

Sign Language Act (Northern Ireland) 2026

CHAPTER 7

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Sign Language Act (Northern Ireland) 2026

2026 CHAPTER 7

An Act to make provision about the status of, and for the advancement of, British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language. [9th July 2026]

BE IT ENACTED by being passed by the Northern Ireland Assembly and assented to by His Majesty as follows:

PART 1

STATUS AND ADVANCEMENT OF SIGN LANGUAGES

CHAPTER 1

OFFICIAL RECOGNITION AND KEY DUTIES

Recognition and promotion

Official recognition of sign languages

1.—(1) Each of these is recognised as a language of Northern Ireland (and as having equal status with the other)—

(a) British Sign Language (as known by that name),

(b) Irish Sign Language (as known by that name).

(2) Nothing in this Part affects the operation of either of these (particularly as relevant to rights of individuals in the deaf community)—

(a) any rule of law, or

(b) any other statutory provision (within the meaning given by section 1(f) of the Interpretation Act (Northern Ireland) 1954).

Promotion of interests by lead department

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

(a) the greater use and understanding of British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language,

(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, and

(c) the further development by the deaf community, as taken collectively, of the deaf community's culture as broadly identifiable by reference to (but not solely by reference to) use of British Sign Language or Irish Sign Language.

(2) Without prejudice to the generality of this section, the greater use and understanding of British Sign Language or Irish Sign Language is to be promoted by the Department through making (or entering into) arrangements for ensuring the availability of classes—

(a) taught by accredited teachers or other suitable persons, and

(b) for people in the two eligible categories to learn (or improve proficiency in) the Language.

(3) The first eligible category comprises—

(a) persons under 25 years of age who are deaf, and

(b) their close families, guardians and carers.

(4) The second eligible category comprises—

(a) persons aged 25 or over who have become deaf, and

(b) their close families and carers.

(5) Persons in the first eligible category must be allowed to participate free of charge in classes available under this section to persons in that category.

(6) The Department may by regulations prescribe fees to be payable by persons in the second eligible category for participating in classes available under this section to persons in that category.

(7) Fees prescribed in regulations under this section are to be set with the aim of ensuring that, in any financial year, the income from such fees does not exceed the overall costs of providing classes under this section to persons in the second eligible category.

(8) Regulations under this section may not be made unless a draft of them has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, the Assembly.

Duty of prescribed organisations

Organisations to take reasonable steps

3.—(1) Every prescribed organisation must take all reasonable steps so as to—

(a) ensure that information and services provided by the organisation are as accessible to individuals in the deaf community as they are to individuals who are not in the deaf community, and

(b) offer or facilitate the use of British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language for the benefit of individuals in the deaf community in accessing information and services provided by the organisation.

(2) For the avoidance of doubt—

(a) something is as accessible to individuals in the deaf community for the purpose of this section if, as well as being as accessible to them in general terms (including as respects convenience), access to it is at no extra cost to them, and

(b) nothing in this section implies that prescribed organisations are prevented from taking into account matters of affordability to them, as well as taking into account wider factors influencing them (including as involving practicability), when determining how in their respective circumstances to comply with this section.

Organisations to be listed in regulations

4.—(1) The Department for Communities must by regulations list which public bodies are prescribed organisations for the purposes of this Part.

(2) Before making regulations under this section, the Department must consult each of the public bodies which it proposes should be listed, added or removed (as the case may be) as prescribed organisations.

(3) However—

(a) all the Northern Ireland departments (including the Department for Communities) are always to be included as prescribed organisations in regulations under this section, and

(b) none of them ever needs to be consulted before such regulations are made.

(4) A reference in this section to public bodies includes persons or groups exercising functions of a public character.

(5) Regulations under this section may not be made unless a draft of them has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, the Assembly.

CHAPTER 2

OVERSIGHT ROLE OF LEAD DEPARTMENT

Formal guidance to be issued

Department to issue guidance

5.—(1) The Department for Communities must issue guidance about—

(a) the effect of this Part, and

(b) such additional or different matters as to—

(i) British Sign Language or Irish Sign Language, and

(ii) the interests of the deaf community,

as the Department considers appropriate.

