ISL; grants ISL users the right to use their language with public bodies | Focuses on promoting the use and understanding of BSL |
| Languages | BSL and ISL | BSL | ISL | BSL |
| Responsibility | Department for Communities | Secretary of State | Minister for Justice and Equality | Scottish Ministers |
| Scope and Implementation | Introduces "prescribed organisations" with accessibility duties | Primarily requires the Secretary of State to report on government departments' BSL promotion efforts and issue guidance | Addresses legal proceedings, educational support for deaf children | Mandates Scottish Ministers to prepare and publish national plans for BSL and requires certain authorities to develop their own BSL plans |
| Public Body Duties | "Prescribed organisations" must take reasonable steps to ensure their information and services are as accessible to individuals in the deaf community as they are to others, at no extra cost. | Relies on Secretary of State to report on promotional activities | Mandates public bodies to provide ISL interpretation | Requires listed authorities to publish their Authority Plans in British Sign Language |
| Use in Legal Proceedings | Not specifically mentioned in Bill | Not specifically mentioned in Act | Explicitly allowed (Section 4(1)) | Not specifically mentioned in Act |

| | | | | |
|--|--|---|---|---|
| Education Provisions | DfC to promote availability of classes | Not specifically mentioned | Detailed provisions for ISL classes, support in schools, and teacher training (Section 5, Education Act 1998) | Included in the National Plan |
| Broadcasting | Not specifically mentioned | Not specifically mentioned | Principles of equality, dignity, and respect in ISL programming (Section 8, Broadcasting Act 2009) | Included in the National Plan |
| Support for Access (Cultural/Arts Events) | Not specifically mentioned | Not specifically mentioned | Yes (Section 9) | Included in the National Plan |
| Community involvement and consultation | The Department for Communities must consult with prescribed organisations and deaf community representatives when devising or reviewing guidance. Similarly, before laying regulations, the Department must consult those on whom functions are to be conferred and at least one person or group acting on behalf of the deaf community. | Not explicitly mentioned | Not explicitly mentioned | Requires Scottish Ministers to consult with persons who use BSL and those who represent BSL users when preparing a National Plan. The listed authorities must publish and consult on a draft of their Authority Plan, considering any representations received. |
| Guidance, Reporting, and Accountability | Department for Communities to issue guidance and publish 5-yearly | Secretary of State to report on government departments' | Minister to report on the Act every 5 years | Mandates progress reports to be |

| | | | | |
|--|--|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| | reports assessing the impact of the legislation | promotion and facilitation of BSL | | presented before the Scottish Parliament |
| Accreditation and Standards | Includes a scheme for accrediting teachers and interpreters of BSL and ISL | Not explicitly addressed | Accreditation scheme for ISL interpreters | Not explicitly addressed in provided text |
| Addressing Different Language Forms | Explicitly includes both visual and tactile forms of BSL and ISL | Not explicitly addressed | Not explicitly addressed | Refers to both visual and tactile forms of BSL, but specifies that the publication of national plans should be in visual BSL only |
| Commencement | Phased implementation | Day after Royal Assent (Section 4(3)) | Phased implementation within 3 years (Section 11(2)) | Phased implementation |

Appendix 2: Summary of policy considerations

| Summary | Policy considerations | Provisions in other sign language Acts |
|---|---|--|
| Specific Measures for Promoting BSL and ISL | While the Bill tasks the Department for Communities with promoting the use of BSL and ISL, it does not contain specific measures or initiatives. | Incorporate more specific measures like requiring national plans and authority-level plans with clear strategies and timelines (British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015) and provisions for the use of ISL in legal proceedings and educational support (Irish Sign Language Act 2017). |
| Support for education | The Bill mentions the continuing educational requirements of deaf children and young people but doesn't detail the specific supports to be provided. | Irish Sign Language Act 2017: includes provisions for ISL classes for parents, siblings, and grandparents of deaf children. British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015: outlines measures to ensure access to education in BSL, develop qualifications in BSL, and train educational professionals on effective engagement with BSL users. |
| Accessibility of public services | The Bill requires "prescribed organisations" to ensure their information and services are accessible. However, it lacks detail on what constitutes "reasonable steps" to achieve accessibility. | Drawing on the Irish Sign Language Act 2017, considerations may include: specifying the provision of ISL interpretation in public services, the availability of information in accessible formats, and training for public sector employees on sign language and deaf awareness. |
| Monitoring and enforcement | The Bill mandates the Department for Communities to publish 5-yearly reports but lacks detail on the specific metrics to be used to assess the impact of the legislation. | The British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 offers a model, requiring progress reports to the Scottish Parliament on the implementation of national and authority-level plans. |
| Deafblind considerations | While the Bill includes both visual and tactile forms of BSL and ISL, it does not specifically address the unique needs of deafblind individuals. | The British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 contains provisions to ensure that guidance and actions plans consider the communication and accessibility needs of deafblind individuals. |

Appendix 3: Assembly procedures in relation to Statutory Rules³⁴

The procedure to which any statutory rule is subject will be set out in its parent legislation. These may include the following Assembly procedures.

The Negative Resolution Procedure

A statutory rule that is subject to the negative resolution procedure is made by the rule-making body, often a Department, and laid before the Assembly. It has effect when its 'comes into force' date is reached. It can be annulled by resolution of the Assembly within the 'statutory period'. It is then void from the date of that annulment. The statutory period is set out in the Interpretation Act (Northern Ireland) 1954. It is 30 calendar days or ten days on which the Assembly has sat after the date on which the statutory rule was laid before the Assembly, whichever is the longer.

The Confirmatory Resolution Procedure

A statutory rule which is subject to confirmatory procedure is made by the rule-making body, often a Department, and laid before the Assembly. It ceases to have effect within a specified period provided for in the parent legislation unless approved by a resolution of the Assembly within that time.

The Affirmative Resolution Procedure

A statutory rule which is subject to the affirmative resolution procedure is made by the rule-making body, often a Department, and laid before the Assembly. It shall not come into operation unless and until affirmed by a resolution of the Assembly.

The Draft Affirmative Resolution Procedure

A statutory rule which is subject to the draft affirmative procedure is laid in draft before the Assembly by the rule making body, often a Department. It may not be made unless and until affirmed by a resolution of the Assembly.

³⁴ Northern Ireland Assembly. Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees. Twenty-third Report. 4 October 2024