BSL/ISL Consultation

June 2016

Introduction :

NDCS is the national charity dedicated to creating a world without barriers for deaf children and young people. We represent the interests and campaign for the rights of all deaf children and young people from birth until they reach independence. NDCS supports the deaf child through the family as well as directly supporting deaf children and young people. We estimate that there are approximately 1,400 deaf children and young people in Northern Ireland.

We have a dedicated team based in Belfast led by Heather Gray, Director for Scotland & Northern Ireland. NDCS provides a Family Support Service across the country, training sessions for families on topics such as:- early years, communication, learning about deafness, starting school- education rights & responsibilities, technology and Family Sign Language courses. We also campaign to drive up the standards of services for deaf children and their families and undertake research to inform the sector. In addition, we provide training and resources for professionals working with deaf children with an aim to supporting children to achieve their potential.

**Part 1**

**Do you agree with the need for a Sign Language Framework that includes proposals for an Irish Sign Language and British Sign Language bill?**

**Yes**

NDCS welcomes the need for a Sign Language Framework that includes proposals for an Irish Sign Language (ISL) & British Sign Language (BSL) bill. This Bill is important legislation in securing the place of BSL/ISL as a recognised language in our society.

The Bill’s aspirations to promote and raise awareness of the language to ensure it is fully embedded into society are commendable. The enabling objectives the Framework sets out could result in strengthening BSL provision across the delivery of public services, and therefore ultimately improve outcomes for deaf children and adults.

1b

**Do you agree with the proposed objectives in the Sign Language Framework?**

Agree

NDCS agrees with all of the proposed objectives laid out in the framework.

Deafness in childhood has a major impact on the learning of spoken language. As 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents or carers, it is crucial then that families receive timely, appropriate support including early intervention strategies and relevant, accessible information. NDCS believes it is essential that families are provided the full range of support options and communication methods available to them. Information about these options should be presented to families in their own terms, taking into account their cultural and social background in such a way that enhances a family’s ability to make informed decisions which reflect their own views and meet the needs of their child.

**Part 2 – Official Status of Irish Sign Language and British Sign Language.**

**It is proposed that Irish Sign Language and British Sign Language be recognised and defined as Official Languages in the north in such a way as to guarantee services through Irish Sign Language and British Sign Language on a par with those available through English.**

**Do you agree with this proposal?**

Agree

NDCS recognises that minority language users are entitled to protection of their internationally recognised rights as set out in the Council of Europe Charter for Regional and Minority Languages and the Framework Convention for the Protection of the Rights of National Minorities. We also note the references to language rights in the Belfast Agreement (1998), the Joint Declaration (2003) and the St. Andrews Agreement (2006).

The UK Government ratified the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in 2001, recognising obligations to protect and promote BSL/ISL, which were recognised as languages in their own right in a position statement made by the Secretary of State on 29th March 2004, thus granting them Part 3 status under the Charter which commits State Parties to specific undertakings for measures in areas including education public services, judicial authority, media, cultural activities and facilities, and economic and social life.

This grants BSL/ISL parity with Irish and Ulster-Scots, both of which are afforded special protection under Section 28B of the 1998 Northern Ireland Act, which following the St Andrews Agreement (2006) was amended to include a provision that the Executive Committee shall adopt strategies to enhance and protect the development of the Irish language and to enhance and develop the Ulster Scots language, heritage and culture; alongside a commitment that “Government will introduce an Irish Language Act reflecting on the experience of Wales and Ireland…to enhance and protect the development of the Irish language”. Ten years after this development, and one year into the current Irish Language Strategy, NDCS expresses its approval of the proposed Framework which will afford BSL/ISL the same depth of commitment, promotion and tolerance.

**Part 3**

**3a**

**It is proposed that the Minister with responsibility for the promotion of the indigenous languages of the north, being the Minister for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, shall have assigned special responsibility in relation to the oversight and exercise of the functions under this legislation.**

**Do you agree that there should be a Minister assigned with special responsibility for Irish Sign Language and British Sign Language?**

Agree

Yes, we agree that there should be a Minister who has responsibilityfor ISL & BSL in Northern Ireland.

