



Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Communities

Sign Language Bill – Call for Evidence Citizen Space Survey Word Version

Overview

The Sign Language Bill provides for:

- Official and equal recognition of British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL) as languages of Northern Ireland.
- A statutory duty on prescribed public organisations to take reasonable steps to make their services and the information they provide as accessible to individuals in the deaf community as they are to individuals who are not in the deaf community.
- A commitment to promoting the use and understanding of sign languages, including greater access to sign language education for deaf children and their families.
- A framework for accrediting sign language interpreters and teachers, ensuring professional standards and capacity building within the sector.

Why your views matter:

- As part of the Assembly's legislative processes, the Sign Language Bill has been referred to the Assembly's Committee for Communities so that the Committee may consider and take evidence on the Bill and report its opinion to the Assembly.
- The Committee is seeking views from stakeholders on the objectives, proposals and potential consequences of the Bill.



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- Your views will help to inform the Committee's consideration of the Bill and any recommendations it may suggest as it moves to the next stage of the legislative process.

How to respond:

- You do not have to complete the whole survey and can choose which sections to complete.
- You can use this platform to respond with written text.
- If you wish to respond using either BSL or ISL please click here to visit the Committee for Communities website for details on how to submit your views in sign language.

Terminology used:

We note that some people prefer the use of the upper case 'D' when referring to the d/Deaf community to reflect its status as a cultural and linguistic group. In the Bill the lower case 'd' is used for deaf as a matter of ordinary language in the legislative context and for this reason we use this term throughout the survey.



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Survey Questions:

Consent and introduction

What is your name?

Name: [REDACTED]

What is your email address?

Email: [REDACTED]

What is your organisation?

Organisation: Deaf Women's Group Northern Ireland (DWGNI)

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

You can read the Northern Ireland Assembly's privacy notice at this link.

[Privacy Notice](#)

Please select only one item

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?

(Required)



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Please select only one item

Yes, publish in full.

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

Clause 1

Clause 1 formally recognises BSL and ISL equally as languages of Northern Ireland, whilst preserving the architecture of existing disability and equality legislation.

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

Please select only one item

Yes

No

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box to enter additional details

BSL/ISL should be treated equally however it is vital that BSL/ISL is kept within the cultural minority group as we require access to information and our method of communication is sign language.

Clause 2



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Clause 2 places a duty on the Department for Communities to promote:

- the greater use and understanding of BSL and ISL (including an obligation to provide for the availability of classes BSL and ISL for deaf children, their close families, guardians and carers);
- the general entitlement of individuals in the deaf community to use BSL or ISL; and,
- the further development of deaf culture by the deaf community through the use of BSL and ISL.

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

Please select only one item

Yes

No

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box for entering additional information

The Department for Communities is the most appropriate department to take the lead in promoting BSL/ISL, Deaf Culture etc and they have had an established Sign Language Partnership Group since 2004. They have been very generous in providing funding for the DWGNI group and we are part of the SLPG.



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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?

Please select only one item

Yes

No

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box to enter additional details

It is important for all of the government departments to include representation of Deaf women in policy consultation & decision making, etc. We are the only Deaf Women's Group in Northern Ireland promoting social inclusion and to advance education of Deaf women but often under-funded.

Clause 3

Clause 3 places a duty on prescribed organisations to take reasonable steps to:

- ensure the information and services provided by them are as accessible to members of the deaf community as they are to the people who are not in the deaf community, at no extra cost to them; and,
- offer or facilitate the use of BSL or ISL for the benefit of individuals in the deaf community in accessing information and services provided by the organisation.



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In considering what is reasonable, prescribed organisations may take account of cost and practicability.

Further details are available in the Explanatory and Financial Memorandum included with the Bill which you can read here:

<https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/legislation/2022-2027-mandate/primary-legislation-bills-22-27-mandate/sign-language-bill/>

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

Please select only one item

Yes

No

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box for entering additional information

The word “reasonable” can be misleading and weak as Deaf women expect “reasonable” means including having full communication access, qualified interpreters, equality, etc. Some government departments may consider “reasonable” to mean providing a leaflet or captions in English.

