



Topical Digest

Sign language legislation

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This topical digest provides a reading list about the development of sign language legislation in Northern Ireland. The digest provides weblinks to a selection of recent research papers, Assembly questions, government department publications, academic journal articles, stakeholder reports and media articles.

Front cover images: [British Sign Language](#) (left) by Cowplopmorris and [Irish Sign Language](#) (right) by Aren8906754; both images used under [CC3.0](#).

1 Introduction

This topical digest provides a reading list of different resources about the development of sign language legislation in Northern Ireland. The most recent publications about sign language legislation were selected in August 2024. This digest is not intended to be fully comprehensive.

There are Sign Language Acts for Great Britain ([2022](#)), Ireland ([2017](#)) and Scotland ([2015](#)), and the [introduction of a Bill was considered](#) in the Welsh Parliament in May 2024. Northern Ireland is not covered by the British Sign Language Act (2022). Yet, [Article 30 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(UNCRPD\)](#), ratified by the UK in 2009, states that:

“...persons with disabilities shall be entitled, on an equal basis with others, to recognition and support of their specific cultural and linguistic identity, including sign languages and deaf culture.”

Most protections for the local Deaf community come under the [Disability Discrimination Act 1995](#). In disability and equality legislation, provision of ‘reasonable adjustments’ for sign language users often means communication services, such as an interpreter. Accessing these ‘reasonable adjustments’ means identifying as disabled. [Many in the Deaf community](#) prefer explicit legal recognition as an indigenous cultural-linguistic minority, with legislation to protect and promote Deaf culture. Also, [research persistently shows](#) that the provision of ‘reasonable adjustments’, such as sign language interpreters to support access to health, education and employment, is still lacking, despite a more implicit approach to disability legislation. A [House of Commons Early Day motion in 2013](#) suggested this was due to a lack of public understanding of sign languages as well as qualified interpreters. Many of the organisations supporting deaf people in Northern Ireland operate on a UK-wide basis and are headquartered elsewhere; witnesses at a [Communities Committee hearing in March 2021](#) described the difficulties of getting local communications support, particularly the challenges of having to use different video relay services, depending on the public service they were trying to contact.

Data about the number of sign language users in Northern Ireland is another issue. According to the [Department for Communities](#): “...BSL is the first or preferred language of communication of approximately 3,500 members of the Deaf population of Northern Ireland while approximately 1,500 use ISL.” According to the [Department of Health](#), there are

approximately 8,000 sign language users in Northern Ireland. The Continuous Household Survey in 2013/14 reported that 9% of all adults in Northern Ireland could use sign languages, with 8% using BSL and 1% using ISL.

This Topical Digest provides a range of different publications and resources to assist with scrutiny of upcoming sign language legislation in Northern Ireland. Readers should note that some of the resources provided are from advocacy groups.

2 Legislation

- [British Sign Language Act 2022](#) (28 April 2022)
- Parliamentary Bill: [British Sign Language Act 2022](#)
- [British Sign Language Bill: Explanatory Notes](#) (July 2021)
- [Irish Sign Language Act 2017](#)
- [British Sign Language \(Scotland\) Act 2015](#) (October 2015)
- [Special Educational Needs and Disability Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2016](#) (March 2016)
- [Disability Discrimination Act 1995](#) (November 1995)

3 Government publications

- Department for Communities, [Communities Minister outlines way forward for Sign Languages](#) (20 February 2024)
- Department for Communities, [Sign language](#) home page (Accessed August 2024)
- Department for Communities, [Sign Language Framework Consultation](#) (ended July 2016)
- Department for Communities, [Sign Language Framework](#) (2016)
- Department for Communities, [Best practice guidance on providing public services to deaf people who use British Sign Language or Irish Sign Language](#) (March 2015)
- Health and Social Care, [New Sign language Interpreting Service for Health and Social Care appointments](#) (30 March 2023)
- Health and Social Care, [Remote interpreting service established for sign language users](#) (April 2020)
- Health and Social Care, [Sign Language Interpreting Service – update on Sign Language Interactions](#) (January 2023)
- B Byrne and C McNamee, [The Emotional Wellbeing of Deaf Children and Young People](#), commissioned by Northern Health and Social Care Trust (November 2022)
- [New Decade, New Approach](#) Agreement. Page 37. Para 5.30 (January 2020)

4 Northern Ireland Assembly

Assembly Questions:

- [AQO 36/22-27](#)
- [Questions on Sign Language](#) (2022-Present)
- [Questions on Sign Language](#) (2017-2022)

Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee Minutes of Evidence:

- [Sign Language Review: DCAL Briefing](#) (13 November 2014)

Research and Information Service Briefing Papers:

- [Sign Language Legislation](#) (November 2020)
- [Legislation and policy on sign language in the UK and Ireland](#) (May 2014)