**3b**

**Do you agree that the Minister with special responsibility for Irish Sign Language and British Sign Language should be the Minister with responsibility for Culture?**

NDCS is pleased to offer its support and positive endorsement of the draft legislation contained within the proposed framework, agreeing with the need to promote parity with English, Irish and Ulster-Scots through the assignation of Special Responsibility in relation to the oversight and exercise of the functions under this legislation to the existing role of the Minister of the Department for Communities.

**Part 4**

**It is proposed that the functions of Executive Ministers in relation to ISL and BSL will include the requirement:**

* **to set down principles to guide the operations of public bodies; making provision for the preparation, publication and implementation of Irish Sign Language and British Sign Language Plans; and**
* **to promote, facilitate the promotion of, and protect the use and understanding of Irish Sign Language and British Sign Language in the exercise of their functions.**

**4a Do you agree with the inclusion of provisions for Executive Ministers to prepare, publish and implement Irish Sign Language and British Sign Language Plans for their departments?**

Yes, we commend the decision to disseminate knowledge, understanding and application of BSL/ISL plans within each department under the direction and guidance of the Executive Ministers, while the Minister with Special Responsibility retains oversight for quality and accuracy.

**4b Do you agree with the inclusion of provisions for Executive Ministers to promote and protect the use and understanding of Irish Sign Language and British Sign Language Plans for their departments?**

Yes, we feel it is imperative that there is cross Departmental support from all Ministers to prepare, publish, implement, promote & protect ISL/BSL Plans to their staff.

NDCS welcomes the publication of this draft Strategy, taken forward as part of the Northern Ireland Executive’s commitment under the Programme for Government 2016-21 to deliver against Outcomes 1 – 14, in particular those contributions highlighted as falling under the Role of the Executive:

* Supporting families to care for children
* Providing high quality health services
* Providing high quality education – including pre-school education
* Increasing the skills of our population
* Creating opportunity for entrepreneurship and employment growth
* Increasing quality of life by supporting culture, the arts, and facilities for recreation
* Building Services around the needs of users
* Supporting the delivery of services through the most appropriate channel
* Building confidence in our communities
* Working to break down intolerance and celebrating diversity
* Working towards greater mutual respect and understanding among people by improving attitudes, and building a community where they can play a full and active role
* Acknowledging that diversity builds strength and adds value to our community, and working to encourage and celebrate diversity
* Leading by example, by challenging discrimination and prejudice, and encouraging others to do the same
* Helping people to address barriers they face to accessing high quality employment, including confidence and capability
* Educating and training people, enabling them to develop to their full potential
* Providing children with the best start in life, supporting parents in their role
* Helping to improve the quality of the places in which people live, work and play

NDCS recommends that such legislation should be drafted so as to enable the language to be promoted in a way that is proportionate to the language needs of the situation, in a spirit of respect for the freedom of minority language speakers to speak their language of preference.

**Part 5**

**It is proposed to provide a scheme to ensure free Irish Sign Language and British Sign Language classes to:**

* **parents, siblings, grandparents of a child who is deaf, and**
* **other people who serve in loco parentis or as a guardian to a child who is deaf.**

**Do you agree with this proposal?**

Agree

NDCS strongly agrees that a proposed scheme to provide free ISL/BSL classes to parents & extended family members is essential to the communication development of deaf children.

NDCS Northern Ireland delivers FSL to families with deaf children in the Early Years. It is the only curriculum in the UK of its kind and is unique in that the BSL is taught in a child-centred way using vocabulary suitable for a young child. According to its independent evaluation report, the delivery of FSL course contributes strongly to deaf children having improved vocabulary and positive family relationships as a result of their parents having better communication skills.

Research demonstrates that the development of effective communication and language skills is paramount for achieving successful emotional development and learning for all children. Deaf children typically start their early education without having the same level of language skills and vocabulary as their hearing peers, placing them at a substantial disadvantage in their early education, where the development of literacy and numeracy skills will help shape their future academic achievements and employment prospects. Yoshinago-Itano (2003) and subsequent studies replicating this study clearly demonstrate that where there was early intervention to help develop communication skills and improve vocabulary, deaf children acquired language and communication skills proportionate to those of their hearing peers.

