

Response ID ANON-PYJC-FR13-J

Submitted to Sign Language Bill - Call for Evidence
Submitted on 2025-05-09 00:13:02

Consent and introduction

What is your name?

Name:

[REDACTED]

What is your email address?

Email:

[REDACTED]

What is your organisation?

Organisation:

[REDACTED]

Please confirm you have read the Northern Ireland Assembly's Committee privacy notice by clicking the button below.

I have read the privacy notice

Do you consent to your submission being published on the Committee's website and included in the Committee's report?

Yes, publish but with my personal information and any content that could be used to identify me redacted.

Clause 1

Do you feel Clause 1 goes far enough in formally recognising BSL and ISL as languages of Northern Ireland?

Yes

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box to enter additional details:

I fully support the official recognition of both British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL) as languages of the North with equal status. This is a crucial step toward linguistic equality and cultural recognition. However, legal recognition must be backed by practical rights, funding, and enforceable duties across all public sectors. It must be more than symbolic, it must drive real change in how services are delivered and how the deaf community is supported in daily life.

Recognition must bring real, enforceable rights for deaf people. BSL and ISL must be treated equally to spoken and written languages in law, with full legal status and protection. Recognition must lead to automatic rights in education, healthcare, private healthcare, employment, justice, and public life. Deaf people still face daily communication barriers, and these won't be solved by symbolic recognition alone. There must be a legal duty on public bodies to provide services in BSL/ISL as a right, not as a courtesy. Equality means deaf people should not have to request access — it should be standard, available, and immediate.

Clause 2

Do you feel Clause 2 goes far enough in promoting the use of BSL and ISL and developing deaf culture?

No

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box for entering additional information:

No, it is a step forward, but much more is needed.

The duty to promote BSL and ISL, and support the cultural development of the deaf community, is welcome. However, the language around "to such extent (and in such manner) as the Department considers appropriate" is too vague and may allow the Department to avoid strong obligations. This clause should include mandatory actions such as funding for BSL/ISL education in schools, provision for deaf-led organisations, and family learning support. It must guarantee sustained and meaningful investment, particularly in rural and underrepresented areas.

This clause mentions promoting BSL and ISL, but it must include a legally binding responsibility for the Department to fund and deliver access. Promotion is not enough, we need action and investment.

Deaf culture, identity, and language are deeply connected. Supporting deaf culture means supporting deaf people to lead, teach, and shape their communities. The government must fund deaf-led organisations, support deaf events, and protect spaces for deaf people to come together and thrive, in our own languages.

Are there any other approaches (apart from providing for the availability of classes) that could help to meet the objective of the greater use and understanding of BSL and ISL?

Yes

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box to enter additional details:

Yes, a number of additional strategies would significantly strengthen the implementation of Clause 2:

1. Establish a Deaf Centre: Funding should be allocated for a dedicated Deaf Centre — a community hub run by and for deaf people. This space would offer social, cultural, educational, and mental health support in BSL/ISL, helping break isolation and strengthen deaf identity. Similar centres are funded for minority ethnic communities — the same equity must be extended to the deaf community.
2. BSL/ISL in the School Curriculum: BSL and ISL should be offered as part of the standard school curriculum for all students, not just those with deaf family members. This promotes wider understanding and early exposure.
3. Public Awareness Campaigns: The Department should run regular campaigns to raise awareness about deaf culture, rights, and sign languages. These could include media content, online resources, and public events.
4. Mandatory Deaf Awareness and Sign Language Training: Public sector workers in key services (health, education, justice) should receive training in deaf awareness and basic sign language skills to improve access and communication.
5. Support for Deaf-led Organisations: Deaf-led organisations must be resourced and supported to deliver training, community programmes, and policy input, ensuring initiatives are deaf-informed and culturally appropriate.
6. Digital and Remote Access: Develop and promote digital tools and interpreting services (e.g., on-demand remote interpreters, accessible apps) to support sign language use across various sectors and in emergencies.
7. More Accessible Public Services: Ensure BSL/ISL is available across all public services, not just on request, and that communication in sign language is provided 24/7 — including during leisure time, emergencies, or outside of working hours.

Clause 3

Do you think the duty placed on prescribed organisations to make the information and services accessible to members of the deaf community is sufficient?

No

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box for entering additional information:

The requirement for prescribed organisations to make information and services accessible in BSL and ISL is crucial. However, this duty should be enforceable with clear accountability and penalties for non-compliance. Additionally, the clause must ensure accessibility 24/7 — not just during working hours. Deaf people have a right to access emergency services, healthcare, and public resources at all times, just like hearing individuals.

