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Comparing Direct Payments, Vouchers and Support Schemes for sign language interpretation

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This briefing paper provides a comparison of publicly funded sign language interpretation supports for social activities in England, Ireland and Finland with Northern Ireland. It is intended to support the Communities Committee in its scrutiny of the Sign Language Bill (Northern Ireland) 2025.

This information is provided to Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) in support of their duties and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. It should not be relied upon as professional legal advice, or as a substitute for it.

Introduction

This briefing paper has been prepared in response to questions raised by Members of the [Communities Committee at its meeting on 9 October 2025](#). It provides an overview of sign language interpretation support funding in England, Ireland, Finland and Northern Ireland, including recent developments, funding mechanisms and policy implications.

1 England – [Direct Payments](#)¹ and [Personal Budgets](#)

Under the [Care Act 2014](#), if a deaf person is assessed as needing communication support (e.g. BSL interpreting), as part of their social care needs, they can use local authority provided [Personal Budgets](#) to pay for:

- Registered sign language interpreters
- Communication support workers (e.g. note takers, lip readers etc.)
- [Personal Assistants](#)² who can interpret and provide other support

Communication support can be used for social inclusion activities, community access, and education. Also, employment support and medical appointments may be supported as long as they are not covered by [Access to Work](#) or NHS [interpreting services](#).

1.1 Personal Budgets and [Direct Payments](#)

Personal Budgets can be provided as [Direct Payments](#) paid by the local authority into a dedicated account of a deaf sign language user. This dedicated bank account can be accessed by a deaf sign language user to employ a [Personal Assistant](#) (PA), whose role can include BSL interpretation.

¹ Personal Budgets (England)

In England, Personal Budgets are allocations of funding provided by local authorities to individuals assessed under the Care Act 2014. These can be managed by the authority or taken as Direct Payments by the individual to arrange their own care.

² Personal Assistant (PA)

A Personal Assistant (PA) is someone employed directly by the service user to provide support. In the context of sign language users, a PA may also be a qualified interpreter or provide communication assistance.

1.1.1 Strengths and limitations

Direct payments are available to disabled individuals assessed as needing social care. Therefore, it is not automatically available to all deaf sign language users, unless assessed as requiring social care support.

Although the Direct Payments approach offers flexibility, it places employer responsibilities on the deaf sign language user who must manage the PA/interpreter's contract, payroll, DBS checks, pensions, and insurance. Support organisations, such as [Independent Lives](#) and [WECIL](#), can help with recruitment and administration, but this responsibility may still be overwhelming for older adults or those with limited support.

Limitations of the system in England include inconsistent local authority support, accredited interpreter availability, lack of awareness among social workers, varying interpreter pay rates (as rates paid by Direct Payments may be below market average), and low awareness among deaf users.

1.1.2 Personal independent payment (PIP)

On both [RNID](#) and [BDA](#)'s websites, advice is offered on Personal Independence Payments (PIP), or Adult Disability Payments (in Scotland), rather than Personal Budgets and Direct Payments. There is [debate](#) about whether deaf people should have to pay with PIP or ADP for communication adjustments at social events.

2 Ireland – [Social Inclusion Voucher Scheme](#)

The Social Inclusion Voucher Scheme was established under Section 9 of the [Irish Sign Language Act 2017](#). It aims to fund Irish Sign Language (ISL)-English interpretation for deaf ISL users to access social, educational, cultural, legal, and private medical events and services.

Funded by the Department of Social Protection through the Citizens Information Board (CIB), and administered by the [Sign Language Interpreting Service](#) (SLIS), this scheme provides up to 5 vouchers per year for deaf ISL users aged

18+ for non-public events (e.g. weddings, funerals, private medical consultations, or solicitor meetings).

Excluded events are those already covered by other schemes or public bodies under Section 6 of the ISL Act (e.g. GP, job interviews, IRIS remote interpreting and services provided by government departments, local authorities and universities).³

2.1.1 The application process

A voucher application for a repeated event – e.g. repeat private medical appointments for a health condition, counts as one voucher application. SLIS employs a dedicated ISL fluent booking officer. SLIS books interpreters directly through contracted agencies, reducing user control over interpreter selection and need for direct employment of the sign language interpreter by the sign language user. And there is no flexibility for recurring or long-term support needs. Applications must be made at least two weeks in advance, with discretion for urgent cases.

2.1.2 Strengths and limitations

Strengths include targeted social inclusion and prioritisation of marginalised groups (e.g. deaf-blind, Travellers, migrants, deaf people with additional needs, ethnic minorities, and those aged 65+). Limitations include the low voucher cap, exclusion of children and families to access interpreting support for social or educational events, and temporary suspensions due to procurement processes for interpreter services, and there are ongoing efforts to align public procurement guidelines and ensure financial accountability. Temporary suspensions of the scheme [caused distress and disruption for deaf sign language users](#) relying on the service.