(2) The Department—

(a) may—

(i) review guidance issued under this Chapter, and

(ii) issue guidance under this Chapter as revised in light of review, and

(b) must publish, on the Department's website, guidance issued under this Chapter (including as revised).

(3) Whenever devising (or reviewing) guidance under this Chapter, the Department must consult—

(a) each of the prescribed organisations, and

(b) at least two persons or groups appearing to the Department to be representative or cognisant of the views or interests of the deaf community.

(4) All the prescribed organisations must have regard to guidance issued under this Chapter in connection with providing information and services.

Best practice to be in guidance

6.—(1) Guidance under this Chapter is to—

(a) give advice on—

(i) the implications for public bodies, including prescribed organisations, of the recognition by this Part of British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language,

(ii) what may be (or is to be) viewed as amounting to reasonable steps as required by this Part to be taken by prescribed organisations, and

(iii) how prescribed organisations should develop plans to be called sign language action plans, and

(b) set out for prescribed organisations advice on best practice for interacting with people who rely for communication on British Sign Language or Irish Sign Language.

(2) Advice as to best practice as set out in guidance by virtue of this section may include recommendations on how to—

(a) offer or facilitate communication in British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language, and

(b) accommodate the particular needs of the various categories of people within the deaf community (including by taking account of the different forms of British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language).

(3) Recommendations included in guidance by virtue of this section on how to offer or facilitate communication in British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language may refer to arrangements through which people can avail of—

(a) accredited interpreters for communication in British Sign Language or Irish Sign Language in person or on screen (including by appointment on request), or

(b) some web-based or technological means for on-site or remote interaction (including by setting up on request).

(4) The reference in this section to public bodies includes persons or groups exercising functions of a public character.

Power to make regulations

Department may make regulations

7.—(1) The Department for Communities may by regulations make provision for the purpose of or in connection with—

(a) the matters contained in this Part (including things which could be the subject of guidance under this Chapter), and

(b) such additional or different matters as to—

(i) British Sign Language or Irish Sign Language, or

(ii) the interests of the deaf community,

as the Department considers appropriate.

(2) Regulations under this Chapter may relate to (in particular)—

(a) the offering or facilitation of the use of British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language, and

(b) the—

(i) accessibility to people in the deaf community of information and services through the use of British Sign Language or Irish Sign Language, and

(ii) support of particular kinds to be made available specially for people who rely for communication on British Sign Language or Irish Sign Language.

(3) Regulations under this Chapter may confer functions on—

(a) the prescribed organisations (apart from the Northern Ireland departments),

(b) the Department for Communities alone or one or more of the Northern Ireland departments separately or together in different or similar ways, or

(c) any persons or groups appearing to the Department for Communities to be—

(i) acting on behalf or in the interests of the deaf community, and

(ii) willing to exercise more functions on behalf or in the interests of the deaf community.

(4) Regulations under this Chapter may limit the operation of this Part (including provisions in such regulations)—

(a) in specific respects, and

(b) in relation to particular prescribed organisations except the Northern Ireland departments,

if, having regard to the scale of their resources or the nature of their functions, the Department for Communities believes this to be appropriate.

(5) In deciding whether to prepare (or whenever reviewing) regulations under this Chapter, the Department must take account of any relevant material or representations received by it from—

(a) any of the prescribed organisations, or

(b) any persons or groups appearing to it to be acting on behalf or in the interests of the deaf community.

(6) Regulations under this Chapter may modify any statutory provision (within the meaning given by section 1(f) of the Interpretation Act (Northern Ireland) 1954).

Procedure for making regulations

8.—(1) Before laying a draft of regulations under this Chapter, the Department for Communities must consult—

(a) everyone on whom functions are to be conferred by them (if made), and

(b) at least two persons or groups appearing to the Department to be representative or cognisant of the views or interests of the deaf community.

(2) Where regulations under this Chapter are (if made) to limit or modify this Part, a draft of them must when laid be accompanied by a statement by the Department justifying its proposal that they do so.

(3) Regulations under this Chapter may not be made unless a draft of them has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, the Assembly.

