



Sign Language Law

Northern Ireland Sign Language Bill Survey Report

A report by National Deaf
Children's Society: 2025



National
Deaf Children's
Society
NORTHERN IRELAND

1. Background

The National Deaf Children's Society is here for every deaf child who needs us - no matter what their level or type of deafness or how they communicate.

The National Deaf Children's Society is committed to Informed Choice,¹ ensuring deaf children and their families have access to unbiased information and support to make decisions about language and communication. We emphasise that Informed Choice is not a one-time decision but an ongoing process that adapts to the evolving needs and views of the child and family throughout different stages of life. Informed Choice includes promoting access to sign language as a key option, within a fully informed and individualised approach.

On 10 February 2025, the Minister for Communities introduced the Sign Language Bill to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The Sign Language Bill makes provision for:

- official and equal recognition of British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL) as languages of Northern Ireland
- a statutory duty being placed on certain public bodies 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 not in the Deaf community
- a commitment to promoting the use and understanding of sign language, including providing access to sign language classes for deaf children and their families
- a framework for accrediting sign language interpreters and teachers.

As part of the Assembly's legislative process, the Sign Language Bill has been referred to the Assembly's Committee for Communities. The Committee will consider and accept evidence on the Bill and report its opinion to the Assembly.²

As part of this process, the National Deaf Children's Society will be submitting evidence from an online survey that gathered views on the Sign Language Bill from parents of deaf children and deaf young people in Northern Ireland. The survey was an important way to make sure

¹ 2023 (NDCS) Informed Choice: Position Statement. Available at: www.ndcs.org.uk/media/8908/informed-choice-2023.pdf

² Source: <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/committees/2022-2027/communities/legislation/bills-primary-legislation/sign-language-bill/>

deaf children, young people and their families, could share their views and ideas about the Bill and its desired impact.³

2. Introduction and methodology

Thirty-two parents, one of them a deaf adult, completed the National Deaf Children's Society survey on the Sign Language Bill. Additionally, two young deaf people under 26 years old filled in the survey. The survey was also open to deaf children under 18 years old, but no responses were received.

Half of the respondents were from County Antrim and all counties except for Fermanagh were represented in responses. Most of the respondents' children fall into the 0 to 5 years age bracket.

Age group (years)	Count
0 to 5	14
6 to 11	6
12 to 17	6
18 to 25	<5
Not sure/prefer not to say	<5

Respondents were asked to answer a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions.

3. Why is sign language important to you?

Out of 33 respondents, 30 answered this open-ended question. From the vast majority of their responses, a primary theme to emerge was, perhaps not surprisingly, the broad subject of 'communication'.

"It helps me communicate with my daughter and helps her communicate with me and her dad as she can't speak. We rely on this to help her understand what we are saying."

Responses illustrated important aspects of communication, such as:

- how a child's wellbeing is related to the feelings of comfort, connection and inclusion that a family offers:

"BSL important for our family as it is helping us to communicate with our son. Through learning BSL we were able to build stronger bond with our child and helped him to get a sense of belonging."

³ The National Deaf Children's Society's previous consultations on the Sign Language Bill with deaf children and young people in 2021 and 2016 will also inform the evidence to the Assembly Committee for Communities.

“Being able to share communication on a level par is of paramount importance to our family.”

- a child’s social, emotional and academic development:

“BSL provides my son with a direct, fully accessible way to communicate, learn and interact with others. Without BSL, he may struggle to express his thoughts, feelings and needs clearly, which can lead to frustration or social isolation. BSL is essential for my son to access education and effectively communicate, and for his cognitive and emotional development, social integration and independence.”

“We believe that accessing sign language will increase our child’s opportunities, not only to learn, but to thrive as they grow up.”

- the right for a deaf child to ‘be’, to feel seen and feel acknowledged:

“Sign language unlocks an ability to ‘be’ for my son, who was diagnosed as deaf at birth.”

“Deaf people deserve to be able to use their language in everyday life.”

- for a deaf child to be able to embrace this side of who they are: their deaf identity and Deaf culture, and for their family to learn about their child’s identity:

“We want to ensure he embraces his Deaf culture.”

“As parents, it is important for us to be able to meet the cultural, social and communication needs of our deaf daughter, and this would be impossible without access to BSL.”

- for deaf individuals to access services and information like their hearing counterparts:

“To give access to services, for example, education and health for my child.”

All 34 respondents were of the opinion that it was important for the new sign language law to ensure deaf children, and their families can access sign language classes.

4. The new law aims to make information and services more accessible for deaf children and their families who use sign language. What practical solutions would you like to see to make information and services more accessible for sign language users?

In a multiple-choice question allowing multiple answers, respondents were asked about what practical solutions they would like to see to make information and services more

accessible for sign language users. Listed below are the answer options and the number of responses received for each option. Of the 34 respondents, 32 answered this question.

Staff learning sign language	29
Other children learning sign language	28
Sign language interpreters for children	25
Sign language tutors and interpreters being accredited	20
All information and forms being available in sign language	19

As we can see, staff and other children learning sign language were the most popular categories, which links to the theme of communication found in the previous open-ended responses.

5. How would these solutions make a difference for deaf children using sign language?

A total of 31 respondents answered this open-ended question. A primary theme that emerged from the vast majority of the responses was 'normalisation'.

"Her deafness would be more normal to her and others. She would not feel different."

"It would help normalise deaf children's communication."

"It's amazing how multicultural we are. But somehow, we forgot to include everyone in their sign language right."

The very fact that 'normalisation' was so often referred to is a poignant insight. Responses illustrate what normalisation would look like:

- enhanced social inclusion and reduced isolation, in part facilitated by others, for example, peers and teachers, having access to sign language:

"She would feel more included. She would not feel different, and she would not be disadvantaged."

