

Our ref: GM 1179-2025
Date: 05 January 2026

From: The DALO

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

Dear Emer,

Thank you for your letter of 3 December 2025 (your ref: CC/25/410) in which you state that *in addition to its deliberations on the particular clauses of the Sign Language Bill, Committee considered other issues received in evidence on which, while not fitting into particular clauses, are relevant to the Committee's consideration of the Bill. Committee agreed that I write to you and request an update on.*

As I advised in my letter to you dated 9 December, the Department aimed to reply to your letter (CC/25/410) before the end of the Christmas Recess as we had prioritised resource on the amendments in advance of the 11 December hearing. The Department apologises for this short delay. Please find below the Department's responses to the issues raised in your letter of 3 December.

- 1. What work, if any, the Department is taking forward in relation to schemes for accessing interpretation for activities or services other than in the public sector***

The Department has prioritised work to progress statutory provisions to ensure access to public information and services at this stage. Although we are aware of interpreter voucher schemes for use in non-public service domains in other countries such as Finland and also Ireland, the Department has not taken forward any substantive work on this matter. Such a scheme will need to be cognisant of Personal Independence Payments (PIP) which can be used for interpreter support in day-to-day activities. In addition, the issue of how private companies could gain access to any future signed video-relay service would be a consideration under the specifications and funding model for a future NI Interpreting contract. However, the Department's priority at this stage is to progress a service to meet public bodies' statutory commitments under the Sign Language legislation. The Department will continue to discuss non-public service interpreter access with representatives of the Deaf community. Should such enhancements be deliverable in the future, this would not require primary legislation to facilitate.

2. Funding/Costing: While Committee is due to get further information on costings this week, what funding bids are being made in relation to the Sign Language Bill and its implementation

The Department bid for £0.5m, £3m & £3m Resource DEL over the next 3 years to cover costs associated with the Sign Language Bill. However, the outcome of the Spending Review for DfC is not known at this stage.

The Committee has asked particularly about Auditory Verbal therapy. This therapy seeks to develop spoken language through listening for pre-school deaf children, from birth to five years of age, to help them make sense of the sound they receive through their hearing technology, like cochlear implants and hearing aids, and develop spoken language so they can learn to talk like their hearing friends. This is therefore beyond the scope of the Sign Language Bill and Sign Language policy, and falls to the Department for Health under its Speech and Language therapy ambit.

- 3. The Committee asked how the Bill is linked with the Disability Strategy (which was due to be released recently) and how does it follow the principles of the UNCRPD? Including, but not limited to, how the SLPG follows the principles on the UNCRPD in terms of consultation. What, if any, update did the Minister provide Danny Donnelly MLA following his question about UNCRPD at second stage?**

There are two commitments in the draft Disability Strategy which relate directly to sign language. They are as follows:

Commitment 6 - We will ensure the rights of sign language users are protected. Deaf people who use sign language as their first or preferred language identify themselves as part of a cultural and linguistic minority and view their signed language as a 'language of need' which, along with Deaf culture, should be respected and celebrated. Uniquely, we have two signed languages - British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language. We have introduced a Sign Language Bill into the Assembly and we will refresh the 2016 draft Sign Language Framework. This work will be informed by key stakeholders from the Deaf sector.

Commitment 54 - We will promote and support a pathway to Sign Language Qualifications which may lead to qualification and registration as interpreters, translators and teachers to contribute to the delivery of the intent of the Sign Language Legislation and Sign Language Framework objectives.

The Sign Language Bill is complementary to various articles of the UNCRPD. For example:

Article 2 – Definitions

“Language” includes spoken and signed languages and other forms of non spoken languages –”

Article 9 – Accessibility

“2. States Parties shall also take appropriate measures: --

e) To provide forms of live assistance and intermediaries, including guides, readers and professional sign language interpreters, to facilitate accessibility to buildings and other facilities open to the public.”

Article 21 – Freedom of expression and opinion, and access to information

“States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities can exercise the right to freedom of expression and opinion, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas on an equal basis with others and through all forms of communication of their choice, as defined in article 2 of the present Convention, including by: ---

b) Accepting and facilitating the use of sign languages, --

e) Recognizing and promoting the use of sign languages.”

Article 24 – Education

“3. States Parties shall enable persons with disabilities to learn life and social development skills to facilitate their full and equal participation in education and as members of the community. To this end, States Parties shall take appropriate measures, including: --

b) Facilitating the learning of sign language and the promotion of the linguistic identity of the deaf community --.

4. In order to help ensure the realization of this right, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to employ teachers, including teachers with disabilities, who are qualified in sign language --.”

Article 30 – Participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport

“4. Persons with disabilities shall be entitled, on an equal basis with others, to recognition and support of their specific cultural and linguistic identity, including sign languages and deaf culture

Minister Lyons wrote to Danny Donnelly MLA in March 2025 offering a meeting with Departmental officials and giving contact details to make arrangements. While this offer has not been taken up to date, officials would welcome a meeting to discuss the proposed UNCRPD Private Member’s Bill.

