

Response ID ANON-PYJC-FRRM-D

Submitted to Sign Language Bill - Call for Evidence
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Consent and introduction

What is your name?

Name:

[REDACTED]

What is your email address?

Email:

[REDACTED]

What is your organisation?

Organisation:

University of the West of England Bristol

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 in full.

Clause 1

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

No

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box to enter additional details:

Clause 1 provides symbolic recognition rather than official legal status and does not create enforceable rights for BSL or ISL users. While the clause mirrors language from the BSL Act 2022, it falls short of a rights-based framework. Additionally, the phrase "as known by that name" is ambiguous: it is unclear whether this includes regional dialects and tactile forms, or whether it limits recognition only to standardised variants. The clause also fails to guarantee protection against regression or to assert positive obligations to use BSL/ISL in law or policy. Without further detail or legal effect, the clause risks being purely declaratory.

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:

Although this clause establishes a general duty for the Department to promote BSL and ISL, it leaves much to the Department's discretion ("as the Department considers appropriate"), which could result in inconsistent or symbolic implementation. The inclusion of "other suitable persons" as teachers of sign language is concerning, as it could permit unqualified instruction. Only accredited teachers should be allowed to deliver BSL/ISL education, with current unqualified tutors given practical and financial support to undertake courses to achieve the required accreditation or offered alternative pathways to accreditation. Moreover, the clause references "deaf culture" without defining or embedding it meaningfully in planning or funding commitments. There is no clear framework for how this duty will be enacted, measured, or enforced.

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:

Suggested additional approaches include:

- Embedding BSL and ISL into school curricula as part of the mainstream education system.
- Promoting bilingual early years education for deaf children.
- Funding awareness campaigns in wider society.
- Supporting the production of public-facing media and communications in sign language.
- Requiring public services to provide proactive ("active offer") sign language access, rather than reactive or on-request only.

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 to take "reasonable steps" is a positive move, but the inclusion of caveats around "affordability" and "practicability" significantly weakens enforceability. These terms are open to broad interpretation and could be used to justify minimal or delayed provision. Moreover, the clause lacks a mechanism for accountability if organisations fail to comply: there is no complaints process or statutory recourse. While the concept of equal access "at no extra cost" is welcome, the clause stops short of creating enforceable rights or obligations. A stronger compliance mechanism, supported by clear standards and regular reporting, is needed.

Clause 4

Do you support the approach taken by Clause 4?

No

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box for entering additional information:

While Clause 4 ensures government departments are automatically included and provides a mechanism to identify additional prescribed organisations, it gives the Department for Communities significant discretion. The power to include or exclude organisations by regulation, especially using the negative resolution procedure, lacks sufficient democratic scrutiny. There's a risk that important public-facing bodies, such as housing associations, universities, or private contractors delivering public services, might lobby for exclusion, weakening the scope of the Bill. Lessons from Scotland show this has already happened. All organisations performing public functions should be included by default, with strict criteria for any exemptions.

Clause 5

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

No

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box for entering additional information:

The duty to issue guidance is welcome, but the consultation requirement, to engage with each prescribed organisation and at least one representative of the deaf community, is far too limited. Consulting only one deaf organisation or individual cannot guarantee that guidance reflects the full diversity of deaf people's views, particularly across linguistic, regional, and cultural lines. A broader and more transparent consultation process is essential. Without stronger consultation duties and independent oversight, there's a real danger that guidance could be poorly informed, inconsistently applied, or ignored entirely. It also lacks provisions for how regularly guidance should be reviewed.

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:

Clause 6 rightly highlights the importance of best practice and the development of sign language action plans. Including advice on what constitutes "reasonable steps," how organisations should interact with sign language users, and how to support varied needs within the deaf community is a step forward. However, this guidance is non-binding and relies heavily on voluntary compliance. Without enforcement, minimum standards, or auditing mechanisms, the risk is that these remain aspirational. The effectiveness of this clause depends entirely on the strength, clarity, and monitoring of the guidance issued.

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. Clause 6 should require the Department to:

- Publish a national Sign Language Action Plan, as in Scotland.
- Set minimum standards for local action plans, including timelines and key performance indicators.
- Include advice on co-producing action plans with the deaf community.
- Include specific mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating compliance with the guidance.

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 ability for the Department to make regulations is essential if the Bill is to evolve into a framework with practical effect. Regulations can address detailed implementation, including bilingual education, accessible services, or new duties on public bodies. However, the clause also allows the Department to limit or adjust requirements based on resources or perceived suitability, without a clear process for how these exemptions are justified. This risks creating a patchwork of inconsistent obligations. The power is valuable, but it must be exercised transparently, with proper checks and accountability.

