



From: On behalf of the DALO

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Our ref: GM 0369 2025

You Ref : CC 25 160

Date: 30 May 2025

Ms Emer Boyle
Communities Committee Clerk
Room 430
Parliament Buildings
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Dear Emer,

Departmental Briefing on the Sign Language Bill

Your letter of 14 April 2025 refers to the Departmental officials' Committee briefing on 10th April at which they agreed to provide some further information. Please find the information below as requested and attached to this letter.

- **The Terms of Reference for the Sign Language Partnership Group**

Provided separately as **Annex A**

- **A copy of the consultation report on the Sign Language Framework**

Provided separately as **Annex B**

At the 10 April briefing, Ms K Armstrong stated: *My final question is more of a request for information. Is there a report on or summary of the findings of the work on the sign language framework in 2016 that can be shared with the Committee, **even if it is given to us in confidence**, because I know that it was not published?*

Therefore, I attach a copy of the 2016 Sign Language Framework Consultation Summary Report on a **strictly in-confidence basis** given that it has not previously been published due to suspensions of the Assembly. Please also note that for the same reason, the links to further information on the Department's website referred to within the Report had not been made live and are therefore not available.

- **A breakdown of the numbers studying ISL and BSL**

At the 10 April briefing, officials were questioned in the context of the number of students studying as interpreters. Please see the table below which outlines those students studying in an Interpreter Training Programme, broken down by Deaf or hearing students and those studying as BSL or ISL interpreters.

	Deaf	Hearing	TOTAL
ISL	1	8	9
BSL	4	13	17
TOTAL	5	21	26

- **Committee Queries**

In your letter of 14 April, you stated that following the briefing session, Members agreed to forward queries from the paper from the Examiner of Statutory Rules on the Delegated Powers Memorandum and from the Assembly Research Bill paper to the Department for answer. Please find attached the Department's responses to those queries, provided separately as **Annex C**.

I trust you find this information helpful.

Yours sincerely,

██████████ on behalf **Laura Coffey**
Departmental Assembly Liaison Officer
Private Office



TERMS OF REFERENCE

Introduction

1. In March 2004 the then Secretary of State, Paul Murphy, announced the formal recognition of British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL) as languages in their own right. At the same time he also committed Government Departments to working in partnership with representatives of the Deaf community to improve access to services for users of sign languages. It is out of that commitment that the Sign Language Partnership Group (SLPG) has been established as a forum to bring together the 11 Departments and key organisations representing the Deaf community.

DCAL Role

2. The role of chairing the Partnership and providing secretariat service for the main steering groups falls to DCAL because we have the policy remit of promoting language diversity. However where working groups on particular topics may need to be formed these will reflect Departmental responsibilities and leads.

Purpose

3. The purpose of the group will be to identify projects which contribute to improving access to government services for users of sign languages.

Scope of the Group

4. During the term of this particular group we will accept proposals from the following strand groups:
 - Access to public services
 - The education and training of sign language interpreters and tutors.

Objectives of the Group

5. The following objectives will be used as a basis for approving and funding initiatives presented to the SLPG:
 - a. To ensure that approved proposals improve access to public services for users of BSL and ISL users.
 - b. To ensure that approved proposals contribute to the education and training of BSL and ISL interpreters and tutors in Northern Ireland.

Funding

6. Funding for the SLPG has been agreed at £50k for 2008/09 and £100k for each of the Financial years 2009/10 and 2010/11. It should be noted that some departments may incur additional funding in implementing recommendations agreed at the SLPG but after seeking DFP guidance, it has been confirmed that this expenditure must be met by the individual departments from within their allocated baselines as agreed by the Executive in Budget 2008-11 publication. Therefore DFP advised that no other central source of funding will be available to departments to implement these proposals nor given the de minimis levels of expenditure involved will they provide a letter of comfort/guarantee to underpin any expenditure incurred

Approval of Projects

7. All proposals submitted to the SLPG for approval must be accompanied by a proportionate business case. Business case templates within relevant expenditure bands i.e. less than or equal to £10,000, between £10,000 and £50,000 and greater than £50,000 are available from the group secretariat. All proposals should be submitted through the relevant strand group for approval

TOR: - Sign Language Partnership Group

by the SLPG. All expenditure approved by the group is also subject to approval within departmental delegation authority.