4. How will the Department consider the following research in progressing and supporting others

The Department considers research from a range of different sources – local and international – and assesses whether they have relevance to NI policy development. Indeed, through its co-funding with the Ulster Society of the QUB Centre for Translation and Interpreting, it provides for 18 MAs, 1 postgraduate post and 3 PhDs to develop a NI base of academic excellence and research integrating BSL, ISL, Deaf and hearing students and academics.

The Department has also funded the QUB School of Medicine to author [*Delivering public health advice to sign language users: a qualitative study with key stakeholders*](#) which has been published in the British Medical Journal. In addition, we have commissioned the report *Review of Department for Communities Funded Sign Language Provision in Northern Ireland* authored by Professor Bronagh Byrne, QUB Professor of Disability and Children's Rights and Director, [Centre for Children's Rights](#) and Ailbhe McGowan in collaboration with the Young People’s

Advisory Group. The report provides an independent assessment of the Department's Family Sign Language Courses Programme.

With regards to the BDA reports referenced in your letter, the Department received copies of its reports from the BDA and we acknowledge the headline finding that "*Every £1 invested in early British Sign Language provision yields up to £14 in lifetime benefits - boosting education, employment, and health outcomes for deaf children and society.*" This is consistent with the Department's approach to investing in sign language – particularly early years' acquisition of sign language.

The Department has also received and been appraised of the report ***Locked out: Exclusion of deaf and deafblind BSL users from health and social care in the UK.*** The Department is currently working closely with representatives of the Deafblind community to develop the outcomes and actions for the development of a Deafblind infrastructure to support the Deafblind community in NI which will form part of the refreshed Sign Language Framework.

The Department has developed a network of expert partners to both grow the NI academic research base and to advise it of existing research and its applicability to NI sign language policy.

5. Is the Department, in its Framework, planning to address the lack of a community hub for the deaf community?

The Department has provided capital funding to Foyle Deaf Association in Derry/Londonderry to purchase and equip its sign language teaching centre and social hub. It is also awaiting the permanent appointment of a Deaf sign language officer to reinvigorate its engagement with the Deaf community on the Sign Language Framework. A Sign Language Hub remains a priority for the Deaf community and this will be reflected within the refreshed Framework, with the caveat that such a hub is subject to business case development and availability of capital funding.

6. What are the Department's plans to document and preserve deaf culture and invest in deaf research?

The Department has funded Foyle Deaf Association (FDA) to deliver a Deaf Heritage project for ISL users and to provide governance oversight for the funding to an equivalent project for BSL users. The outputs from both projects are being collated and some of the ISL filmed material and contributions are available on the FDA website. The Department is working with the producers of both projects to identify and develop a suitable platform to exhibit the collated materials to a wider societal audience. This work is being progressed within the broader context of the Department's work on the Heritage, Culture and Creativity programme, recognising the cultural aspects of sign language activity.

With regard to investing in deaf research, please see the response at (4) above.

7. Confirmation in relation to the avenues of redress for people who do not identify as 'disabled' and therefore cannot avail of the DDA (in the event that a service is not provided on request) e.g. parents of deaf children accessing classes.

The Sign Language Bill states that the Department must issue guidance, including on how prescribed organisations should develop their Sign Language Action Plans. This will include how organisations monitor requests for accessibility to services and information and clear signposting to each organisation's complaints procedures. Parents of deaf children will be acting on behalf of their deaf child(ren), and organisations funded by the Department to deliver family sign language classes will have contractually to commit to conditions of funding including effective procedures and controls for monitoring and dealing with complaints. These will be reported to the Department (as the funder) by way of an agreed monitoring schedule.

8. Can the Department confirm if a Regulatory Impact Assessment has been completed?

The Department conducted an integrated screening exercise on a number of impact assessments, including a regulatory impact assessment. The screening exercise found that a full regulatory impact assessment was not required, as it had no direct impact on the private and voluntary sectors. The Department accepts that this may not be clear within the EFM and will take remedial action when drafting the explanatory notes.

The Bill is directed at public services, and it is only in respect of such services that clause 3 will apply. Consequently, if a private or voluntary organisation is deemed to be carrying out functions of a 'public character', it will not be possible to list such a body until any private or voluntary business undertaken by that organisation is exempted from any duties under the Bill.

Clause 7 (4) addresses any diversion into the private or voluntary sector, and provides a route for exempting such functions.

(4) Regulations under this Chapter may limit the operation of this Part—

(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 believes this to be appropriate.

9. Has a Child's Impact Assessment been carried out, and if not, why not?

The Department has not carried out a Child's Impact Assessment. As explained at (4) above, it has commissioned the *Review of Department for Communities Funded Sign Language Provision in Northern Ireland* authored by Professor Bronagh Byrne in collaboration with the Young People's Advisory Group. In addition, the Department receives regular monitoring reports and post project evaluations from Deaf organisations which includes direct feedback from deaf children, their parents and families and professional support network. The Department believes this reporting and assessment mechanism to be robust, informative and with sufficient rigour from deaf children and their families to negate the need for the Child's impact assessment.

Departmental Amendments

As stated at (4) above, the Department considers research from a range of different sources – local and international – and assesses whether they have relevance to NI policy development.

The Department has considered the *Review of Department for Communities Funded Sign Language Provision in Northern Ireland* by Professor Bronagh Byrne, which recommends that the Department for Communities should continue to fund families' sign language provision in Northern Ireland so it can be provided free of charge to families and professionals working with deaf children. The Department has consistently articulated that family sign classes are a priority and intends to continue its funding of free classes for families. The Department has therefore revisited clause 2(2) of the Bill which references making arrangements for classes and has decided, for the avoidance of doubt, to include an amendment to specify that these classes will be free.

In addition, at clause 7(3)(b) Regulations under this Chapter may confer functions on—

(a) *the prescribed organisations (apart from the Northern Ireland departments),*

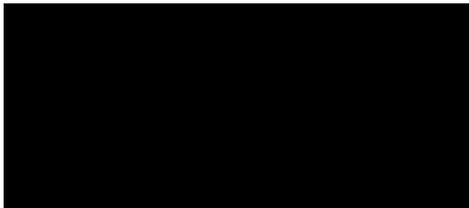
(b) the Department for Communities alone or each Northern Ireland department in the same way, or...

The Department has instructed OLC to amend sub-clause (b) for clarification so as to be able to make a Regulation to apply to one, any or a specific subset of Departments.

These two amendments are in addition to the amendments agreed with the Committee and for which we have instructed OLC accordingly. The Department will of course provide the Committee with drafts of the amendments upon receipt from OLC.

I trust you find this information helpful.

Yours sincerely,



Laura Coffey

Departmental Assembly Liaison Officer

Private Office



**Northern Ireland
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COMMITTEE FOR COMMUNITIES

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03 December 2025
Our ref: CC/25/410

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Dear Laura

Sign Language Bill Deliberations – Other Issues

On Tuesday 2 December, in addition to its deliberations on the particular clauses of the Sign Language Bill, Committee considered other issues received in evidence on which, while not fitting into particular clauses, are relevant to the Committee's consideration of the Bill. Committee agreed that I write to you and request an update on the following:

1 – What work, if any, the Department is taking forward in relation to schemes for accessing interpretation for activities or services other than in the public sector – such as the **voucher scheme** seen in Finland and how private companies could gain **access any future signed video-relay-service**, for example. Other examples presented to Committee include: Sport, employment (Access to Work scheme), extra-curricular activities following school time, access to religion and worship, communicating with utility providers and accessing solicitors and counselling services.

2 – **Funding/Costing:** While Committee is due to get further information on costings this week, what funding bids are being made in relation to the Sign Language Bill and its implementation? What further work has commenced following a question from Colin McGrath MLA at Second Stage in relation to

auditory-verbal intervention which was quoted as costing “£80,000 for the whole of Northern Ireland”?

3 – How is the Bill linked with the **Disability Strategy** (which was due to be released recently) and how does it follow the principles of the UNCRPD? including, but not limited to, how the SLPG follows the principles on the **UNCRPD** in terms of consultation. What, if any, update did the Minister provide Danny Donnelly MLA following his question about UNCRPD at second stage?

4 - How will the Department consider the following **research** in progressing and supporting others to progress, the Bill effectively:

- [Locked out: Exclusion of deaf and deafblind BSL users from health and social care in the UK](#)
- [The value of British Sign Language: An Economic Analysis](#)
- [The benefits of early access to sign language for deaf children - an evidence briefing](#)
- [Evaluation of family sign at home pilot](#)

5 – Is the Department, in its Framework, planning to address the lack of a **community hub** for the deaf community?

6 – What are the Department’s plans to document and preserve **deaf culture** and invest in **deaf research**?

7 - Confirmation in relation to the **avenues of redress** for people who do not identify as ‘disabled’ and therefore cannot avail of the DDA (in the event that a service is not provided on request) e.g. parents of deaf children accessing classes.

8 - Can the Department confirm if a **Regulatory Impact Assessment** has been completed?

- Minister’s comments at Second Stage suggest the Bill places no duties on private enterprises or the community or voluntary sector, and so one wasn’t carried out.
- Evidence from Officials also suggests it wasn’t required, however the EFM states it was completed and there was no direct impact
- Given the **‘public character’ functions** these organisations may be providing, please confirm if a regulatory impact assessment was completed and how, in light of this, it could be suggested that it won’t place duties on private enterprises or the community or voluntary sector?

9 - Has a **Child’s Impact Assessment** been carried out, and if not, why not?

In order to support efficient progress, Committee requests that responses in relation to these issues are received ahead of Official's attendance at Committee on 11 December, before it moves to informal and formal clause by clause post-Christmas Recess.

Committee would be grateful for the earliest possible response.

Yours sincerely

Emer Boyle

Clerk to the Committee for Communities