CASE STUDY UPDATE | TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

From Bill to Act: Sign Language in Northern Ireland

How a statutory committee, stakeholders and Assembly votes shaped legislation

THE OUTCOME

The Sign Language Bill was introduced on 10 February 2025, completed Final Stage on 28 April 2026 and received Royal Assent on 9 July 2026. It is now the Sign Language Act (Northern Ireland) 2026. Its first commencement order took effect on 23 September 2026.

What is the Committee for Communities?

The Committee for Communities is a statutory committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly. It advises, assists and scrutinises the Department for Communities and the Minister. Its remit includes housing, welfare, equality, languages, culture, sport, and community and voluntary services.

What committees do

- Examine Bills clause by clause and question Ministers and officials.
- Gather written, signed and oral evidence from affected people.
- Consider costs, equality, rights, implementation and policy delivery.
- Report findings and recommend changes; return to implementation later.

Why this Bill mattered

- Northern Ireland uses two distinct sign languages: British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL). Both received governmental recognition in 2004, but no equivalent statutory recognition then followed.
- The Bill proposed equal legal recognition and duties designed to improve access to public information and services.

The Bill's journey at a glance

10 FEB 2025 Bill introduced	**FEB 2025–FEB 2026** Committee scrutiny and evidence	**24 MAR 2026** Consideration Stage: amendments voted on
20 APR 2026 Further Consideration Stage: wording refined	**28 APR / 9 JUL 2026** Final Stage / Royal Assent	**23 SEP 2026** First commencement order

Key distinction for students: a Committee can recommend and agree proposed amendments during scrutiny, but the Assembly decides which amendments become part of the Bill.

CASE STUDY | PARTICIPATION

Making the scrutiny process accessible

A practical example of a parliamentary committee adapting how it gathers evidence

A different kind of Call for Evidence

The Committee's consultation opened on 7 March 2025 and closed on 9 May 2025. To hear from BSL and ISL users in their preferred languages, it accepted signed video submissions via WhatsApp alongside conventional written responses. Videos were interpreted for Committee Members.[1]

The evidence

- 42 responses through Citizen Space.
- 44 signed responses through WhatsApp.
- 20 additional written responses and briefings.
- Evidence from 18 stakeholder groups across 13 Committee meetings and two events.

Accessible participation

- Live two-way interpreting during signed evidence sessions.
- BSL and ISL video updates on Committee proceedings.
- Information events in Belfast, Strabane and Banbridge, plus a virtual event.
- Special engagement with children, families, CODAs and deafblind people.

The people behind the legislation





Left: a message from a child about communication in healthcare. Right: Committee engagement with members of the deafblind community (October 2025). Images retained from the original Education Service sheet.

Children described wanting to communicate at doctors' surgeries, swimming pools and with mental health services. Deafblind witnesses explained the specialist interpreting they required and the difficulties of accessing ordinary services. Their evidence helped Members see how legal wording could affect everyday life.

TEACHING POINT

Effective scrutiny is not only about asking questions. It is also about changing the evidence-gathering method so that people affected by a law can take part on equal terms. In this case, the Committee extended its scrutiny timetable in part to accommodate interpreting and accessible publication.[2]

1 Committee for Communities, Bill report (2026).
2 Committee for Communities, Bill report (2026).

CASE STUDY | COMMITTEE STAGE

Changes secured through Committee scrutiny

Committee Stage finished in February 2026; the amendments were then made at Consideration Stage

The Committee examined each of the 15 original clauses, heard evidence, and negotiated or supported Departmental amendments. Its report was published on 12 February 2026. These changes were not inserted into the Bill by the Committee itself: they became legislative amendments when agreed by the Assembly on 24 March.[3]

Issue	Bill introduced (2025)	What the Assembly enacted (2026)
Free sign language classes	Classes were required for deaf children under 19 and close families, without the word "free" on the face of the Bill.	Classes expressly free for deaf people under 25, with close families, guardians and carers. (Further Consideration later separated the eligible categories.)
Public bodies to be covered	DfC could list prescribed organisations through regulations subject to negative resolution.	The list must be approved by Assembly affirmative resolution — stronger Assembly oversight.
Who must be consulted	Guidance and regulations required consulting at least one deaf-community person or group.	At least two persons or groups; a further clause requires specific input on both BSL and ISL.
Departmental reports	One impact report within no more than five years, then every five years.	Report must be laid before the Assembly; after the first reporting period (still up to five years), subsequent periods are every three years.
Accreditation scheme	DfC must create a teacher/interpreter accreditation scheme by negative-resolution regulations.	Regulations for the scheme require affirmative approval by the Assembly.

Additional amendments clarified how functions may be given to departments or other bodies and how the interests of different sections of the deaf community can be represented. See original clauses 5–8 and amendments 7–18.[4]

WHAT WAS NOT RESOLVED AT COMMITTEE STAGE?

Members differed over how broadly to define the "deaf community", particularly for people who acquire deafness later in life. On the relevant original clause 11, the Committee recorded a division of 6–2 in favour of leaving the clause as drafted. This issue returned to the Assembly at Consideration Stage.[5]

3 Committee for Communities, Bill report (2026); NI Assembly, Consideration Stage amendment list; NI Assembly, Official Report (24 March 2026).
4 Committee for Communities, Bill report (2026); NI Assembly, Consideration Stage amendment list; NI Assembly, Official Report (24 March 2026).
5 Committee for Communities, Bill report (2026).

CASE STUDY | ASSEMBLY DEBATE

Two contested votes at Consideration Stage

24 March 2026: individual MLAs could propose amendments even after Committee Stage

There were 22 amendments on the annotated marshalled list. Most Ministerial amendments were agreed without a recorded division. Two amendments from Kellie Armstrong MLA were decided by recorded votes of the whole Assembly.[6]

AMENDMENT 4 | 47 AYES – 22 NOES

Classes for people aged 25 or over who become deaf
Ms Armstrong proposed that the Department must arrange sign language classes for people who become deaf at age 25 or over, and their close families/carers. The proposal allowed fees, but aimed to prevent fee income exceeding costs.

What followed: Agreed on division. At Further Consideration Stage, joint Minister/Member amendments restructured clause 2 into two eligible categories, keeping free classes for those under 25 and enabling cost-limited fees for the second category under affirmative regulations.[7]

AMENDMENT 22 | 39 AYES – 28 NOES

Broadening the meaning of the "deaf community"
Ms Armstrong proposed replacing "who normally use" BSL/ISL with "who will benefit from using" BSL/ISL in the definition relating to deaf or deafblind people.

What followed: Agreed on division. At Further Consideration Stage, the wording was refined. Final section 12 covers deaf or deafblind people who "at any time use, or ever benefit from use of," BSL or ISL for communication.[8]

Why was there further amendment?

The Assembly supported widening access, but the exact wording had to be made workable in law. At Further Consideration Stage on 20 April 2026, eight amendments were agreed: four addressed clause 2 (including fee arrangements), and four refined the new definition of the deaf community.[9]

DISCUSSION PROMPT

Why might Members agree on an objective — making sign language support available to more people — but disagree about the precise words and cost implications of an amendment?

6 NI Assembly, Consideration Stage amendment list; NI Assembly, Official Report (24 March 2026).
7 NI Assembly, Consideration Stage amendment list; NI Assembly, Official Report (24 March 2026); NI Assembly, Further Consideration amendment list; NI Assembly, final Bill text.
8 NI Assembly, Consideration Stage amendment list; NI Assembly, Official Report (24 March 2026); NI Assembly, Further Consideration amendment list; NI Assembly, final Bill text.
9 NI Assembly, Further Consideration amendment list; NI Assembly, final Bill text.

CASE STUDY | THE FINAL LAW

What the Sign Language Act now provides

The Act has 16 sections, compared with the 15-clause Bill as introduced

Recognition and public access

- BSL and ISL are recognised as languages of Northern Ireland with equal status (section 1).
- Prescribed organisations must take all reasonable steps to make information and services accessible and facilitate use of BSL/ISL, at no extra cost to users (section 3).
- DfC must list prescribed bodies in regulations requiring Assembly approval (section 4).

Learning and standards

- Free classes must be available for people in the under-25 category and their close families, guardians and carers.
- A further class category covers people 25 or over who have become deaf and close families/carers; charges may be prescribed subject to safeguards and Assembly approval (section 2).
- A scheme for accrediting sign language teachers and interpreters must be set up (section 11).

Consultation and accountability

- DfC must consult at least two representatives/groups on guidance and regulations and seek input specifically relating to BSL and ISL (sections 5, 8–9).
- DfC must provide best-practice guidance, including advice on sign language action plans (section 6).
- Impact reports must be presented to the Assembly. The FIRST period is no more than five years; later periods are three years (section 10).

A qualified outcome

- The Bill remains a framework for delivery: the accessibility duty applies only to prescribed bodies, guidance and regulations are important, and affordability/ practicability may be considered. The Act does not create an automatic general right to an interpreter in every setting.

Royal Assent is not the same as commencement

Royal Assent was given on 9 July 2026. The first Commencement Order brought sections 1, 2 and 4–14 into operation on 23 September 2026. Section 3 - the central reasonable-steps duty for prescribed organisations - was NOT included in that first order and requires separate commencement. The Act therefore becomes operational in stages.[10]

LIVE SCRUTINY QUESTION

Which public bodies will be prescribed, when will section 3 be commenced, how will interpreting and classes be funded, and how will deaf people know where to complain if access fails?

10 NI Assembly, final Bill text; Commencement No. 1 Order 2026.

CASE STUDY | CLASSROOM USE

What students can learn from this example

The legislative process is more than a debate in the Assembly Chamber

Challenges faced by the Committee

Scrutiny pressures

- Time and interpreting: accessible sessions and signed updates required additional preparation.
- A framework Bill: much detail was left to guidance and delegated legislation.
- Funding: workforce development, interpreters and delivery infrastructure carry costs.
- Cross-cutting policy: health, education, justice, transport and social inclusion span departments.

Long-term oversight

- Recognising two languages requires meaningful consultation with both language communities and deafblind people.
- Legislation on paper must be followed by funded services and published guidance.
- The Committee recommended work on complaints, accessibility, workforce capacity and clear implementation milestones.
- The Act's future reporting and regulations provide opportunities for post-legislative scrutiny.[11]

Questions for discussion

- Why did the Committee make video and WhatsApp evidence available rather than relying only on written submissions?
- What is the difference between a Committee recommendation, an amendment agreed by the Assembly, and a provision brought into force?
- Why were amendments 4 and 22 decided by recorded votes, while many other amendments passed without division?
- Why did the Assembly revisit the successful amendments at Further Consideration Stage?
- How could a future Committee test whether the Act has improved everyday access to information and services?

Primary sources and further exploration

1. Bill history and dates
2. Committee for Communities report (12 February 2026)
3. Annotated amendments — Consideration Stage
4. Official Report — 24 March 2026 (including divisions)
5. Annotated amendments — Further Consideration Stage
6. Bill as amended at Further Consideration Stage (final text before Royal Assent)
7. Sign Language Act (Northern Ireland) 2026
8. Commencement No. 1 Order (23 September 2026)

Prepared for educational use, based on the original Committee for Communities information sheet and official NI Assembly and legislation records. Updated 1 November 2026. The Committee's recommendations and Assembly amendments are identified separately throughout.

11 Committee for Communities, Bill report (2026).