



Department for

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Your ref: HD/JT

Our ref: CORR 0805-2021

6 May 2021

Dear Henry

Thank you for your letter of 22 April 2021 to Minister Hargey. I have been asked to reply on behalf of the Minister.

Minister Hargey welcomes the interest of Belfast City Council in this matter and she 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 on the principles of equality and social inclusion in ensuring 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.

My team has been engaging with the Deaf community over the past number of months to outline the legislative timeframes and the options that have been considered for bringing forward a Bill both in this mandate and the next in the context of the challenges presented with COVID. 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 that will make a difference to their lives, even if it takes more time to do so.

Whilst Minister would have strongly preferred to introduce legislation in the current mandate, responding to the pandemic has reduced our time to do so. Therefore, despite our best efforts, a Sign Language Bill has not been included in the Department's Primary Legislation Timetable schedule for the remainder of this Mandate.

Minister recognises that this news will be viewed with disappointment and she 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. This will of course include continued engagement with the Belfast City Council Language Officer with responsibility for BSL and ISL – Michael Johnston.

I note that the Council's motion also states: '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'. The Department's work with the Deaf community promotes respect and understanding of BSL and ISL and Deaf culture.

To this end, we fund 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 outcomes, including academically and emotionally. In addition, we fund some Deaf awareness and sign language classes across the schools sector – primary and secondary. We also fund 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. In addition, we fund projects and initiatives to promote the awareness of BSL/ISL and Deaf culture to local hearing communities and voluntary and community groups.

Although these courses are accessible across Northern Ireland, many beneficiaries of the courses reside within the Belfast City Council area.

I note that the motion refers to the 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. The Department was pleased to partner with the conference organisers and support the conference through funding to meet the not insignificant costs of interpreting and translating.

I am happy to meet with officials for discussion to identify further areas of collaboration.

I trust you find this response helpful.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tommy McAuley', with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Tommy McAuley
Acting Head Sign Language Policy Team