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Our ref: GM 0910-2025
Date: 16 October 2025

From: The DALO

Ms Emer Boyle
Communities Committee Clerk
Room 430
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Stormont
Belfast
BT4 3XX

Dear Emer,

Sign Language Bill

You wrote to me on 30 September 2025 (your ref: CC/25/298) to request a Departmental briefing on the Bill. Officials will provide an oral briefing on 23 October. You also requested information on a series of issues relating to the Bill.

Officials have indicated that the list of issues referred to in your letter is currently being progressed, including by co-design with the Deaf sector; and that some of these issues are closer to completion than others. Officials are content to share this information when in a position to do so, to help the Committee with its scrutiny of the Bill. Please find attached briefing which provides updates on those matters.

Yours sincerely,

[REDACTED]

Laura Coffey
Departmental Assembly Liaison Office
Private Office

NI ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE FOR COMMUNITIES WRITTEN BRIEFING

Introduction

1. Following the Committee's meeting on 25 September, the Committee Clerk wrote to the Department on 30 September 2025 to request a Departmental briefing on 23 October and outlined in that correspondence that the Committee has requested information on a series of issues relating to the Sign Language Bill, those being:
 - a copy of a draft of co-designed best practice and guidance;
 - a copy of the updated Sign Language Framework;
 - any further work on associated costs;
 - a copy of the list of public bodies that is referenced under clause 4 included any proposed "persons or groups exercising functions of a public character" in addition to the public bodies; and
 - a copy of the draft regulations under Clause 10.
2. By way of an update, the list of issues and requests for sight of documents referred within the Committee Clerk's letter is currently being progressed, including by co-design with the Deaf sector; therefore some of these issues are closer to completion than others.
3. As indicated in previous correspondence with the Committee, officials are content to share this information when in a position to do so, in the hope that it will help the Committee with its scrutiny of the Bill. The following written briefing provides updates on those matters of interest to the Committee. As these issues and draft documents are finalised, officials will contact the Committee Clerk to provide updates as line-by-line scrutiny of the Bill progresses.
4. Officials are cognisant of the fact that members of the Committee may intend to seek amendments to the Bill and, as such, have indicated to the Committee Clerk that we are content to progress discussion of any agreed amendments with the Office of Legislative Counsel in the interests of consistency and timeliness. Therefore, following consideration of

the Committee's views to date and the Department's further engagement with stakeholders, officials look forward to discussing potential amendments to the Bill with Committee on 23 October.

Further work in parallel with the Bill

5. The Bill creates enabling powers to implement certain duties which can be achieved by statutory regulations such as the listing of prescribed organisations.
6. The Bill also directs that the Department must issue statutory guidance to include best practice which prescribed organisations should include within their respective sign language action plans (SLAP). These plans outline how the commitments of this Bill with regard to the specific functions and information of respective organisations will be made accessible to the Deaf community. Officials are in the process preparing a draft of a DfC SLAP which the Department intends to share with the Sign Language Partnership Group (SLPG) for assessment and, following this it can share with the Committee.
7. Work to refresh the Sign Language Framework/Strategy is also progressing. This will, through a co-design approach, not only identify key outcomes and actions to further develop the infrastructure of support to deliver on statutory duties of prescribed organisations, but will also outline action to promote sign language and promote BSL and ISL. An update on work to date is provided within this briefing.
8. These various workstreams will augment the Primary legislation, setting out in detail not just the policy intent of the Bill but how this will be realised. Officials are conscious of the strong call from within the Deaf community for early implementation of the Bill's provisions, and that these will generally be effected through Statutory Rules and the like. Officials are therefore attempting to progress a number of streams of work in parallel with the stages of the Bill – whilst not getting ahead of the detailed consideration of the Bill's provisions.
9. The Committee has sought further information and documents and updates on various issues, and these are provided in the following paragraphs.

Best practice and guidance

10. With regard to the request for a copy of a of co-designed best practice and guidance, a first draft has been received from the British Deaf Association. The Department has committed to sharing this with Deaf organisations which are represented on the Sign Language Partnership Group (SLPG). It will also be circulated to SLPG representatives from Executive departments. This will provide an opportunity for detailed consideration and input to agree a fit for purpose final draft for inclusion in the draft Statutory Guidance. Officials are happy to share a draft when the co-design phase has ended, which we expect to be within the next 4-6 weeks.

