



Subject:	Motion: Support for Sign Languages Act and the Addition of Sign Languages to School Curricula – Response from Ministers
Date:	21st May, 2021
Reporting Officer:	John Walsh, City Solicitor/Director of Legal and Civic Services
Contact Officer:	Jim Hanna, Senior Democratic Services Officer

Restricted Reports	
Is this report restricted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?	
After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sometime in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>

Call-in	
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

1.0	Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues
1.1	To consider responses to a motion calling for the introduction of a Sign Languages Act and the addition of Sign Languages to School Curricula, which was passed by the Council at its meeting on 1st April.
2.0	Recommendation
2.1	The Members of the Committee are requested to consider the responses and, in line with the Council's decision of 4th May, to delegate authority to the Chief Executive to take such action thereon as may be determined.
3.0	Main Report
3.1	At the Council meeting on 1st April, the following motion, which was proposed by Councillor McMullan and seconded by Councillor Heading, was passed: "This Council notes that 15th – 21st March was Sign Language Week, timed with the anniversary of the UK Government formally recognising British Sign Language (BSL) as a language in its own right on 18th March 2003. However, in 2021 neither

BSL nor Irish Sign Language have legal status in Northern Ireland nor are sign languages part of school curricula.

This means at present, that deaf people must rely on the provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act (NI) (1995) to secure reasonable adjustments via sign language provision. In order to do so, deaf people are required to identify as 'disabled', in sharp contrast to their right to recognition as a cultural and linguistic minority under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

This Council believes that there is a need to create a more accessible and inclusive society in Northern Ireland, through greater learning of sign languages and awareness of Deaf culture.

It further notes this Council's previous support for the Belfast Statement on Mental Health and Deafness following the 6th World Congress, which met in Belfast in September 2014, to address issues around equal rights for deaf people in mental health care under the CRPD and UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Noting the rights of deaf people to recognition as a cultural and linguistic minority under the CRPD, this Council expresses its support for the introduction of a Sign Languages Act for Northern Ireland. Further noting Article 24(b) of the CRPD that requires the State to facilitate the learning of sign language and the promotion of the linguistic identity of the deaf community, the Council expresses its support for sign languages to be added to school curricula to ensure that all children learn from the earliest opportunity.

Therefore, the Council will write to the Minister for Communities and the Minister for Education to ask when the New Decade, New Approach commitment to a Sign Language Act will be brought forward and further asks that this legislation includes provision for sign languages to be added to the Key Stage 1 and 2 Curriculum, with schools equipped to deliver these courses, as well as the introduction of sign languages as a GCSE for secondary school pupils."

3.2 A response to the motion has been received from Mr. Peter Weir, Minister for Education, and from Mr. Tommy McAuley, Acting Head of the Sign Language Policy Team, on behalf of the Minister for Communities. Copies of those are attached.

3.3 Minister Weir begins by stating that there is currently no statutory requirement for pupils to learn sign language in schools in Northern Ireland. However, young people should be given opportunities to engage with and demonstrate the skill of communication and to transfer their knowledge about communication concepts and skills to real-life meaningful contexts across the curriculum. Pupils are encouraged to become effective communicators by using a range of techniques, forms and media to convey information and ideas creatively and appropriately. Therefore, schools may choose to introduce sign language in this context.

3.4 He points out that the curriculum is broad and balanced and provides schools with considerable flexibility to adapt what they teach and to use approaches which best suit the learning needs of their pupils. This flexibility affords the freedom to include learning opportunities, such as sign language, should a school consider this to be a priority for their pupils.

3.5	<p>He goes on to confirm that any changes in the current curriculum to make sign language a statutory requirement at Key Stage 1 and 2 would require a legislative change to the 2007 Minimum Content Order. His officials are liaising with their counterparts in the Department for Communities, who have lead responsibility for taking forward the new Sign Languages Act, to discuss the impact and operational practicalities of the new Act.</p>
3.6	<p>The Minister concludes by stating that, in terms of introducing sign languages as a GCSE qualification at post primary level, the Department for Education (England) is developing content for a potential British Sign Language (BSL) GCSE and hopes to consult on this later in the year. Following a period of consultation and, if this process leads to approval of a qualification by Ofqual, then it will be available for delivery by centres in Northern Ireland. However, it is not possible to provide an accurate timescale for the potential rollout of this qualification at this time.</p>
3.7	<p>Mr. McAuley begins by confirming that Minister Hargey welcomes the Council's interest in this matter and is fully supportive of the need to create a more accessible and inclusive society in Northern Ireland, through greater learning of sign languages and awareness of Deaf culture. The Minister remains committed to the introduction of Sign Language legislation, built upon the principles of equality and social inclusion, to ensure that the Deaf community here have the same rights and opportunities as those in the hearing community and are able to access services in their own language.</p>
3.8	<p>He explains that the Sign Language Policy Team has, over the past few months, been engaging with the Deaf community to outline the legislative timeframes and the options which have been considered for bringing forward a Bill, both in this mandate and the next, in the context of the challenges presented with Covid-19. The Department has taken on board feedback from the Deaf community, not only of the need for legislation, but more importantly, of the need for the right legislation which will make a difference to their lives, even if it takes more time to do so.</p>
3.8	<p>Whilst the Minister would have strongly preferred to introduce legislation in the current mandate, responding to the pandemic has reduced the time available to do so. Therefore, despite the best efforts, a Sign Language Bill has not been included in the Department's Primary Legislation Timetable schedule for the remainder of this mandate. The Minister recognises that this news will be viewed with disappointment and shares that disappointment. However, she has directed officials to continue their engagement with the Deaf community to ensure that their views continue to be represented as work towards a future Sign Language Bill in the next mandate progresses and will include continued engagement with the Council's Language Officer with responsibility for BSL and ISL.</p>
3.9	<p>Mr. McAuley goes on to address that part of the motion referring to "the need to create a more accessible and inclusive society in Northern Ireland, through greater learning of sign languages and awareness of Deaf culture" by pointing out that the Department's work with the Deaf community promotes respect and understanding of BSL and ISL and Deaf culture.</p>
3.10	<p>He goes on to highlight the fact that the Department funds multiple BSL and ISL courses, such as Family Signing Language courses for families with deaf children, to learn together to enhance the crucial early years' communication which is the foundation for better life</p>

<p>3.11</p> <p>3.12</p>	<p>outcomes, including academically and emotionally. It also funds some Deaf awareness and sign language classes at primary and secondary school level, as well as some BSL and ISL courses at Levels 3,4 and 6, which are a requirement for a career in, for example, interpreting, translating and as a BSL/ISL linguistic Assessor. Projects and initiatives to promote the awareness of BSL/ISL and Deaf culture to local hearing communities and voluntary and community groups are also funded. He points out that these courses are accessible across Northern Ireland and that many beneficiaries reside within the Belfast City Council area.</p> <p>Mr. McAuley then makes reference to the Council’s previous support for the Belfast Statement on Mental Health and Deafness, following the 6th World Congress, to address issues around equal rights for deaf people in mental health care and points out that the Department for communities was pleased to partner with the conference organisers and support the conference through funding to meet the significant costs of interpreting and translating.</p> <p>He concludes by stating that he would be happy to meet with Council officers to identify further areas of collaboration.</p> <p><u>Financial and Resource Implications</u></p> <p>None associated with this report.</p> <p><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u></p> <p>None</p>
<p>4.0</p>	<p>Documents Attached</p>
	<p>Appendix 1 -Response from Minister Weir</p> <p>Appendix 2 – Response from DfC official</p>