

EXPLANATORY NOTES

Sign Language Act (Northern Ireland) 2026

Chapter 7

£8.90

These Notes refer to the Sign Language Act (Northern Ireland) 2026 (c.7)
which received Royal Assent on 9 July 2026

SIGN LANGUAGE ACT (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2026

EXPLANATORY NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. These Explanatory Notes relate to the Sign Language Act (Northern Ireland) 2026 (the ACT), which received Royal Assent on 9 July 2026. They have been prepared by the Department for Communities to assist the reader in understanding the Act. They do not form part of the Act and have not been endorsed by the Assembly.

2. The Notes should be read in conjunction with the Act. They do not, and are not meant to be, a comprehensive description of the Act. So where a section or part of a section does not seem to require an explanation or comment, none is given.

BACKGROUND AND POLICY OBJECTIVES

3. This Act makes provision for the recognition and promotion of British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language with associated duties placed on listed prescribed organisations, including to take reasonable steps to ensure that the sorts of information and services provided by it are as accessible to individuals in the deaf community as to those individuals who are not in the deaf community.

4. Uniquely across the UK, Northern Ireland has two sign languages British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL). In March 2004, the Northern Ireland Secretary of State formally recognised BSL and ISL as languages in their own right.

5. This recognition does not provide any legal protection for the languages. Neither language is covered by the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. There has been no Executive recognition or formal Executive agreed Policy or Strategy document to date. The British Sign Language Act 2022 recognises British Sign Language as a language of England and Wales and Scotland but does not extend to Northern Ireland (which aligns with the approach taken in the Equality Act 2010).

6. BSL and ISL are the first or preferred means of communication for many people who are profoundly deaf and are used by a significant number of their families and friends. They are languages in their own right which use hand shapes, movement of the hands, body language, facial expressions and lip patterns to convey meaning. They also have their own grammar, vocabulary and idioms completely different from the grammatical rules of the spoken language.

7. For many Sign Language users, spoken and/or written language is their second or even third language. As with all linguistic minorities, members of the deaf community may have varied levels of English. While some Sign Language users are bilingual in both Sign Language and English, others may have limited literacy skills. This means that misunderstandings can easily arise, especially when using more complex concepts or grammar, or less common words.

8. As such, Sign Language users may not necessarily read or understand information on government websites or printed leaflets and various types of literature unless these are translated into their native BSL or ISL. As a comparison, most hearing English language users in Northern Ireland may not understand information provided through BSL and/or ISL.

9. Therefore, BSL/ISL users in Northern Ireland can experience social exclusion as a direct result of linguistic exclusion which can adversely affect their access to education, employment, healthcare and public services generally.

10. In passing, it is acknowledged that some people prefer the use of the large 'D' when referring to the 'Deaf' community to reflect their belonging to that community in a cultural and linguistic minority context. The references in the Act are however framed with the lower case 'd' for deaf as a matter of ordinary language in the legislative context, although the references to BSL and ISL have initial capitals to reflect the use of their formal names in the legislative context.

11. The Act recognises and promotes British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language, including the right to use, develop and preserve BSL and ISL, as well as to develop deaf culture, whilst preserving the architecture of disability legislation.

12. The Act directs that the lead department - the Department for Communities - must issue guidance and best practice on BSL or ISL, and the interests of the deaf community as the Department considers appropriate, to prescribed organisations. It will take account of any representations from those organisations or any persons or groups appearing to it to be representative or cognisant of the views or interests of the deaf community as part of that process. Such best practice may inform the development of plans by listed prescribed organisations.

13. The intention is to ensure that those organisations take all reasonable steps to ensure that the information and services provided by it are as accessible to individuals in the deaf community as they are to individuals who are not in the deaf community

14. The lead department's duty to promote greater use and understanding of BSL or ISL includes (in particular) its obligation to provide for the availability of classes - free of charge - for deaf children and young people under 25 years of age, and their close families, guardians and carers, to learn (or improve proficiency in) BSL or ISL. The Department is further obliged to provide for the availability of classes for those adults who become deaf aged 25 and over, their close families and carers, to learn (or improve proficiency in) the Language. Whereas a fee will be payable for those classes, the fee must not exceed the costs arising from the provision of the classes.

15. For the avoidance of doubt, the Department's duty to promote BSL, ISL and deaf culture, extends beyond the availability of classes. The Department will continue to work in partnership with the deaf community and its representatives, to co-design initiatives to promote the increased visibility, awareness, and understanding of BSL, ISL and deaf culture - not just within public life but also across wider society. This will be included as an outcome of the draft Sign Language Framework Strategy.

16. The Act also provides for the accreditation of BSL/ISL interpreters and teachers to provide assurance of professional competence.

17. For the purposes of the Act, appropriate definitions of members of the deaf community and the different forms of sign languages used by the deaf community in Northern Ireland are included.

OVERVIEW

18. The Act has 16 substantive sections. Any reference in this Memorandum to a numbered section is to that section of the Act. A commentary on the provisions follows. This Memorandum will be translated into BSL and ISL.

COMMENTARY ON SECTIONS

Section 1: Official recognition of sign languages

The Act formally recognises British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL) as languages of Northern Ireland whilst preserving the architecture of existing disability and equality legislation. Therefore, in recognising British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language as a language in law, the Act does not affect the operation of any enactment or rule of law.

Section 2: Promotion of interests by lead department

The Act provides for the Department for Communities to promote: the greater use and understanding of BSL and ISL; 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.

The lead department's duty to promote greater use and understanding of BSL or ISL includes an obligation to provide for the availability of classes, free of charge, for young people who are deaf, and their close families, guardians and carers, to learn (or improve proficiency in) BSL or ISL. For the purposes of the Act, young people are persons under 25. Additionally, the Act also includes a further obligation for the Department to make arrangements for classes for those people aged 25 and over who become deaf, their close family and carers, to learn or improve proficiency in BSL or ISL. These classes however are not required to be free of charge; a fee will be payable which must not exceed the costs arising from the provision of the classes. The Department's duty to promote BSL, ISL and deaf culture, extends beyond the availability of classes and is not restricted to promotion across public bodies only.

Section 3: Organisations to take reasonable steps

The Act places a duty on prescribed organisations to take all reasonable steps to ensure that the information and services provided by them are as accessible to members of the deaf community as they are to individuals who are not in the deaf community, and to 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. Reasonableness of steps includes consideration in terms of affordability and practicability for prescribed organisations, but on the basis that accessibility should be at no extra inconvenience or additional cost to individuals in the community.

Section 4: Organisations to be listed in regulations

The Act provides for the Department for Communities to make regulations to list the public bodies (to be referred to as prescribed organisations) that are subject to the duties within section 3.

Section 5: Department to issue guidance

The Department for Communities must issue guidance about the effect of the provisions relating to BSL and ISL, and the interests of the deaf community, as the Department deems appropriate. In addition, the Department may review, issue revised guidance and publish revised guidance on its website.

The Department when devising (or reviewing) guidance must consult each of the prescribed organisations, and at least two persons or groups appearing to the Department to be representative or cognisant of the views or interests of the deaf community. All the prescribed organisations must have regard to guidance issued in connection with providing information and services.

Section 6: Best practice to be in guidance

The Department's guidance should include best practice advice on the implications for prescribed organisations, of the recognition of BSL and ISL. This includes what may be (or is to 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 set out advice on best practice for interacting with people who rely for communication on BSL or ISL.

Section 7: Department may make regulations

The Department for Communities may by regulations make provision for the purposes of the Act, as the Department considers appropriate. Regulations may relate to (in particular) the offering or facilitation of the use of BSL and ISL; the accessibility by people in the deaf community to information and services through the use of BSL or ISL; and support of particular kinds to be made available specially for people who rely for communication on BSL and ISL.

Regulations may confer functions on the prescribed organisations, the Department for Communities alone, or one or more of the Northern Ireland departments separately or together in different or similar ways; or any persons or groups appearing to the Department for Communities to be acting on behalf or in the interests of the deaf community, and willing to exercise more functions on behalf or in the interests of the deaf community.

Regulations may limit the operation of the Act (including provisions in such regulations) in specific respects, and 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.

In deciding whether to prepare (or whenever reviewing) regulations, the Department must take account of any relevant material or representations received by it from any of the prescribed organisations, or any persons or groups appearing to it to be acting on behalf or in the interests of the deaf community

Section 8: Procedure for making regulations

Before laying a draft of such regulations, the Department for Communities must consult at least two persons or groups appearing to the Department to be representative or cognisant of the views or interests of the deaf community, in whole or in part. Such regulations need to be laid before and approved by the Assembly. In carrying out such consultation, the Department must engage with both the BSL and ISL community, including members of the Deafblind community separately or together in different or similar ways.

Section 9: Department's manner of engagement

In carrying out such engagement, the Department must consult with at least two persons or groups appearing to the Department to be representative or cognisant of the views or interests of the deaf community, in whole or in part. In fulfilling such engagement, the Department must seek to secure input relating specifically to British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language as well as generally from the whole deaf community.

Section 10: Department to publish 3-yearly reports

The Department for Communities must prepare and lay before the Assembly a report evaluating the impact of the Act within five years of the Act's commencement and every three-year period after that.

Section 11: Accreditation of teachers and interpreters

The Department for Communities must by regulations make a scheme for the purpose of, or in connection with, the accreditation of (either or both) teachers of BSL or ISL, or interpreters of BSL or ISL. The scheme may include provision for applications to become accredited persons, the registration of accredited persons, and criteria and conditions to be met in order for persons to become or remain accredited (especially as to matters of professional competence).

Section 12: Members of the deaf community

For the purposes of the Act, the deaf community is defined as comprising of all people falling within one or more of the following paragraphs:

(a) individuals who rely for communication on BSL or ISL,

(b) deaf or deafblind people who at any time use, or will ever benefit from using 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).

In addition, 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 Act.

Section 13: Different forms of sign languages

For the purposes of the Act, reference to BSL or ISL is to 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.

Section 14: Everyday reliance on sign languages

Everyday reliance on BSL or ISL is defined for the purposes of the Act to refer to someone who relies (wholly or substantially) on BSL or ISL by necessity or for convenience in the course of everyday activities.

Section 15 Commencement

The provisions for commencement and the short title come into operation on the day after the day on which the Act receives Royal Assent. The rest of the Act comes into operation on such day or days as the Department for Communities may by order appoint.

Section 16: Short title

The short title is given as the Sign Language Act (Northern Ireland) 2026.

HANSARD REPORTS

19. The following table sets out the dates of the Hansard reports for each stage of the Act's passage through the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Stage	*Date*
Introduction	10 February 2025
Second Stage	18 February 2025
Consideration Stage	24 March 2026
Further Consideration Stage	20 April 2026
Final Stage	28 April 2026
Royal Assent	9 July 2026

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