Evaluation

8. An evaluation of the outturns of each project against the objectives defined in the business case should be completed by the lead organisation and forwarded to the SLPG secretariat within the defined timescales.

Membership & Frequency of Meeting

9. Membership of SLPG is restricted to one (1) representative from each organisation representing the Deaf Community and each department. There are no restrictions to the number of representatives who represent organisations/ departments on the sub – groups. The SLPG is expected to meet 3 – 4 times per year and the sub – groups are expected to meet when proposals for funding are being considered (usually twice per year)

Department's Response to Committee Queries in letter of 14 April 2025

Following the Committee briefing session with departmental officials on 10th April 2025, Members agreed to forward queries from the paper from the Examiner of Statutory Rules on the Delegated Powers Memorandum and from the Assembly Research Bill paper to the Department for answer. Please find below the Department's responses to the questions.

1. Given the significance of the regulation making power under clause 4 of the Bill, would the Department consider the use of the affirmative resolution procedure?

The Department has written to all Departments requesting a list of their public bodies and is in the process of compiling that list. The Department must consult all of the public bodies which it proposes to list.

The core duties within clause 3 will apply to all areas within the prescribed organisations' responsibilities. The guidance referred to in clause 5 *Department to issue guidance* will also apply to which all bodies must have regard in connection with providing information and services. The Department, if it is deemed appropriate to do so, can make regulations under clause 7(4), through the draft affirmative procedure to exempt certain functions of prescribed organisations.

The Department considers that the negative procedure is appropriate to list the prescribed organisations as it enables Statutory Regulations rather than a Bill to be made and amended quickly, to insert for example, a newly formed body or remove an organisation. However, the Department notes the Committee's position and is content to share the proposed list with the committee when complete for further consideration.

2. The Department's view on the breadth of the scope of the power in Clause 7(1). It is noted that "in connection with" may be considered broader than for example "necessary", or "expedient"

For context, the Department is bound to act reasonably in seeking to make regulations which must be in connection with relevant matters of the Bill i.e. sign language interests and, as such, the power is restricted as described by such matters.

The Department has no immediate intention to make any regulations under clause 7(1). Statutory guidance under clauses 5 and 6 will set out best practice,

interpretation and process, in respect to clause 3 duties. However, it is important that the Department retains powers to regulate around these aspects, if necessary, as well as the ability to legislate around future developments that may arise such as technical advancements or parity issues.

The Department is cognisant of the fact that it would be difficult to find reasonableness if regulations are neither necessary nor expedient. As the powers are broad any regulations made under the clause are subject to the conditions set out in clause 8, that requires consultation and draft affirmative procedure.

3. Clause 7(3) provides that the Department can determine on whom to confer functions including the prescribed organisations – the Committee would like to know the views of the Department on the nature of the functions anticipated to be conferred

What may be done under clause 7(3) is informed by clause 7(1) and (2). However, the Department has no immediate intention to confer additional functions as the statutory guidance and associated sign language plans will set out procedures and functions that should be followed to deliver on the intent of the legislation.

However, the 5-yearly review process and/or other reviews may identify the need for a function to be conferred on the Department, as lead department, or another organisation for example:

- to support organisations to assess how well standards are being met with regards to accessibility, and to make improvements; and
- provide authoritative cross-government requirements and further guidance so that organisations don't have to do this individually as part of their action plans.

It may also be considered appropriate, subject to GDPR considerations, to confer a function on prescribed organisations to collate data on the numbers of BSL/ISL users seeking access to their services or information which may contribute to the provision of up-to-date prevalence figures for NI sign language users for future planning purposes.

As previously stated, the Department is cognisant of the fact that it would be difficult to find reasonableness if regulations are neither necessary nor expedient. As the powers are broad any regulations made under the clause are subject to the conditions set out in clause 8, that requires consultation and draft affirmative procedure.