Sign Language Framework

11. Work continues on the refreshed Sign Language Framework/Strategy through a series of engagement events with the Deaf community and Executive departments. This will contribute to the development of the outcomes and actions for the Framework/Strategy. This work has included a series of presentations with the SLPG, Deaf community and other stakeholders. The presentation revisits the nine objectives of the 2016 draft Framework to highlight achievements to date. This will allow a focus on the new 'outcomes' and actions that are to be the basis of the refreshed Sign Language Framework Strategy. The Department is also finalising a competition to recruit a natural BSL/ISL signer to expedite this process.

12. Officials propose to provide the Minister with a draft of the refreshed Sign Language Framework by 31 March 2026 for consideration ahead of referral to the Executive for approval to hold a public consultation. It is proposed that the Statutory Guidance will be consulted on at the same time.

13. Although we are not in a position to share a draft of the Framework/Strategy with the Committee at this stage, officials will include key elements of the current thinking in their opening remarks on 23 October, and are happy to speak to the various strands of this work.

Costs associated with the Bill

14. There are no costs associated with the Bill proposals at this stage, as the Bill creates enabling powers to implement duties which may incur costs at a later date. This may include agreement that each department bids for budget cover for their own identified costs and takes responsibility for any actions that they implement as a result of this legislation.
15. However, the primary financial implications will be for accessibility to public information and services, under the principle that access to services begins with access to information. Therefore, we have carried out an exercise to identify the current costs of interpreting incurred by public bodies, with a view to quantifying the potential costs post legislation (as the legislation will likely increase demand). We are in discussions with various colleagues at the moment as to how best to align sign language translation provision and charging, with those for other translation services.
16. In an extension to this exercise, work is also under way with representatives of the Deaf community and Executive Departments to assess if all requests for interpreting are indeed currently being met, and to understand the reasons if requests for interpreters are not being met. In addition, this work will examine if some BSL/ISL users are not requesting interpreter support and, if so, the reasons why.
17. Officials will advise the Committee on current interpreting costs when this further work has been undertaken. We anticipate that this information will be available within the next 4 to 6 weeks.

List of public bodies that is referenced under clause 4

18. The Department has previously indicated it is content to share a list of public bodies to be considered prescribed organisations for the purposes of the Bill. Officials have carried out an exercise to collate such a list of public bodies under the vires of Executive departments for listing as prescribed organisations.
19. A final sweep has been of those public bodies has been commissioned for confirmation of this list and an understanding of whether departments will include any proposed “persons or groups exercising functions of a public character” in addition to the public bodies. The Department of Education is considering the implications of the duties outlined in the draft

Bill on all schools, should they be included as prescribed bodies, and will keep DfC officials informed. The Department will update the Committee as this becomes clearer.

20. Officials are currently assessing the most appropriate approach to any proposed “persons or groups exercising functions of a public character” being listed, and the most appropriate legislative mechanisms for their inclusion.

Copy of the draft regulations under Clause 10

21. Clause 10 provides for the Department by regulations to make a scheme for the accreditation of teachers and interpreters. With regards to BSL/ISL interpreters it is a straightforward exercise to list those professional and registration bodies which BSL/ISL interpreters must be registered with currently to access work with NI public bodies. Interpreters pay a subscription fee to these bodies - for example, the National Registers of Communication Professionals Working with Deaf and Deafblind People (NRCPD). As such, there is no intent to impose additional fees upon interpreters. The intent is to ensure that interpreters meet optimum standards for their profession, which those registration bodies set and monitor.
22. There is currently no equivalent body for BSL/ISL teachers or tutors. However, officials are exploring options with the current cohort of BSL/ISL teachers/tutors on whether it is possible to establish an equivalent professional body to ensure optimum standards of teaching and safeguarding registration.
23. Officials will share draft regulations for the interpreters when complete over the coming weeks and will keep the Committee apprised with the ongoing work to develop a suitable scheme, at which time regulations for the accreditation of teachers will follow.