“Reasonable steps” let organisations avoid real responsibility. Accessibility should never be optional. Deaf people have a right to access all public services — without delay, without having to ask, and without having to fight.

Clause 4

Do you support the approach taken by Clause 4?

Yes

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box for entering additional information:

Yes, but it must go further. The list must include all public and private services, including:

- Healthcare and hospitals
- Private Healthcare
- Education institutions
- Local councils
- Police and justice systems
- Emergency services
- Public transport
- Job centres
- Housing providers
- Arts and culture institutions
- Sports Events

- Job Interviews
- Kids Sports Clubs - weekend
- Wine tasting events
- Barber / Hairdressers

The list should be reviewed regularly and expanded as needed to cover any public-facing and private organisations that delivers services.

However, the list must also include key public-facing bodies and private services such as health trusts, education authorities, housing providers, emergency services, local councils, and transport providers. The Department must also consult with deaf-led organisations when adding or removing bodies from this list to ensure relevance and transparency.

Clause 5

Do you support the approach to consultation required in Clause 5?

Yes

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box for entering additional information:

Deaf people and their representative organisations must be centrally involved in writing, reviewing, and updating this guidance.

Consultation must include multiple deaf-led organisations, not just one. The deaf community is diverse. People who use BSL, ISL, or both must all be consulted. Deafblind people and those with additional needs must also be represented.

Consultation must:

- Be conducted in BSL and ISL.
- Be ongoing, not just one-off.
- Be transparent, with public reports showing how deaf feedback was used.

Clause 6

Do you support the approach taken in this clause?

Yes

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box for entering additional information:

Yes, but the guidance must be mandatory, not just advisory. Best practice should set a minimum standard, not be left to interpretation. Each prescribed organisation must:

- Develop annual sign language action plans with deaf community involvement.
- Report publicly on their progress.
- Train staff regularly with deaf awareness and sign language basics.
- Use deaf people as experts and trainers in shaping their services.

Do you feel there is anything else this Clause should include?

Yes

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box to enter additional details:

Yes. The clause should be strengthened in the following ways:

Make Guidance Mandatory: Rather than merely “advice,” the guidance should include mandatory standards for certain key services — especially in health, education, emergency services, and justice — where communication breakdowns have the most serious consequences for deaf individuals.

Deaf Centre Inclusion: The guidance should explicitly recommend the establishment and public funding of a Deaf Centre, or multiple centres, as a best practice example. These centres would provide direct services, cultural support, education, interpreting coordination, and community development. Public bodies should be advised to engage with such centres in developing their sign language action plans.

Community-Led Input: Guidance must require that prescribed organisations co-produce their sign language action plans with deaf people, particularly through partnerships with deaf-led organisations, rather than just consulting tokenistically.

Monitoring and Enforcement Mechanisms: Clause 6 should specify how adherence to guidance will be monitored. There should be independent oversight, with powers to audit, publish compliance reports, and recommend improvements where necessary.

Training and Awareness: Best practice guidance should include clear minimum standards for deaf awareness training and basic BSL/ISL competency among public-facing staff.

24/7 Access: The clause should include best practice expectations that access to BSL/ISL support services is not limited to working hours — equal access must include evenings, weekends, and emergency situations.

Accessibility Standards: Guidance should include technical standards for ensuring digital, video, and in-person service access for BSL/ISL users, including high-quality interpreting, subtitling, and the use of visual translation services.

Clause 7

Do you support the provision for the Department for Communities to make regulations detailed in Clause 7?

Yes

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box for entering additional information:

The power to make regulations is necessary, but should include a duty to act, not just a power to act. The deaf community cannot rely on future goodwill. The Bill should require the Department to bring forward regulations on key issues (like interpreter qualifications, funding for community services, and inclusive education). Deaf organisations must have a formal role in shaping all regulations.

Regulations allow the Bill to grow and adapt. But this power must be used to strengthen rights, not weaken them. It must never be used to cut corners or reduce standards because of cost.

Do you support the approach to consultation detailed in Clause 7?

Yes

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box to enter additional details:

Yes — but it must always include:

- Deaf-led organisations
- Deaf individuals with lived experience
- A formal public comment process
- Reports in BSL and ISL

Regulations must be shaped with the community, not just about us without us.

Clause 8

Do you feel the level of consultation required in Clause 8 is sufficient?