"Signing shouldn't be a 'secret language' – it should be there for everyone. This would enable children to be part of mainstream school and society. Using it in everyday life will prevent exclusion and create inclusion."

"When BSL is the norm and accessible and widely available and promoted, society's attitude to deaf children and adults can become more inclusive and respectful."

"Teaching other kids BSL will help deaf kids to be included and will enable them to miss out less."

"I'm a teacher and I use a little in my class. I would love to use it more in my teaching to help hearing children communicate more easily with deaf children."

- greater sense of self-worth, contributing to enhanced self-esteem and stronger sense of identity:

“When BSL is the norm, deaf children can be proud of their deafness.”

“Deaf children learning sign language would feel less alienated: it would help them develop a strong Deaf cultural identity.”

“It's part of their cultural identity and enables them to communicate with their community.”

Ultimately, these responses relate to enhanced opportunities for communication between deaf children and their family members and hearing friends, as well as the professionals in their lives. They illustrate the potential for sign language to support deaf children to feel more connected to the communities and wider society around them, and to provide better access to services and information.

“Being able to understand and access information that others take for granted would be amazing for deaf children and their families.”

Additionally, some of the answers referred to accreditation of sign language courses and how this would not only enhance deaf awareness and ensure a certain level of quality in the sign language being used, but also create jobs and, therefore, economic opportunities.

“An accredited course would make it more appealing for hearing people to study and therefore more people would be available to be interpreters; and also, people will become more deaf aware in day-to-day life.”

6. The new law will apply to ‘public bodies’ such as government departments and statutory agencies. Can you tell us what kinds of organisations you believe the new law should apply to?

In a multiple-choice question allowing multiple answers, respondents were asked which public bodies they would like this law to apply to. Responses included:

Healthcare	33
Childcare and early years	32
Schools and education	32
Play, leisure and recreation	30
Public transport	28
Social care	27
Employment support	27
Policing and justice	25
Council services	23

Accessing healthcare, which is an essential public service, is a key concern highlighted in responses. The previous themes of social inclusion and self-worth found in the open-text responses would likely be experienced in childcare and educational settings, where many children spend their time. While the responses above do indicate some level of preference, the high count for each option also indicates that respondents, generally, want all aspects of public life to be accessible to deaf children, which ties in with the previous theme of 'normalisation'.

"My child could attend extracurricular activities without feeling isolated."

"She would not feel different ... nor would she miss out on her education."

7. Is there anything else you want to tell us about the new sign language law?

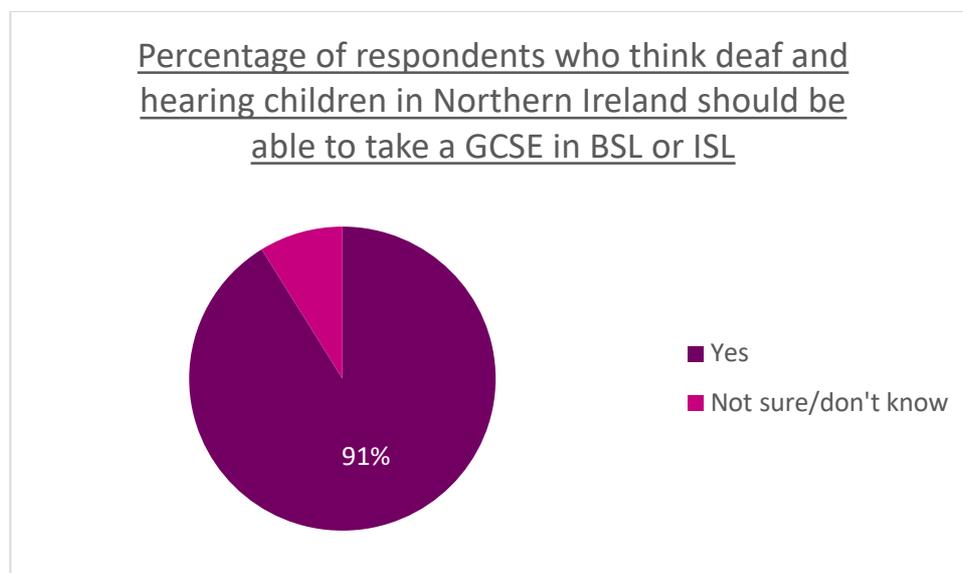
This was an open-ended question inviting respondents to share anything they had not been able to share in detail earlier. Responses repeatedly mentioned: learning sign language in school; prioritisation of family members of deaf children when it comes to attending sign language courses; and opportunities for low-cost or free learning.

"BSL GCSE really should be introduced. The fact that children can opt to study languages such as French, German and Spanish, yet not BSL is crazy! I personally had to study French and German – neither of which I have used. I have a deaf son and deaf friends, and I am scrambling to learn BSL so I can communicate with my son and teach him BSL. Learning this in school would have been so beneficial."

"BSL /ISL should be as easily accessed as non-national languages when attending NHS or private facilities."

8. Do you think deaf and hearing children in Northern Ireland should be able to take a GCSE in BSL or ISL?

In response to this final question, 31 out of 34 respondents (91%) said "Yes".



9. Conclusion

This report highlights the vital importance of sign language for many deaf children, young people and their families in Northern Ireland, including the need to promote Deaf culture and sign language actively in everyday life.

Parents consistently express a desire for their children simply to 'be' – to grow up accepted and included, using a language that supports their full participation in society.

Enhancing the accessibility of sign language for deaf children and their families could improve communication within families and foster a stronger sense of identity. Moreover, it has the potential to support better outcomes for deaf children in many aspects of their lives and within the broader community.