4. It is noted that in the Westminster Parliament, the Lords' Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee (DPRRC) are often critical of broad powers if they lack justification or appropriate safeguards –the Committee would like the Department to provide justification and outline the appropriate safeguards for the use of broad powers in the Bill

The Department references its response to question 2 regarding clause 7(1) and would state that the same context applies: the Department is bound to act reasonably in seeking to make regulations which must be in connection with relevant matters of the Bill i.e. sign language interests and, as such, the power is restricted as described by such matters.

Rather than applying a broadbrush approach to all regulations, the Department has considered the need and justification for each power sought within the Bill - cognisant that the aim of the powers is to help ensure that the right outcomes can be fully delivered for the benefit of the deaf community. The primary safeguard is Statutory Regulations procedure and the knowledge and assurance that nothing can be done by regulations if the Assembly intervenes (whether to negative or not affirm).

The demarcation of departmental functions, and the need for Executive approval on cross-cutting policy matters, prevents the Department from acting unilaterally in areas not solely within its own responsibilities. The cross-cutting element of this Bill for which Executive approval was granted relates to accessibility to the public information and services which are available through public bodies. Should there be a substantive change to the policy intent that was the basis upon which the Executive approved the original Bill, Executive approval must be sought.

5. The Department's views on whether initial regulation creating a new accreditation scheme should be subject to an affirmative resolution procedure

Sign Language interpreters and teachers/tutors are freelance professionals. The creation of a scheme to provide for the accreditation of interpreters and teachers seeks to provide assurances of continuing professional competence, safeguarding and professional standards.

With regards to interpreters, the intention of the regulations will seek to ensure that the interpreters procured by prescribed organisations must be members of a recognised registration body, for example, The National Registers of Communication Professionals working with Deaf and Deafblind People (NRCPD). Interpreters as members pay a subscription to the NRCPD and therefore no fees will be payable to the Department or a public body.

There is currently no equivalent body for teachers. However, should a body be established in the future, the issue of fees would be considered at that point. There is no intent from the Department to administer such a body as the preference is - like the NRCPD - that it be independent of the Department or public body and therefore, no fees would be payable to the Department or a public body.

Should the Department or a public body take on such a role in future the Department accepts that the introduction of fees is a matter that should be considered under the draft affirmative procedure. However, given that the intention is for no fees to be payable, the Department is content for negative resolution at this stage.

6. 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?

The Department currently funds deaf organisations such as the British Deaf Association, National Deaf Children's Society and Action Deaf Youth to procure the services of sign language teachers/tutors to deliver their respective classes for deaf children and their families. Those organisations as a condition of funding are responsible for ensuring that the teachers/tutors they procure are properly vetted for professional standards and safeguarding.

Clause 2(2) will place a duty on the Department for making (or entering into) arrangements for ensuring the availability of classes— (a) taught by accredited teachers or other suitable persons, and (b) for deaf children, and their close families, guardians and carers, to learn (or improve proficiency in) the Language.

The Department is currently reviewing its Family Sign Language Programme as part of its preparatory work for the Bill. As part of this work, the Department will engage with organisations which provide family signing classes and others to explore the potential scalability of classes post-legislation, including teacher/tutor capacity – cognisant that teachers/tutors are freelance professionals. It is anticipated that the legislation may lead to an increase in demand for such classes.

7. Clause 2 – whether the use of BSL “or” ISL may have unintended outcomes?

The issue of reference to *and/or* is a matter of language use in context.

Clause 2 (1)(a) places a duty on the Department to promote the greater use and understanding of BSL **and** ISL. The clause does not distinguish between the two languages in this regard. With regards to the following sections:

Clause 2(1)(b) refers to the general entitlement of individuals in the deaf community to use BSL **or** ISL as necessary or convenient in the course of everyday activities. Individuals will use either BSL or ISL in this context rather than both languages in the course of everyday activities to access information or services.

Clause 2(1)(c): for context there are two linguistic communities, and deaf individuals will use BSL **or** ISL under the banner of deaf culture, cognisant of the differing linguistic journeys experienced by users of either language. For example, the Department has funded a BSL Heritage Project and an ISL Heritage project reflecting the different experiences of BSL and ISL users.