On a positive note, for a wide range of Women’s health (ranging from pregnancy, breast & cervical screening, etc), Deaf women have been provided BSL & ISL interpreters (either by in-person or remote sign language interpreting) from the Department of Health & Social Care (they have a contract with Sign Language Interactions by Sorensen)



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However, from a Deaf lady's experience with the hospital maternity. They offered a lot of workshops (yoga, breastfeeding, medication, counselling etc) which were separate from HSC, they were provided by small organisations. They didn't have any funds to provide sign language interpreters. She ended up paying her own expenses to pay for an interpreter during a breastfeeding workshop because she felt it was so important but because it was more than one session and she could not afford to continue the sessions. At the end, she could not breastfeed her baby.

Ensure information about GBV, sexual health, domestic violence, legal rights, etc., are produced in BSL & ISL (videos, leaflets etc.), accessible and widely distributed.

An example of this, DWGNI organised a "Domestic violence" training in March 2023, and it was the first-time Deaf women in Northern Ireland had received this type of training, via a Deaf trainer. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] being Deaf meant that we could empathise on a victims' level but also on a cultural level having been brought up in the Deaf community and knowing the barriers that Deaf women face on a daily basis.

Through this particular training we learnt the various types of abuse eg gaslighting, coercive control, female genital mutation, stalking & harassment. Some of these came as a great shock to the women as they generally thought "Domestic Violence" was just physical abuse.

Clause 4

Clause 4 provides for the Department for Communities to list the public bodies (known as the prescribed organisations) that are subject to the duties in Clause 3.

Do you support the approach taken by Clause 4?

Please select only one item



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Yes

No

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box for entering additional information

All government departments are automatically covered including Health Trusts, the Department of Justice etc.

With research suggesting that Deaf women are twice as likely as hearing women to experience domestic violence, reports show that many Deaf women are reluctant to report domestic violence or sexual abuse because they are unsure how to communicate with police or support services. They may also have a fear of lack of confidentiality plus knowing that they will have barrier in having full access to communication due to lack of funds.

Abuse survivors need safety, trust, confidentiality. Without communication access, they may avoid seeking help; may be re-traumatized. Deaf women often face extra barriers in reporting and navigating justice systems

Support organisations (such as Women's Aid agencies, domestic abuse safe homes, therapeutic services, etc) have the lack of funding needed to provide specialist support to Deaf victims of crime where it is reported.

Another example of this, the PSNI and the Court service are all automatically covered in the list of prescribed organisations, however if a Deaf woman is going through the court system and they need a solicitor and that solicitor is from the private sector, they would not be liable to provide the support that a Deaf woman requires.

Clause 5



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Clause 5 states that the Department for Communities must issue guidance about the effects of the provisions in the Bill relating to BSL and ISL and the interests of the deaf community. This clause states that, when devising or revising guidance the Department for Communities must consult:

- each of the prescribed organisations; and,
- at least one person or group appearing to the Department to be acting on behalf of the deaf community.

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

Please select only one item

Yes

No

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box for entering additional information

DWGNI is one of the representatives for the DfC's Sign Language Partnership Group. For devising or revising guidance, it is important to have a selection of Deaf people participate or take a lead on this.

Clause 6



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Clause 6 states that the Department for Communities guidance should include best practice advice on the implications of the recognition of BSL and ISL in the Bill for public bodies, including prescribed organisations. This would include:

- what may or must be viewed as amounting to reasonable steps to be taken by prescribed organisations;
- how prescribed organisations should develop plans to be called sign language action plans; and,
- advice on best practice for interacting with people who rely for communication on BSL or ISL.

Do you support the approach taken in this clause?

Please select only one item

Yes

No

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box for entering additional information

Same as above in clause 5, it would possibly be a good idea to have a steering group consisting of Deaf people, including independent Deaf people and representatives from Deaf organisations, This would then show equity of views from throughout the community.