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

No

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box to enter additional details:

As with Clause 5, the consultation requirement, "at least one person or group appearing to be acting on behalf of the deaf community", is inadequate. This narrow wording risks tokenism and fails to reflect the full spectrum of the deaf community. Regulations developed without broad and meaningful consultation could fail to meet actual needs or reinforce existing inequalities. The Department should be required to consult a wider, representative range of deaf-led organisations, including those with expertise in sign language rights, education, health, and interpreting.

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:

The current consultation procedure is insufficient. Clause 8 continues the trend of minimal obligations by requiring consultation with only those directly affected and "at least one" deaf representative. This is neither inclusive nor transparent. A proper consultation framework should include:

- Public calls for evidence.
- Regional engagement sessions.
- Accessible formats (including BSL and ISL versions of draft regulations).
- Publication of consultation outcomes.

Without these measures, the Assembly's role in approving regulations may become a formality rather than a robust safeguard. There is a need for strengthened procedures to ensure deaf people's lived experiences shape the regulations that affect them.

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:

While five-yearly reports are a standard model, this interval is too infrequent to ensure timely monitoring and correction of problems. Early years of implementation are especially critical, gaps or failures may become entrenched if they go unreported for too long. An initial report within two years of commencement, followed by five-yearly reviews, would provide better momentum and accountability. In addition, there is no requirement for these reports to be laid before the Assembly or debated, which limits scrutiny. Public transparency and deaf community engagement with these reports must be guaranteed.

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:

Accrediting teachers of BSL and ISL is crucial to ensure language learning is delivered by qualified professionals with appropriate cultural and pedagogical knowledge. It helps raise standards and protect learners from poor-quality provision. However, the Bill currently permits classes to be taught by "other suitable persons" under Clause 2. This should be considered carefully to avoid undermining the accreditation process. Accreditation must align with recognised national standards and bodies such as Signature or NRCPD and should be monitored and updated regularly.

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. Interpreter accreditation ensures deaf people receive high-quality and reliable communication support, especially in essential services like healthcare, education, and legal settings. The scheme must include quality assurance, continuous professional development, and safeguarding procedures. Accreditation must not be optional or self-declared. There should also be a clear pathway for recognising existing qualifications and ensuring parity with current national interpreting registers. Attention must also be given to supply: Northern Ireland currently lacks sufficient qualified interpreters and teachers, so workforce development must accompany accreditation.

Clause 11

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

No

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:

While the definition in Clause 11 is broadly inclusive, there are two key problems:

1. It blends linguistic and audiological criteria, potentially shifting focus away from language rights.
2. The wording of subsections (3) and (4) is confusing: it treats some individuals as "not actually" members of the deaf community while simultaneously treating them as if they are. This is poorly drafted and creates uncertainty.

There also needs to be clarity about the inclusion of hearing CODAs and others who use BSL/ISL as their primary or shared language. The Bill should clearly centre sign language users, not simply deaf people, to align with its stated aims.

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:

The inclusion of both visual and tactile forms of BSL and ISL is important and commendable.

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:

The phrase “relying... by necessity or for convenience in the course of everyday activities” is too vague. It borrows language from disability law (“normal day-to-day activities”) but lacks clarity about what constitutes “necessity” versus “convenience.” This opens the door for narrow interpretation by public bodies. The definition must make clear that BSL/ISL use is legitimate regardless of context, whether in education, work, healthcare, or social life, and that rights are not dependent on justifying how much one “relies” on the language.

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:

The Bill lacks:

- A national sign language action plan, with local plans developed by prescribed organisations (as in Scotland).
- Any enforcement or complaint mechanism — no consequences if “reasonable steps” are not taken.
- A robust oversight body or commissioner with investigatory powers.
- A clear requirement for proactive provision (e.g. active offer of interpreting or accessible information).
- A rights-based framing — the Bill remains symbolic rather than enforceable.

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

Text box to enter additional details:

The Bill is a welcome starting point but must be strengthened to create real change. Symbolic recognition without enforceable rights risks repeating the mistakes of past legislation. The deaf community in Northern Ireland deserves more than promises, it needs guaranteed, practical, and measurable improvements to communication, services, and cultural recognition. This includes bilingual education, early years support, and deaf-led monitoring structures. Without stronger provisions, the Bill risks being a missed opportunity.