



**From: The Minister**

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[REDACTED]  
Date: 23 January 2025  
Our Ref: SUB-0018-2025

Mr Colm Gildernew MLA  
Chair  
Communities Committee  
Room 430  
Parliament Buildings  
Ballymiscaw  
Stormont  
Belfast  
BT4 3XX

Via email: [Committee.Communities@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:Committee.Communities@niassembly.gov.uk)

Dear Colm,

## **THE SIGN LANGUAGE BILL**

At its meeting today, Thursday 23 January 2025, the Executive approved the introduction of the Sign Language Bill (the Bill), and I have today written to the Speaker seeking his permission to introduce the Bill on 10th February 2025 or as soon as possible thereafter.

I attach an 'in confidence' copy of the Bill (**Annex A**) which I plan to introduce. I am providing this advance copy to allow the Committee time to consider prior to an pre-introductory briefing from officials. Officials will, of course, provide clause by clause briefing during the formal Committee Stage.

The Bill contains a small number of clauses, summarised as follows to provide for:

- Clause 1: Official recognition of British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL) as languages within Northern Ireland, without prejudice to any established rights or laws in respect to the deaf community;
- Clause 2: Promotion of interests by the lead department - being the Department for Communities (DfC) - to promote: the greater use and understanding of BSL and ISL; the general entitlement of individuals in the deaf community to use BSL or ISL; and the further development of deaf culture by the deaf community through the use of BSL and ISL. The lead department's duty to promote greater use and understanding of BSL/ISL includes an obligation to provide for the availability of classes for their close families, guardians and carers to learn (or improve proficiency in) BSL/ISL;
- Clause 3: A duty on all prescribed organisations, to take all reasonable steps to provide access to information and services through the medium of BSL and ISL;
- Clause 4: Powers for the DfC to make regulations that will set out all public bodies that will be subject to the duties set out in clause 3;
- Clause 5: DfC, having engaged and consulted with the deaf community, must issue guidance of which all prescribed organisations must take account;
- Clause 6: That the guidance should address issues of best practice;
- Clause 7: The provision for DfC of powers to make regulations in respect to this part of the Bill;
- Clause 8: That such regulations must be consulted upon and laid before the Assembly;
- Clause 9: That DfC must prepare a report evaluating the impact of the bill within five years of the Bill's commencement and every five-year period thereafter;
- Clause 10: That DfC must by regulations make a scheme for the purpose of, or in connection with, the accreditation of (either or both) teachers of BSL or ISL, or interpreters of BSL or ISL;
- Clause 11: Provides the definition of members of the deaf community for the purpose of this Bill;
- Clause 12: For the purposes of the Bill, reference to BSL or ISL is to either or both of the visual form of the Language as commonly used and understood by

deaf people, and the common tactile or non-visual forms of the Language as used and understood by some deafblind people;

- Clause 13: That everyday reliance on BSL or ISL refers to someone who relies (wholly or substantially) on BSL or ISL by necessity or for convenience in the course of everyday activities;
- Clause 14: This Part of the Bill comes into operation on the day after the day on which this Act receives Royal Assent. The rest of this Act comes into operation on such day or days as DfC may by order appoint;
- Clause 15 – States that the Act may be cited as the Sign Language Act (Northern Ireland) 2025.

Yours sincerely



**Gordon Lyons**  
**Minister for Communities**