Clause 2(2) refers to 'Without prejudice to the generality of this section' which establishes that the Department must promote the greater use and understanding of both BSL **and** ISL within 2(1). The subsequent references to BSL **or** ISL reflects the context that deaf individuals will use either BSL or ISL.

For the purposes of clause 3 for example, it would be considered unreasonable for a deaf individual to seek access to information and services in both BSL and ISL. This is also the case with regards to clause 2(2) in that classes will be for either BSL or ISL and where there is demand for either BSL or ISL.

8. Clause 6 refers to a broader category of “public bodies” as well as “prescribed organisations” – Members requested clarification about the scope of this definition. For example, how does this affect private contractors carrying out services on behalf of a public body?

The reference in essence just applies to the guidance in the form of advice as outlined in clause 6(1)(a)(i) whereas the duty in clause 4(4) applies only to prescribed organisations. This essentially ensures that such advice accommodates the implications for wider public bodies which are likely to be cognisant of the recognition of BSL and ISL declaration in clause 1(1).

Clause 1(1) is all that clause 6(1)(a)(i) involves for wider public bodies. It places no duties on wider public bodies and is intended to be helpful for wider public bodies in their operations. Indeed, best practice in guidance may be disseminated to prescribed organisations through promotional or training materials which may also be shared with wider public bodies not listed as prescribed organisations.

As stated, only prescribed organisations will be subject to the duties of clause 3. However, prescribed organisations will need to consider guidance per 6(1)(iii), cognisant of 6(4) *persons or groups carrying out functions of a public character* on its behalf should be addressed in their sign language action plans 6(1)(iii).

9. 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?

The Bill provides for prescribed organisations to take all reasonable steps to ensure that information and services provided by the organisation are as accessible to individuals in the deaf community as they are to individuals who are not in the deaf community, and to offer or facilitate the use of BSL/ISL for the benefit of individuals in the deaf community in accessing information and services provided by the organisation. Guidance will contain best practice, including how the deaf community interacts with prescribed organisations, including through existing or new technologies or approaches, if appropriate.

10. The Sign Language Partnership Group – the Committee requested further information about the long-term plans for the membership of this group

The Sign Language Partnership Group (SLPG) was established post-formal recognition of BSL and ISL in 2004. The Department has committed to a review of the current terms of reference for and, representatives on the SLPG to ensure it is fit for purpose for its role post-legislation. The new constitution of the SLPG will seek to ensure that it is representative of the NI deaf community and open to organisations and deaf people who are acting on behalf of the NI deaf community. An open call for deaf representatives will be launched when preparatory work is complete which will include engagement with the deaf community and departments.

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

The Department continues to engage with representatives of the Executive departments through the Sign Language Partnership Group to consider how the proposals for legislation may impact on departments and their prescribed organisations.

The primary financial implications identified for accessibility to public information and services will be largely for BSL and ISL interpreters and translations and the SLPG

will consider options on how best to address this. The Department is currently carrying out an exercise to establish the number of requests for interpreters across departments and public bodies to quantify current costs. A similar exercise is being taken forward with local councils.

This will inform the potential scoping and specifications for a potential cost effective, future proofed and free at the point of access centrally funded NI regional model similar to the Department of Health's Regional Communication Support Service (RCSS) for People who are Deaf, Deaf-blind and Hard of Hearing.

For individual departmental commitments under the Bill, departments would be expected to identify and/or bid for appropriate resources to take forward these obligations. In the current budget context this will be very challenging, although legislative commitments will largely be subject to future regulations, in which affordability for delivery of agreed programmes will have to be prioritised in the absence of additional funding being provided and, should be included within prescribed organisations' sign language action plans.

7(4) provides that regulations may limit the operation of provisions in regulations - (a) in specific respects, and (b) in relation to particular prescribed organisations except the Northern Ireland departments, if, having regard to the scale of their resources or the nature of their functions, the Department for Communities believes this to be appropriate.

The Department is happy to provide updates to the Committee throughout its scrutiny role.

12. How have the Department 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?

Please see the response at question 11.

13. How will the Department 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?

Please see the response at question 11

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

The Department has considered the matter of balance between what ought to be in the Bill, and what may reasonably be left to regulations, to deliver the necessary outcomes. That balance is informed by the desire to have tools available both in the present and the future for implementation in furtherance of the policy as set by the Bill.

