

Response ID ANON-PYJC-FR1G-6

Submitted to Sign Language Bill - Call for Evidence
Submitted on 2025-05-08 18:09:08

Consent and introduction

What is your name?

Name:

[REDACTED]

What is your email address?

Email:

[REDACTED]

What is your organisation?

Organisation:

Individual

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?

No

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box to enter additional details:

Formal recognition is of course welcomed and a good first step.

In Northern Ireland, there is a precedent for regional and cultural minority languages largely due to protections provided by The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and more recently the Identity and Language Act. It is disheartening that at a time when the OICE is being established and Irish and Ulster Scots Commissioners are being recruited, there appears to be a significant disparity in effort to protect, promote and recognise the significance of BSL and ISL compared with other indigenous languages of the province.

We need to treat BSL and ISL in Northern Ireland just as we treat Irish and Ulster Scots, signed languages have their own rich cultural heritage in NI alongside a painful history of oppression. The lack of signed language inclusion in the ECRML or oversight from the Committee of Experts should not limit the aspiration of this Executive to apply an equitable approach to indigenous languages in NI. ISL and BSL are of course languages of necessity, essential tools to make life more accessible but like our spoken languages, they also have an important heritage and cultural identity that requires preservation.

Clause 2

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

Yes

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box for entering additional information:

If the Department produces an action plan with sufficient budget to support this duty then there could be significant opportunity for progress in developing deaf culture with flexibility to engage with the deaf community to establish priorities.

At this stage however, it is difficult to assess the potential impact of this 'duty' as there is no minimum standard required. The current wording of this clause does not place any statutory responsibilities on the Department in a meaningful and measurable way. As it stands, the ability of the Department to secure sufficient funding to support this work, will be the ultimate factor to determine delivery.

Additionally, the lack of any obligation to support the children of deaf adults (CODAs) to learn BSL/ISL and fully embrace their dual identity as members of both the deaf and hearing communities as well as communicate effectively with their family, feels like an obvious oversight.

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:

Better BSL and ISL programming in culture and media similar to Irish and Ulster Scots Broadcast funding. (BBC NI no longer has live interpreting which many deaf people saw as both a real loss but also erasure of sign language on TV screens.) Accessibility to our arts and culture through better representation of deaf artists, performers and production staff as well as support for organisations to hire interpreters to ensure their events/screenings/performances are more accessible would be a huge support. As the Department with a duty for promotion, DfC also supports a number of ALBs such as the Arts Council, National Museums, Libraries NI, Sport NI etc, all of which could be vehicles for funding/project delivery to promote greater use of BSL/ISL.

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:

There should be a standard minimum level of provision that deaf people can expect when they access public services. The 'reasonableness' of steps taken by organisation will be no comfort to the deaf community if public services are inaccessible to them.

The Equality Commission has already worked on a number of successful cases where deaf people and their families have received compensation for instances where interpreters have not been provided by health trusts. In one case, serious distress was caused when a family member had to break the news of terminal illness to their deaf relative. Not only does this strip the deaf person of their dignity at a vulnerable time and cause distress to their loved one, the lack of consistent provision causes confusion amongst deaf people around their rights.

The reliance on family members as interpreters has become far too commonplace including the use of children as interpreters. Not only does this place a burden of responsibility on family members and reduce the individual's independence, it removes the true accessibility that only a professional interpreter would be able to provide.

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:

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 consultation approach places significantly more focus on the prescribed organisations than the deaf community in Northern Ireland. This consultation with the organisations is of course necessary however, the Department can be more aspirational in its approach to engagement with the deaf community. I am skeptical about the ability to measure the effectiveness of guidance in practice by engaging a single deaf person or organisation- regardless of how well meaning they may be. One person or organisation should not be acceptable as meaningful consultation- but I appreciate the Department including a minimum criteria for engagement which is measurable.

For further inspiration, DfC itself has demonstrated numerous examples of utilising expert steering groups e.g. social inclusion strategies and the Joint Forum. Furthermore, TEO demonstrated an innovative co-design approach in their recently released EVAWG Strategy. Indeed even the Assembly's own

outreach on the Bill for Committee Stage engagement has been more effective than the standard this clause sets for the Department.

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:

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:

This could be further strengthened by DfC support for prescribed organisations to overcome barriers to service provision or extended to private businesses to improve accessibility. Again, guidance is not enforceable, without incentives for organisations, it will be difficult to create meaningful change and results for the deaf community.

Further clarity is required here regarding how this would impact sub-contractors/those delivering on behalf of prescribed organisations.

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:

If done properly, this is a real opportunity for meaningful co-design and co-production. The Committee should continue its oversight function to ensure this is the case- perhaps with more frequent overview periods.

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:

As above- a real opportunity that the Department should grasp

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:

Please see response to Clause 5

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:

5 years is an acceptable period of time to report on the impact of a Bill. However, given that the current form of this Bill is essentially an outline with no funding, strategy or action plan attached at this stage, the real opportunity for scrutiny will come after the development of tangible actions and the first phase of delivery. I would hope the Department's aim would be closer to 2-3 years for an initial delivery phase, if so this would be an appropriate initial review period followed by 5 years after.

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:

Many of my deaf friends are dismayed at the struggle they face accessing PGCEs, particularly with funding and access as the main barriers. Deaf people should be prioritised in becoming accredited to teach deaf children.

Beyond deaf children, more sign language teachers are required more generally if we are to keep pace with opportunities to promote sign language across NI. In England, BSL will be a GCSE option from September 2025, the teaching infrastructure required to implement a similar offering in Northern Ireland is severely lacking. Despite all the political will, Northern Ireland does not have enough accredited teachers for the option of a BSL/ISL GCSE to be feasible.

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:

There are 39 registered sign language interpreters in Northern Ireland, this is nowhere near enough to provide meaningful accessibility to the deaf community. In Northern Ireland, the disability employment gap is almost double that of anywhere else in the UK. It is no surprise however when one considers the Access to Work provision available in GB compared to NI.

Personally, I have heard many examples of organisations struggling to secure interpreters for events and even considering flying BSL interpreters from GB. In my own experience, the lack of interpreters available

CODAs have lived experience of both the deaf and hearing worlds, they grow up surrounded by deaf culture and sign language, it feels like a natural career path/additional GCSE that many CODAs would have the skills and experience to pursue.

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:

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:

Clause 13

Do you agree with the definition of "everyday reliance" provided 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:

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:

Targeted baseline research to uncover more accurate data on numbers within the deaf community, BSL and ISL users, availability of interpreters, knowledge of sign languages and deaf experiences of accessing public services etc.

A dedicated sign language commissioner (as is being proposed in Wales)

Commitment to cross departmental working to bring together all aspects of sign language provision and deaf accessibility- education, justice, access to work etc.

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

Text box to enter additional details: