

Sign Language Act for Northern Ireland

Consultation with deaf young people, March 2021

Overall view on Sign languages Act

The response from young people overall was overwhelmingly positive. Young people were happy and excited about the Act, but also felt proud that deaf people and deaf culture were to be recognised in this way. It would make them feel more confident.

They felt a Sign Language Act could break down many barriers that deaf people experience. It could improve everyday communication by increasing knowledge and use of basic sign language by more people, which would in turn lead to a more inclusive society for all.

The opportunity to increase Deaf Awareness was felt to be an extremely important element of the legislation.

It was felt that the Act would benefit all deaf children, not just children who use sign language exclusively.

“People won't have to go through as much, feeling like it's a problem that they are deaf.”

“It would have made a big difference to me if this Act had been around a few years ago.”

“I complete agree. I think it should be accessible to everyone because it would help deaf people a lot if they were able to talk to other people that were speaking in their own language.”

Sign Language for deaf children and their families

There was a big welcome for the idea of free sign language classes for deaf children and their families. Young people talked about how expensive sign language classes were, and how hard it was to find one, especially during Coronavirus restrictions. “It will become more open for everybody.” It was suggested that deaf children who wanted to become sign language teachers or interpreters should have free access to more advanced sign language classes.

“I moved from the mainstream school and I had no sign language until 2011. I was pretty fluent within a short period of time, probably about a year and a half because you have deaf people around you. I think that's really a massive thing for learning sign language. Having deaf people as sign language teachers is a good way to do it.”

During the discussion, the question of hearing people teaching sign language was raised. The Act will mean more demand for classes and teachers. Hearing people can interpret sign language, is there an argument that they could also teach it in order to meet this demand? Most of the young people felt that teaching sign language is not just an introduction to BSL or ISL, but also to deaf culture. Hearing people, no matter how deaf aware, will never have lived experience of deaf culture. The discussion was very thoughtful and respectful of all views expressed: no conclusion was reached, but the young people clearly thought that consideration may need to be given to this as implementation of the Act is planned.

Access to Sign Language in Education

Particularly positive views about some of the potential impact on schools and education. There was strong support for **all** children, both deaf and hearing, having a chance to learn some sign language in school, as part of the curriculum, not as an extra requirement on top of school work. It was agreed that this could contribute to making mainstream schools more deaf-aware and deaf-friendly, and so a better educational option for deaf children.

It was felt that it would be good if children learnt some basic sign language from early in primary school, and got used to seeing sign language. It was felt strongly that this would improve communication for all and stop isolation of deaf children.

“I think it should be taught from P3. P1 and P2 are too early, you just are learning basic English.”

“Schools teach first aid from really early. I knew what to do if I saw someone hurt in the street, but not what to do if you are on the street and someone is deaf. What do I do and how do I help this person? Everyone should be taught basic sign language: are you okay, do you need help, are you lost, things like that.”

One of the young people was already running some after-school sessions for some of his classmates that want to learn the basics.

It was felt that secondary schools should offer an option to do a Sign Language GCSE in the same way as they do for languages like French and Spanish. It would be more useful for everyday (not holiday) communication and good because of career options such as interpreter, teacher, classroom assistant which would be more in demand after the Act is passed.

A Sign Language GCSE means that deaf people who go to mainstream school have a way of still being able to use sign language, and of having their skills recognised in a formal qualification.

Accessing education through the medium of Sign Language

The young people we spoke to were excited about easier access to education through sign language for children if they or their families want to use sign language as their first language

Consistent access to support from classroom/communication assistants that use BSL/ISL could make mainstream schools better for deaf children, including those that want an oral approach to be supported by sign language

It was felt that the Act would improve the current SEN system, which was felt to vary from school to school in the support offered to deaf children, by giving clear legal rights

“When I was younger we had to go through NDCS to do sign language in school. They had to go with my mom to court to get a classroom assistant with BSL I was one of the first children in Northern Ireland to have an actual signing classroom assistant. If it means there won't be any hassle about it in the future, that's a lot easier and helpful. Hopefully this act means we'll see much more of that.”

Other Education Issues

There was a lot of discussion about advantages and disadvantages of mainstream schools and deaf schools or deaf resource units. Many of the young people shared their experiences, and all had some concerns about integration, about bullying and about the best ways of supporting children and young people in education. We are most grateful to the young people involved for sharing their experiences so openly. We will not share details, but two key points did emerge.

Firstly, the Act has the potential to improve deaf children's experience in mainstream schools. This is particularly true for children who have sign language as their first language, but increased deaf awareness and increased exposure to sign language in schools will help all deaf children in mainstream education.

Secondly, all school settings need to address bullying on any grounds and think creatively about how deaf children are integrated, involved and included both with other pupils and also with the wider community around the school.

Deaf awareness

There was strong agreement about the importance of deaf awareness. Young people shared experiences of impatience and lack of awareness from teachers, in shops, on public transport and even amongst their friend groups. They felt that there is a stigma around being deaf, a judgement around the way they spoke and sometimes assumptions that because they were deaf they couldn't do anything for themselves.

“You need to have that patience as well as deaf awareness. Sometimes people say ‘Oh, it doesn't matter’ when I have to ask them to repeat themselves. I get that all the time it's so frustrating.”

They felt that with more deaf awareness and more sign language being used “you won't feel as much as an outsider. Now, whenever I go into the shop, and my hearing aid battery just died I don't know what to do because there is no one to talk to.”

To many of the young people it felt like the only people who were truly deaf aware were those who had deaf relatives. The Act has the potential to transform this.

Health

Access to interpreters was very important. Even better would be if paramedics and other frontline staff had some basic sign language for crisis situations (eg a stroke) where quick communication is really vital and there isn't time to bring in an interpreter.

One young person also mentioned the importance of privacy and confidentiality if a young person wanted to discuss something like a mental health issue. A family member accompanying them is not appropriate, so having an interpreter is particularly important.

Transport

It is important that the Act applies to public transport providers. Sign language information and services on buses, trains, stations and stops was important, as well as improving access to taxi services.

Being able to travel with confidence on your own is key to independence.

Other issues

Improved deaf awareness and increased basic sign language use in shops was another key area discussed. Young people mentioned having to interpret for older deaf people they had come across having difficulty in understanding cashiers in shops.

Promoting Independence

The young people strongly felt that the Act could offer:

- more widespread use of sign language in Northern Ireland,
- improved access to interpreters,
- the chance to use sign language alongside oral communication
- better support for families to learn and use sign language and
- more widespread deaf awareness

These are all needed and would all come together to improve confidence and, most importantly, independence for young people growing up deaf. They want to be able to speak for themselves and not have other people speaking for them.

Participants – some background information

Age range: 14-20

Education

Four: Jordanstown school;

Five: mainstream schools;

One: moved to Jordanstown after some years in mainstream primary, now in FE.

Currently experiencing a mix of remote learning and going into school and appear to be coping relatively well with the disruption. Jordanstown pupils mostly in school.

Communication methods

One primarily BSL at home in early years, now a mix of BSL and oral communication.

Four (Jordanstown pupils) confident in BSL, used alongside oral.

One only learned BSL at 10, now uses BSL and oral.

Two use some BSL, alongside oral.

Two use oral communication but want opportunities to learn BSL.