For example, the Department considers that clause 4 provides flexibility and agility to add a new body or remove a body. The need for functions or exceptions as contemplated by clause 7(3) or (4) is unlikely to be known until the relevant bodies are prescribed and guidance is available.

Such powers enable the Department to make regulations that will assist in the delivery of the Bill, for example, with regard to future technical developments and unforeseen circumstances or implementation of a scheme or project. The Department has previously described to the committee how COVID left the deaf community exposed and, through what can be described as discretionary interventions, departments provided interventions to support the deaf community who seek greater assurances for future unforeseen events.

The guidance as outlined at clause 5 provides for a consistent approach to the duties imposed on prescribed organisations under clause 3 and, it is through the guidance that the duties under clause 3 will be delivered.

The Department has outlined its rationale for the use of secondary legislation in response to specific elements of the Bill previously and those which it believes are subject to clause 8, requiring consultation and draft affirmative procedure.

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

The Department respectively refers to the Committee to previous responses with regards to regulations and secondary legislation in which it outlines what it considers appropriate in each context

Clauses 4 and 10 are considered technical regulations in nature as lists and accreditations and appropriate to the negative procedure. However, as stated previously, the Department does provide the caveat at clause 10 of a future scheme for accreditation of teachers which, if it included fees (although there is no intent from the Department to pursue a fee-paying scheme), the draft affirmative route may be appropriate.

Clause 7 enables the Department for Communities, which may by Statutory Regulation, make provision around the policy intent and the delivery of the Bill. It is acknowledged that this will be of interest to the Assembly and therefore, such

regulations must be made through the draft affirmative procedure as set out in clause 8

16. Will the Department 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?

As part of the affirmative procedure the Department will carry out appropriate consultation and risk assessments and set these out within the SL1 to the committee

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

As stated, the Department is happy to share the list of public bodies that will be listed under section 4.

Please see the response to question 5. The regulations under section 10 are still being developed, however the department has no objection to sharing a draft with the committee.

Clause 7, the Department for the reasons previously mentioned have no immediate plans to make any regulations under this clause. If such regulations are required, the Department will complete the SL1 and assist the committee in anyway it can through the affirmative procedure

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

Please see the response to question 11.

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

The Department worked closely with the Department of Health since the onset of COVID to launch the Remote Interpreting Service which has evolved into the Regional Communication Support Service (RCSS) for People who are Deaf, Deaf-blind and Hard of Hearing. This provides access to BSL and ISL interpreters remotely and in person.

Prior to the 2022 suspension of the Assembly work to refresh the 2016 Sign Language Framework began a process to assess existing accessibility to information and services for BSL/ISL users.

As advised to the Committee at the briefing on 10 April 2025, the Department is revisiting the refresh of the Framework. Through engagement with representatives of the Executive departments, the Sign Language Partnership Group will consider how they currently provide for access to information and services and to consider how the Bill's provisions may impact upon departments and their prescribed organisations and what improvements can be made.

As part of this work, the Department is currently carrying out an exercise to establish the number of requests for interpreters across departments and public bodies to quantify current costs. A similar exercise is being taken forward with local councils. This will provide insight into current steps being taken by departments, highlight potential areas for improvements and inform models for future delivery of information and services.

20. What assessment has the Department 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?

Please see the response to question 19.

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

The concept of reasonable steps is for prescribed organisations to consider in their respective circumstances, cognisant of clause 3(2)(a) and (b) e.g. affordability and practicability. The scale of an organisation may influence how they address 'reasonable steps' e.g. what is reasonable for a large organisation or department may not be reasonable for a small organisation.

However, best practice (per clause 6) is currently being co-designed for inclusion in the guidance (per clause 5). This will address issues such as consideration of

reasonable steps to access information and services This will provide benchmarks for organisations to strive towards for inclusion in the development of a sign language plan by all prescribed organisations per 6(1)(iii). Such guidance also offers consistency and continuity of approach, across prescribed organisations.

The Department may under clause 7 define such terms, however, statutory guidance is deemed the most appropriate method to deliver on the intent of the Bill.