5 Stakeholder insights

- Action on Hearing Loss, [Inequality of opportunity: Barriers to further and higher education, training and employment for people with hearing loss in Northern Ireland](#). (2016)
- Advance HE, [What will the British Sign Language Bill do for deaf students?](#) (February 2022)
- B Byrne, [Why We Need a Sign Language Act in Northern Ireland](#), Queen's University Belfast Policy Engagement (September 2019)
- British Deaf Association, [British Deaf Association responds to gene therapy trial to treat deafness: "Deaf children are not broken; what they need most of all is access to sign language"](#) (May 2024)
- British Deaf Association, [Report launched on Access to Justice for Deaf](#) (December 2019)
- British Deaf Association, [Belfast City Council Signs the BSL/ISL Charter](#) (March 2019)
- British Deaf Association, [Northern Ireland Legal status of BSL/ISL](#) (Accessed August 2024)
- British Deaf Association, [How many people use BSL in the UK? How many of these users are Deaf?](#) (Accessed August 2024)
- British Deaf News, [Northern Ireland – Needs of deaf community not taken into account](#) (May 2018)

- Coalition of Deafness NI, [A policy manifesto for the Northern Ireland Executive](#) (May 2015)
- Consortium for Research in Deaf Education, [Education provision for deaf children in Northern Ireland in 2022/23](#) (Accessed August 2024)
- Disability Rights, [BSL set to gain official status](#) (February 2022)
- Foyle Deaf Association, [Sign Language Bill for Northern Ireland](#) (12 April 2024)
- National Deaf Children’s Society, [Education rights in Northern Ireland](#) (Accessed August 2024)
- Royal National Institute for Deaf People, [British Sign Language](#) (Accessed August 2024)
- Royal National Institute for Deaf People, [Prevalence of British Sign Language](#) (Accessed August 2024)
- Royal National Institute for Deaf People, [BSL Act Now!](#) (May 2024)
- Royal National Institute for Deaf People, [Our manifesto for the Northern Ireland Assembly election](#) (September 2022)
- Sign Teach, [Country Report: United Kingdom](#) (Accessed August 2024)
- UK Council on Deafness, [Law change opens doors for deaf jurors in England and Wales](#) (March 2021)
- World Federation of the Deaf, [The Legal Recognition of National Sign Languages](#) (Accessed August 2024)

6 Academic research articles

- M Sebba and W Ayres-Bennett, [‘Censoring multilingualism? Language questions in the 2021 Census’](#), *Languages, Society and Policy* (2021)
- B Byrne, B Elder and M Schwartz, [‘Enhancing Deaf People’s Access to Justice in Northern Ireland: Implementing Article 13 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities’](#), *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 23(1), p. 74–84 (2021)
- D Alexander and J Rijckaert, [‘News ‘with’ or ‘in’ sign language? Case study on the comprehensibility of sign language in news broadcasts’](#), *Perspectives*, 30(4), pp. 627–642 (2021)
- P Crume, [Overview of the Legal Recognition of Sign Languages Around the World](#), *The Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, Volume 25, Issue 3, Pages 378–379 (2020)
- S McLeod, [‘Communication rights: Fundamental human rights for all’](#), *International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 20(1), pp. 3–11 (2018)

- M De Meulder, J Murray, and R McKee, [Introduction: The Legal Recognition of Sign Languages: Advocacy and Outcomes Around the World](#). In: De Meulder, M., Murray, J. and McKee, R. ed. *The Legal Recognition of Sign Languages: Advocacy and Outcomes Around the World*. Bristol, Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters, pp. 1-16 (2019)
- A Emond, M Ridd, H Sutherland, et al, [The current health of the signing Deaf community in the UK compared with the general population: a cross-sectional study](#), *BMJ Open* (2015)
- J Bosco Conama, '[Situating the socio-economic position of Irish Deaf community in the equality framework](#)', *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*, Vol. 32 No. 2, pp. 173-194. (2013)

7 Media articles

- BBC News, [Sign language: Bill proposed along with plans for more interpreters](#) (22 February 2024)
- Echo Live.ie, [Cork Deaf Association: State bodies failing deaf people](#) (3 February 2023)
- Belfast Live, [The challenges facing the Deaf community in Northern Ireland](#) (5 February 2022)
- The Conversation, [How British Sign Language developed its own dialects](#) (March 2019)

8 Background and history of sign language

- Sense, [Sign language](#) (Accessed August 2024)
- Scottish Government, [The History of BSL in Scotland](#) (Accessed August 2024)
- Sign Community, [A Brief History of British Sign Language \(BSL\)](#) (Accessed August 2024)

9 Websites

- [National Deaf Children's Society](#)
- [Hands That Talk](#)
- [Action Deaf Youth](#)
- [Joseph's Deaf Centre](#)
- [National Deaf Children's Society](#)
- [Foyle Sign Language Centre](#)
- [University of Atypical](#)

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