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

Please select only one item



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Yes

No

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box to enter additional details

Clause 7

Clause 7 makes provision for the Department for Communities to make regulations (some time in the future) for the purposes of the Bill.

- The Department for Communities will have the power to create new regulations to support the Sign Language Bill. These regulations are a different form of law, with working detail and may cover things like how public services provide sign language access and how organisations support sign language users. These future regulations would also need to come before the Assembly for scrutiny and agreement before they come into effect.
- The Department for Communities must consult with the deaf community and relevant organisations before making changes. It can assign responsibilities to public bodies, charities, or groups working with the deaf community.
- If needed, the Department for Communities can limit or adjust requirements for certain organisations based on their resources. Any changes must be approved by the Assembly before they become law.



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

Please select only one item

Yes

No

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box for entering additional information

Same as above for Clause 5 & 6. It is important for the DfC to continue with consultations with stakeholders and the Deaf community.

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

Please select only one item

Yes

No

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box to enter additional details



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Clause 8

Clause 8 states that, before laying a draft of such regulations, the Department for Communities must consult everyone on whom the regulations confer functions, and at least one person or group appearing to the Department to be acting on behalf of the deaf community. Such regulations need to be laid before and approved by the Assembly.

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

Please select only one item

Yes

No

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box for entering additional information



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Clause 9

Clause 9 would require the Department for Communities to prepare a report evaluating the impact of the Bill within five years of the Bill's commencement and every five years thereafter.

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

Please select only one item

Yes

No

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box for entering additional information

Five years could be considered too long as things could change in that time frame, we feel a report after three years would be more representative and then three years after.

Clause 10

Clause 10 provides that the Department for Communities must make a scheme for, or connected to, the accreditation of (either or both) teachers of BSL or ISL, and/or interpreters of BSL or ISL.

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

Please select only one item



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Yes

No

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box for entering additional information

We need more Deaf teachers (especially Deaf women), as they would make a fantastic cohort of teachers to teach Deaf Awareness and sign language to all Women's Aid agencies and relevant women's organisations here in Northern Ireland. DWGNI provided bespoke Deaf Awareness training to over 100 staff from Women's Aid agencies in 2023 which was essential. We both struggled to continue with the momentum due to lack of funds, turnover of staff, etc.

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

Please select only one item

Yes

No

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box to enter additional details

Train interpreters and related professional staff in gender sensitivity, trauma-informed interpreting, confidentiality, and awareness of issues specific to deaf women (e.g. safety, abuse, privacy).



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We feel that with NRCPD and Signature, these bodies have a wealth of experience and knowledge about the accreditation of BSL/ISL Interpreters, we do not need another scheme.

Clause 11

Clause 11 defines, for the purposes of the Bill, the deaf community as all people falling within one or more of the following categories:

- (a) individuals who rely for communication on BSL or ISL;
- (b) deaf or deafblind people who normally use BSL or ISL for communication (including people who can obtain some or better levels of hearing when assisted by auditory devices); or
- (c) children of deaf or deafblind people who habitually or occasionally use BSL or ISL for communication (including children who have some or full hearing).

Clause 11 also provides that people who (whether or not they have some or full hearing) have little or no understanding of spoken or written language in English but are able to communicate effectively in BSL or ISL, are to be regarded as if members of the deaf community for the purposes of the Bill.

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

Please select only one item

- Yes
- 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



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Clause 12

Clause 12 defines, for the purposes of the Bill, BSL or ISL as either or both of the visual form of the Language as commonly used and understood by deaf people, and the common tactile or non-visual forms of the Language as used and understood by some deafblind people.

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

Please select only one item

Yes

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

Clause 13



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Clause 13 defines, for the purposes of the Bill, everyday reliance on BSL or ISL as relying (wholly or substantially) on BSL or ISL by necessity or for convenience in the course of everyday activities.

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

Please select only one item

Yes

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

Any other comments

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

Please select only one item

Yes



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No

Please give details to support your answer.

Text box to enter additional details

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

Text box to enter additional details