No

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box for entering additional information:

Not fully. Consulting “at least one group” is not enough. The Department must set clear standards for inclusive, accessible consultation that:

- Ensures diverse deaf voices are heard.
- Reaches rural and underrepresented groups.
- Provides materials in BSL, ISL, and easy read formats.
- Reports publicly on the outcome.

Regulations must not move forward without proven engagement and evidence of deaf community agreement.

Clause 9

Do you think evaluating the impact of the Bill in a report every five years is an appropriate length of time?

No

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box for entering additional information:

No - five years is too long between evaluations.

Five years allows too much time for failures, delays, or gaps in delivery to go unnoticed or uncorrected. Deaf people need real change — and need it now.

The first report should happen within two years, to ensure early accountability, followed by evaluations every three years.

Ongoing feedback should also be collected from the deaf community annually, and all reports must be:

- Made public in BSL, ISL, and English.
- Co-developed with deaf-led organisations.
- Used to trigger improvements, not just sit on shelves.

Clause 10

Do you support the creation of a scheme for accrediting BSL and ISL teachers?

Yes

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box for entering additional information:

I fully support the creation of an accreditation scheme for both BSL and ISL teachers. Such a scheme would ensure high standards of teaching and interpreting, fostering trust within the deaf community. It would also promote consistency and professionalism, which are crucial for effective communication and education.

Teachers of BSL and ISL must be qualified, fluent, and culturally aware — ideally native signers. An accreditation scheme is essential to uphold quality and consistency. It must be:

- Designed with deaf teachers and deaf organisations.
- Inclusive of ISL, not just BSL, to reflect the full community.
- Fully funded to train and support more deaf tutors, not just hearing teachers.

Do you support the creation of a scheme for accrediting BSL and ISL interpreters?

Yes

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box to enter additional details:

Yes — this is vital.

Accredited interpreters ensure deaf people get accurate, respectful communication. But more than accreditation is needed — we also need:

- A larger pool of interpreters, especially for out-of-hours access.
- Continuous training in specialised areas (e.g. legal, medical, mental health).
- Strong complaints and quality assurance processes — designed with deaf input.

Clause 11

Do you agree with the definition of the deaf community provided for in the Bill?

Yes

Please give details to support your answer. Please outline what people or groups you think should be included or excluded and why.

Text box for entering additional information:

Yes — broadly, but it should be expanded.

The inclusion of deafblind people and CODAs (Children of Deaf Adults) is very welcome. It reflects the real diversity of the deaf community. But it should also include:

- Hard of hearing people who use BSL or ISL sometimes.
- Immigrants and refugees who use BSL or ISL as their only language in Northern Ireland, even if they are not “deaf” in the traditional sense.
- Deaf sign language users with additional disabilities or complex needs who rely on adapted forms of sign language.

Language, not audiology, defines the community. The definition must remain flexible, led by lived experience, not narrow labels.

Clause 12

Do you agree with the definition of BSL and ISL provided for in the Bill?

Yes

Please give details to support your answer. If you think there are any aspects missing, please outline what you think should be included.

Text box for entering additional information:

Mostly — but it should be stronger.

Including tactile and non-visual forms for deafblind users is excellent, but the definition must also reflect:

- Regional variations of BSL and ISL — language is not one-size-fits-all.
- The need to protect these languages from being simplified into “signed English” or artificial systems.
- The cultural and linguistic richness of sign languages — they are complete natural languages, with grammar, structure, and history.

This clause must clearly state that interpreters and teachers must use full BSL/ISL, not simplified or mixed systems, unless requested by the user.

Clause 13

Do you agree with the definition of “everyday reliance” provided in the Bill?

No

Please give details to support your answer. If you think there are any aspects missing, please outline what you think should be included.

Text box for entering additional information:

No — it’s too vague and limited.

The phrase “by necessity or convenience” is not strong enough. For deaf people, relying on BSL or ISL is not about convenience — it is about human rights and linguistic identity.

The definition should state:

- That “everyday” includes work, education, health, shopping, leisure, transport, emergencies, parenting, legal matters, and social life.
- That access must be available 24/7, not just during business hours.
- That reliance on sign language is not temporary or optional, and the law must reflect this.

Any other comments

Is there anything which you expected the Bill to make provision for which has not been included in the Bill?