Engagement and reporting

Department's manner of engagement

9.—(1) In this Chapter—

(a) a reference to persons or groups appearing to the Department for Communities to be representative or cognisant of the views or interests of the deaf community includes persons or groups appearing to the Department to be representative or cognisant of the views or interests of part of the deaf community,

(b) a reference to persons or groups appearing to the Department to be acting on behalf or in the interests of the deaf community includes persons or groups appearing to it to be acting on behalf or in the interests of part of the deaf community, and

(c) the reference to persons or groups appearing to the Department to be willing to exercise functions on behalf or in the interests of the deaf community includes persons or groups appearing to it to be willing to do so on behalf or in the interests of part of the deaf community.

(2) In fulfilling a requirement to consult persons or groups as imposed on the Department for Communities by this Chapter, the Department is in particular to seek to secure input relating specifically to each of (as well as input relating generally to both of) British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language.

Department to publish 3-yearly reports

10.—(1) The Department for Communities must prepare a report, covering the reporting period, evaluating the impact of this Part.

(2) A report under this section is to be—

(a) laid before the Assembly by the Department, and

(b) published by the Department, in such manner (and in such form) as the Department considers appropriate,

as soon as practicable after the end of the reporting period.

(3) For the purpose of this section—

(a) the first reporting period is the period, of not more than 5 years beginning with the day on which this section comes into operation, determined by the Department, and

(b) each subsequent reporting period is the period of 3 years following the previous reporting period.

CHAPTER 3

SCHEME FOR ACCREDITATION

Accreditation of teachers and interpreters

11.—(1) The Department for Communities must by regulations make a scheme for the purpose of or in connection with the accreditation of persons as (either or both)—

(a) teachers of British Sign Language or Irish Sign Language, or

(b) interpreters of British Sign Language or Irish Sign Language.

(2) The scheme may include (in particular)—

(a) provision (with or without fees payable) for—

(i) applications to become accredited persons, and

(ii) registration of accredited persons, and

(b) criteria and conditions to be met in order for persons to become or remain accredited (especially as to matters of professional competence).

(3) However, the scheme may additionally allow for accreditation of persons as such to be automatic (and free of charge even if fees are otherwise payable under the scheme) in particular circumstances.

(4) A reference in this Part to accredited teachers, or to accredited interpreters, is to persons accredited as such in accordance with the scheme.

(5) Regulations under this Chapter may not be made unless a draft of them has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, the Assembly.

CHAPTER 4

KEY TERMINOLOGY

Members of the deaf community

12.—(1) For the purposes of this Part, the deaf community comprises all people falling within one or more of the following paragraphs—

(a) individuals who rely for communication on British Sign Language or Irish Sign Language,

(b) deaf or deafblind people who at any time use, or ever benefit from use of, British Sign Language or Irish Sign Language for communication (including such 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 British Sign Language or Irish Sign Language for communication (including such children who have some or full hearing).

(2) Here, children of such people are their children and stepchildren of any ages (including of adult ages).

(3) People who (whether or not they have some or full hearing)—

(a) have little or no understanding of spoken or written language in English, but

(b) are able to communicate effectively in British Sign Language or Irish Sign Language,

are for the purposes of this Part to be treated as if members of the deaf community.

(4) That is, all individuals meeting this description are to be so treated where (for those purposes) they are not actually members of the deaf community.

Different forms of sign languages

13. A reference in this Part to British Sign Language or Irish Sign Language is to either or both of—

(a) the visual form of the Language as commonly used and understood by deaf people, and

(b) the common tactile or non-visual forms of the Language as used and understood by some deafblind people.

Everyday reliance on sign languages

14. The references in this Part to relying for communication on British Sign Language or Irish Sign Language are to so relying (wholly or substantially) on the Language by necessity or for convenience in the course of everyday activities.

PART 2

COMMENCEMENT AND SHORT TITLE

Commencement

15.—(1) As follows—

(a) this Part comes into operation on the day after the day on which this Act receives Royal Assent, and

(b) the rest of this Act comes into operation on such day or days as the Department for Communities may by order appoint.

(2) An order under this section may contain such transitional or transitory provision as the Department for Communities considers appropriate.

Short title

16. This Act may be cited as the Sign Language Act (Northern Ireland) 2026.

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