The NDCS-developed Family Sign Language (FSL) project is an example of such an early stage intervention. As traditional sign language courses are more appropriate to adult life and interactions, and families with young deaf children need to learn signs needed for nursery rhymes, stories, games and child-centred activities that help build early communication between parents and their child, and build the base for the early development of age-appropriate language and communication skills. Children learn language best when it is consistently modelled for them in an interactive and meaningful context and the Family Sign Language course helps parents to develop appropriate sign language skills to model and interact with their deaf children and support ongoing communication with their deaf child.

The NDCS FSL curriculum grew out of a recognised need among the families of deaf children for strong, meaningful communication within the child’s community of care; a need which has been recognised as one of the five core competences for Social and Emotional Learning (see Weissberg and O’Brien, 2004).

In 2007, Garcia and Turk conducted research that showed that “deaf children usually need extra help to differentiate, label and express a range of emotional states” (Garcia and Turk, 2007:134), and that while “[s]ome voluntary organizations such as NDCS are starting to address parenting concerns about the differences in raising a deaf child and are giving some primary advice... there have to date been no formal assessments of methods to empower parents of deaf children with specific skills related to communication with deaf children, in particular helping them to address emotional vocabulary, which in turn will prevent the development of behavioural problems” (Garcia and Turk, 2007:127). It is thereforeextremely gratifying to learn that parents attending FSL courses recognised that their child’s acquisition of emotional vocabulary was a positive influence arising from their participation, a fact that strengthens our endorsement of the above proposal.

Likewise, when we consider the literature highlighting the importance of family-oriented support by both professionals and peers following an early identification of deafness (see Bodner-Johnson and Sass-Lehrer, 1999; Calderon and Greenberg,1999; Meadow-Orlans, 1995; Meadow-Orlans and Sass-Lehrer, 1995; Most and Zaidman-Zait, 2003), it is encouraging to find that parents counted the presence of other families in similar situations and also adult deaf role models as having had a positive impact on their family, although baseline research carried out by NDCS between 2012 and 2013 revealed that in general parent-child communication is carried out with confidence; but the involvement of the extended family is mainly below what we may consider to be a reasonable level of confidence. Bouvet (1990) referred to this as a ‘shared handicap of communication’ in which both the hearing and deaf participants are ‘unsure and ineffective’ in their communications (see also Beazley, 1992; Gibson, 1994). NDCS moved on these findings to extend the offer of FSL, and now delivers to extended families, or parent’s nominated support companions, thus increasing the communicative competence and confidence of the child’s community of care – we therefore fully support the proposal to offer BSL/ISL to all extended families and carers of deaf children, as those parents or carers who wish to use BSL/ISL to communicate with their deaf child currently have little support available to meet their needs. There is currently no free funding for these parents to access appropriate training or classes in order to communicate with their child through sign language. Traditional BSL classes are more appropriate for adult life and interactions while family provision needs include signs and phrases to facilitate play and child-centred activities.

The Northern Ireland Early Years Strategy recognises that “it is vitally important that the building blocks for language development are established at early years” and aims to work effectively with parents as they are “a child’s first teachers”. The Family Sign Language project is consistent with both of these objectives as the course component of the project provides parents with skills to help deaf children in progressing their language and vocabulary at a young age. The Education Minister’s 2012 announcement on the SEN review recognises as a key priority the need “to ensure early intervention” and highlights that if a child’s needs are met earlier on the child will “experience better educational outcomes and have better life choices”. Family Sign Language courses could help deaf children enter schools with better developed language; as a result they could experience better outcomes in education which is consistent with these aspects of the SEN review.