Yes

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box to enter additional details:

- No guaranteed 24/7 access to interpreters

Deaf people live full lives, and communication barriers don't stop at 5pm. There must be a publicly funded 24/7 interpreter and communication support system — not just for work and health, but also emergencies, social life, parenting, and personal needs.

- No mention of funding for implementation

The Bill sets out duties but does not guarantee funding. Without this, it risks becoming a paper promise. Deaf people deserve investment equal to what is given to other language communities.

- No legal right to education in sign language

Deaf children must have the right to learn in BSL or ISL if that is their first language. Access to BSL/ISL must be embedded in the education system — not as an add-on.

- Lack of leadership roles for deaf people

Deaf people must be involved at every level — as leaders, not just “consulted. Decision-making roles should be held by deaf experts, deaf teachers, deaf researchers, and community advocates.

Additional Proposal: Fund a Deaf Centre in Northern Ireland

The Bill must include funding for the creation and long-term support of a Deaf Centre — a dedicated, deaf-led space where members of the deaf community can gather, organise, learn, socialise, and access essential services in BSL and ISL.

This centre would:

- Promote deaf identity, culture, and language in a safe, fully accessible environment.
- Serve as a hub for BSL/ISL education, interpreter training, and deaf-led services.
- Provide a base for deaf organisations, youth work, mental health support, and accessible community services.
- Host regular events and programmes that empower the deaf community, deaf families, and sign language users, including during evenings and weekends.

Minority ethnic communities currently receive public funding through local government for community centres, cultural hubs, and language-based services — and rightly so.

The deaf community is also a linguistic and cultural minority, with its own language (BSL/ISL), identity, and history. We deserve the same support and recognition.

A Deaf Centre is not a luxury, it is essential infrastructure for equality.

If this Bill truly aims to break down communication barriers and support the development of deaf culture, then funding a Deaf Centre must be a core part of its delivery.

Deaf Education

it is essential that commencement also prioritises urgent and equitable access to deaf education. Deaf children and young people must not wait years for improvements in access, resources, and language support. The Department for Communities should work with the Department of Education to ensure that: Specialist deaf education services are included in the early stages of implementation; BSL and ISL teaching is embedded in school curricula, particularly in schools with deaf pupils; Funding is allocated from the outset to support language development, early years access to sign language, and interpreter provision in education settings.

If you have any other comments in relation to the Bill please tell us here.

Text box to enter additional details:

This Bill is a welcome and historic step forward for the rights and recognition of the deaf community in the North, there are areas that require stronger commitment, clearer mechanisms, and urgent resourcing to ensure the Bill has meaningful and lasting impact.

Establishment of a Deaf Centre: The Bill should make provision or recommendation for funding a Deaf Centre — a community space where deaf individuals can access services, share culture, hold meetings, and feel a sense of belonging. Minority ethnic communities receive local government support for community centres; the deaf community should receive the same. This would support the development of deaf culture and promote inclusion across all age groups.

Deaf Access Outside Working Hours: Communication access must be available 24/7, including evenings and weekends. Deaf individuals should not be excluded from public life, emergency services, or cultural activities due to limited interpreter availability. Access to BSL/ISL interpreters and video relay services must not be restricted to standard office hours.

Stronger Accountability and Enforcement: While the Bill places obligations on prescribed organisations, there must be clear consequences for non-compliance and a system for reporting failures to meet reasonable access standards.

Funding Commitments: The effectiveness of the Bill relies on adequate and ring-fenced funding for interpreter services, training, deaf education, and community development. Commitments to financial support must be explicitly outlined or guaranteed through secondary legislation or departmental strategies.

Access to Family and Social Life: Communication access must extend beyond work and public services to cover family life, community events, and leisure time. This includes birthday parties, weddings, sports clubs for children on weekends, social gatherings, and recreational activities. Deaf people must not be left isolated during these vital moments.

Deaf Education: The Bill should go further to protect and promote access to bilingual education for deaf children, ensuring that both sign language and written/spoken English are equally supported. Early years access to BSL/ISL is critical for language development.

Include Mental Health Access: The Bill should explicitly address mental health support for deaf individuals. Access to BSL/ISL-fluent therapists and culturally appropriate services is often lacking and must be improved as part of this legislative change.

Support for Deaf Children and Families: Families of deaf children must have access to free BSL/ISL classes, deaf role models, and bilingual support in early education. Language development begins at home and needs to be fully supported.

This Bill represents a crucial opportunity to remove long-standing communication barriers and uplift the rights, language, and culture of the deaf community. It must be ambitious and inclusive — not only in language but in practice.