³ Section 6 of the Irish Sign Language Act 2017

Section 6 outlines services already required to provide interpretation (e.g. public bodies), which are excluded from the voucher scheme.

3 Finland – [Kela funded Interpreter Service](#)⁴

The Social Insurance Institution (Kela) funds 180-360 hours per year of state funded interpreting for deaf and deafblind users. Users apply through Kela and book interpreters directly for a range of purposes (e.g. education, work, social life, medical appointments, etc.). Users can choose their interpreters and use hours flexibly. Interpreters are trained via [Humak University of Applied Sciences](#), with both deaf and hearing interpreters.

3.1 Strengths and limitations

Strengths include universal entitlement based on communication needs, flexibility across a range of life domains, and user autonomy in choosing interpreters. And there are no age restrictions, so children and families can benefit. Limitations include interpreter access in rural areas and no dedicated mental health or social work services for deaf sign language users.

4 Northern Ireland – [Self Directed Support](#) (SDS)⁵

[Direct payments](#) are also described as [Self-Directed Supports](#) in Northern Ireland and are administered by health trusts rather than local councils or the Department for Communities.

Like the system in England, monies are directly paid to people who have been assessed as having a critical need⁶ for social services support. Instead of the

⁴ Kela (Finland)

Kela is Finland's national social insurance institution. It administers the interpreter service for disabled individuals, including deaf and deafblind users, providing up to 360 hours of interpretation annually.

⁵ Direct Payments / Self-Directed Support (Northern Ireland)

Direct Payments in Northern Ireland are also referred to as Self-Directed Support (SDS). These are cash payments made by Health and Social Care Trusts to individuals assessed as needing social care services, allowing them to arrange their own support.

⁶ Critical Need (Northern Ireland)

The term "critical need" refers to the eligibility threshold used by Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland to assess whether an individual qualifies for Self-Directed Support. This typically includes needs that significantly impact daily living or wellbeing.

health trust arranging all care services, the individual can arrange and pay for their own support as specified in their social care plan.

In Northern Ireland, self-directed support (SDS) provides a personal budget to meet assessed social care needs. SDS can fund personal assistants (PAs), including BSL/ISL signing PAs, communication support such as sign language interpreters for essential social participation, if assessed by the Trust as a critical need in the assessment for the user's social care support plan.

Approval depends on assessment and Trust discretion. Trusts administer direct payments, managed budgets or mixed packages. Trusts provide guidance, but the resources and support for managing direct payments varies between Trusts. Some Trusts provide payroll / employer support.

As the HSC Trust combines health and social care, SDS can be more integrated with health services, but only social care-eligible needs can be funded by SDS / direct payments. Health services (like hospital-based care or therapy) are usually funded separately.

4.1.1 Considerations of access to Self-Directed Support

For deaf sign language users, applying for Self-Directed Supports means being assessed for social care need by their health trust. Acknowledging this, Members may wish to consider whether this approach aligns with Clause 2b of the [Sign Language Bill \(Northern Ireland\) 2025](#);

2.— (1) The Department for Communities must promote, to such extent (and in such manner) as the Department considers appropriate—

(b) the general entitlement of individuals in the deaf community to use British Sign Language or Irish Sign Language as necessary or convenient in the course of everyday activities

The legislative framework for self-directed support includes the [Health and Personal Social Services \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1972](#) and the [Carers and Direct Payments Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2002](#). Each of the five HSC Trusts acts as the statutory authority for social care assessments and SDS / direct

payments. Further information on each health trust's individual approach to SDS applications can be found via the links below.

- [Belfast Trust](#)
- [Northern Trust](#)
- [Southeastern Trust](#)
- [Southern Trust](#)
- [Western Trust](#)

According to the Department of Health;

Direct payments are cash payments, **made in lieu** of social service provisions, to individuals who have been assessed as needing services.

The eligibility criteria states that assessment is based on identifying “critical need” - this threshold may exclude individuals with moderate but socially significant needs (e.g. access to community events). Up to four hours can be allocated for social support, such as social interaction or carer respite. The hourly rate provided for a personal assistant is £18.53 per hour. This may be significantly lower than the standard hourly rate for a sign language interpreter⁷.

4.1.2 Distribution of SDS payments (June 2025)

To contextualise the operational landscape across Northern Ireland's Health Trusts, the following table of data illustrates the scale and distribution of payments made under the Self-Directed Support scheme, as of June 2025.