The benefits of providing NDCS FSL courses:

* Increased knowledge and skills that help them in parenting their deaf child
* Greater confidence in their ability to parent a deaf child
* Greater confidence in signing with their deaf child
* Better understanding of their deaf child’s needs
* An improvement in family relationships
* Wider family support for the deaf child
* Reduced feelings of isolation
* Improved communication in the family

Tutors & NDCS staff delivering FSL report that:

* Parents being more confident and demonstrating more positive attitudes to deafness
* An improvement in parents’ communication skills
* The formation of new friendships/peer networks
* Professionals who have been trained feel more confident communication with and caring for deaf children

**Part 6**

**It is proposed to establish a scheme for the provision of free Irish Sign Language and British Sign Language classes to:**

* **children, parents, siblings, grandparents of an individual who becomes deafened, and**
* **other people who serve in loco parentis or as a guardian to an individual who becomes deafened.**

Agree

As mentioned in our response to part 5, NDCS commend the inclusion of a legislative programme providing age and contextually appropriate ISL/BSL classes to every deaf child’s community of care.

**Part 7**

**It is proposed that in legal proceedings an Irish Sign Language and/or British Sign Language interpretation service be provided for Deaf people where Irish Sign Language or British Sign Language is their primary or preferred language of use, at no inconvenience or additional expense to the individual.**

Agree

NDCS agrees that ISL/BSL interpretation service should be available for all deaf people to attend court, tribunals or legal proceeding at no inconvenience or expense to the individual.

NDCS considers that the proposed legislation provides an opportunity to bring about clarity in respect of the level of protection for BSL/ISL users within a range of spheres, including education and the courts, bringing about the level of engagement with BSL/ISL that was warranted to Irish and Ulster Scots under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998). Indeed, this legislation may be a useful opportunity to ensure a more consistent approach across the public sector in the matter of language policy.

NDCS considers that the use of any language should be a neutral act and that the use of ISL or its more general use in the community should not diminish the entitlements of those whose right to their British identity is guaranteed in the Good Friday Agreement, nor should BSL diminish the entitlements of those whose right to their Irish identity is thus guaranteed. The use, provision and promotion of any language in Northern Ireland should not be perceived as a threat to any individual or group, nor should it be intended in such a manner.

**Part 8 -It is proposed that Irish Sign Language and British Sign Language interpreters be provided, where necessary in accessing public services, at no inconvenience or additional expense to the Deaf individual.**

Agree

NDCS agrees that ISL/BSL interpreters should be provided for deaf people to attend medical appointments, meetings with professionals in schools or in accessing public services at no inconvenience or additional expense to them.

**Part 9 -It is proposed that legislation may provide for the regulation of Irish Sign Language and British Sign Language interpreters in the north.**

Do you agree with this proposal?

NDCS agrees that BSL/ISL interpreters should be regulated and this should be part of the legislation being introduced.

**9b It is proposed that legislation may require registered Irish Sign Language and British Sign Language interpreters and teachers to demonstrate and maintain professional competence.**

NDCS agrees that BSL/ISL interpreters and teachers should demonstrate continued professional development and professional competence.

**Part 10 –**

**It is proposed that there will be provision for the continuing educational requirements of deaf children and young people through Irish Sign Language and British Sign Language and to provide for related matters.**

Yes, NDCS agrees that there should be provision for the continuing educational requirements of deaf children and young people through ISL/BSL.

We know that with the right support, deaf children can achieve performance equality with their hearing peers; however we are also aware that there is a significant gap in the educational attainment and associated life chances for deaf children in Northern Ireland. NDCS are working with partners across sectors to address the issues which we know contributes to gaps in life chances and employability outcomes.

Deaf young people who use BSL as their preferred language require a high quality of fluency of support which, given the lack of qualification framework for support staff, is not always on hand. It can be frustrating for learners to not feel confident that everything the teacher is saying is being effectively translated to them and they understand everything that is going on in the classroom.

The role of Classroom Assistants is critical to ensuring that children and young people who rely on BSL/ISL to access teaching and learning receive accurate interpretation of what the teacher is saying and what is going on in class. Ensuring Classroom Assistants in schools and colleges have a minimum level of BSL qualification so that they can effectively fulfil this role is a fundamental element of fulfilling this requirement. As the SEN-Statemented attachment of a Classroom Assistant to a deaf child limits the contact time they will have with a Teacher of the Deaf, NDCS considers it essential that this provision is regulated and maintained as a part of the above proposal.