Through a co-design mechanism, the Department also intends to refresh the 2015 Sign Language Framework which will address directly obstacles and barriers that the deaf community face in interaction with public services. It is the Department's intention that the guidance will be incorporated within the Framework which will be subject to public consultation.

22. 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?

The Department is currently exploring options on how to provide robust up-to-date data on the numbers of BSL and ISL users with its statisticians. However, prevalence is not only an issue for Northern Ireland as previously advised to the Committee with reference to the Parks and Parks 2012 report and therefore, it is engaging with colleagues and Deaf organisations in other jurisdictions to seek best practice on collation of such data should it be available.

23. 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?

Please see the response to question 11.

24. How does the Department plan to appoint commencement dates?

The Department is assessing the commencement dates for the various sections of the Bill upon Royal Assent. For example, clause 3 which confers statutory duties on prescribed organisations will not commence until the statutory guidance as set out in clause 5 is published and operational, at which time the department will commence clause 3 and subsequent duties will come into effect. The Department is also

considering the commencement date for clause 1 which is legally significant and may be subject to the availability of guidance.

As stated previously, the Department does provide the caveat at clause 10 regarding a future scheme for accreditation of teachers which, if it included fees and, notwithstanding the Department's preference to avoid a fee-paying scheme, the draft affirmative route would be appropriate. In any case, as such a scheme is not yet available, the commencement date for teachers is likely to be appointed for a later date than for interpreters. The Department will update the Committee on these considerations throughout the Committee's scrutiny role.



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

COMMITTEE FOR COMMUNITIES

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14 April 2025
Our ref: CC/25/160

Ms Laura Coffey
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Department for Communities
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Dear Laura

Departmental Briefing on the Sign Language Bill

At the Committee meeting on 10 April the Departmental officials agreed to provide the Committee with the following information:

- The Terms of Reference for the Sign Language Partnership Group
- A copy of the consultation report on the Sign Language
- A breakdown of the numbers studying ISL and BSL

Following the briefing session, Members agreed to forward queries from the paper from the Examiner of Statutory Rules on the Delegated Powers Memorandum and from the Assembly Research Bill paper to the Department for answer.

The queries are as follows:

- Given the significance of the regulation making power under clause 4 of the Bill, would the Department consider the use of the affirmative resolution procedure?
- The Department's view on the breadth of the scope of the power in Clause 7(1). It is noted that "in connection with" may be considered broader than for example "necessary", or "expedient"
- Clause 7(3) provides that the Department can determine on whom to confer functions including the prescribed organisations – the

Committee would like to know the views of the Department on the nature of the functions anticipated to be conferred

- It is noted that in the Westminster Parliament, the Lords' Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee (DPRRC) are often critical of broad powers if they lack justification or appropriate safeguards – the Committee would like the Department to provide justification and outline the appropriate safeguards for the use of broad powers in the Bill
- The Department's views on whether initial regulation creating a new accreditation scheme should be subject to an affirmative resolution procedure
- 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?
- Clause 2 – whether the use of BSL “or” ISL may have unintended outcomes?
- Clause 6 refers to a broader category of “public bodies” as well as “prescribed organisations” – Members requested clarification about the scope of this definition. For example, how does this affect private contractors carrying out services on behalf of a public body?
- 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?
- The Sign Language Partnership Group – the Committee requested further information about the long-term plans for the membership of this group
- How will the Department ensure the proposals are affordable in light of ongoing pressures faced across the Executive?
- How have the Department 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 Department 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?
- 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 Department 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 Department forward drafts of the proposed regulations set out in the Bill to the Northern Ireland Assembly?
- What discussion has the Department had with other Departments and public sector organisations about their ability to fund any potential financial implications of the duties in the Bill?
- What assessment has the Department made of existing steps public bodies have carried out to improve accessibility for the deaf community?
- What assessment has the Department 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?
- Will the Department provide further clarity on the meaning of “reasonable steps” to assist “prescribed organisations” in their interpretation of Clause 3?
- 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?
- How does the Department plan to appoint commencement dates?

The Committee would appreciate a response at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely

Barbara Love

Interim Clerk to the Committee for Communities