Communication support such as sign language interpretation would be included as a “sensory disability”.

Table 1: [Department of Health, Northern Ireland – Quarterly Direct Payment Statistics, June 2025](#)

⁷ Interpreter Pay Rates

The hourly rate for a Personal Assistant under SDS in Northern Ireland is £18.53. This may be lower than the market rate for qualified sign language interpreters, which can vary depending on qualifications, experience, and region.

Client Group	<u>Number of Direct Payments</u>	<u>Total Amount Paid (£)</u>
Physical and Sensory Disability	1079	£4.6m
Learning Disability	1827	£7.9m
Family and Child Care	25	£0.24m
Older People	2009	£7.6m
Mental Health	208	£0.4m
Children with a disability	1909	£2.9m

At the time of writing, there was no data available on the amount spent on PAs/sign language interpreters by each Trust. Members may wish to request this information from the Department of Health.

The following comparative table highlights how Northern Ireland's Self-Directed Support model contrasts with similar schemes in England, in terms of administration, flexibility and user experience.

4.1.3 Table 2: Authority responsible

Jurisdiction	Administering body	Administration
Northern Ireland	Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts	Trusts combine health and social care; responsible for SDS assessment of critical need, approval and payment
England	Local councils / authorities	Local authority social services administer personal budgets; NHS health funding is separate

Taken together, the schemes in England, Ireland, Finland and Northern Ireland reflect varied approaches to funding and facilitating sign language interpretation

for social inclusion. Each model presents distinct strengths and limitations in terms of flexibility, user autonomy, administrative burden and eligibility criteria.

As Members consider the provisions of the Sign Language Bill (Northern Ireland) 2025, the following summary table offers a concise comparison to support informed scrutiny and policy development.

4.2 Table 3: Comparison of support schemes

Feature	<u>England</u>	<u>Ireland</u>	<u>Finland</u>	<u>Northern Ireland</u>
Funding source	Local Authorities	Dept of Social Protection	Kela	Health Trusts
User control	Employ own PA	SLIS books	Choose interpreters	Employ own PA
Flexibility	Personal Budget	5 vouchers per year	180-360 hours per year	Self-Directed Support (£18.53 per hour for PA)
Eligibility	Assessed care needs as disabled	18+ ISL user	All ages, communication need	Assessed social care critical needs as disabled
Scope	Broad care needs	Non-public events	All life domains	Care needs as assessed as critical in care plan
Interpreter role	PAs may interpret	Professional interpreters	Professional interpreters	Communication support if assessed and documented in care plan as critical
Challenges	Employer burden	Limited vouchers, admin delays	Interpreter access, mental health gaps	Interpreter access, employer burden if not provided with health trust management

5 Potential scrutiny points for consideration

The following potential scrutiny points are offered to assist Members in examining key aspects of eligibility, administration, equity, and user experience across jurisdictions.

Eligibility and Access

- Do the current eligibility criteria for Self-Directed Support in Northern Ireland sufficiently reflect the general entitlement to use BSL/ISL as outlined in Clause 2b of the Sign Language Bill?
- Are there barriers for deaf individuals who do not meet social care thresholds but still require interpretation for social activities? If so, how might support to address these gaps in provision be funded?

Administrative Burden

- To what extent does the requirement for deaf users to act as employers under Self-Directed Supports create disproportionate administrative burdens?
- Are adequate supports in place across all health trusts in Northern Ireland to assist users with payroll, recruitment, and compliance?

Equity and Inclusion

- How effectively do current schemes address the needs of marginalised groups, such as older adults, ethnic minorities, deaf-blind individuals, and families with deaf children?
- Are there gaps in provision for children and young people who require sign language interpretation for social inclusion?

Consistency Across Trusts

- Is there consistency in how Self-Directed Support is administered across the five Health and Social Care Trusts?
- Do variations in support services (e.g. payroll assistance, guidance) impact equitable access to PA/interpreter services?

User Autonomy and Choice

- How much control do deaf users in Northern Ireland have over the selection and scheduling of interpreters compared to users in England, Ireland or Finland?
- How does the current model allow for sufficient flexibility to meet recurring or long-term interpretation needs for social inclusion?

Awareness and Uptake

- Is there sufficient awareness among deaf communities and social care professionals about the availability and scope of Self-Directed Support for PA/interpreters?
- What mechanisms are in place to monitor uptake and identify under-served groups?

Alignment with Legislative Intent

- Does the current funding and delivery model for interpretation support align with the intent of the Sign Language Bill to promote everyday use of BSL/ISL?
- Are there opportunities to strengthen the integration of interpretation support within broader social inclusion policies?