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| Subject: | Sign Language Bill – response to Call for Evidence |
| Date: | 23 May 2025 |
| Reporting Officer: | Nora Largey, City Solicitor / Director of Legal and Civic Services |
| Contact Officers: | Russell Connelly, Policy, Research and Compliance Officer Michael Johnston, Language Officer |

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| Restricted Reports | |
| Is this report restricted? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| Please indicate the description, as listed in Schedule 6, of the exempt information by virtue of which the council has deemed this report restricted. | |
| Insert number <input type="text"/> | |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Information relating to any individual2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information)4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained6. Information showing that the council proposes to (a) to give a notice imposing restrictions on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime | |
| 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"/> |

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| 1.0 | Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues |
| 1.1 | The purpose of this report is to seek retrospective approval from Members for the attached officer response to the Call for Evidence for a Sign Language Bill which was submitted to the Northern Ireland Assembly prior to the deadline of 9 th May 2025. |
| 2.0 | Recommendation |
| 2.1 | It is recommended that Members: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Note the contents of this report. 2. Provide retrospective approval for the officer response to the Call for Evidence which was submitted on 2nd May 2025. |
| 3.0 | Main report |
| | <u>Background</u> |
| 3.1 | In March 2004, the then British Secretary of State, Paul Murphy, formally recognised British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL) as languages in their own right. This recognition does not provide any statutory protection for the languages. |
| 3.2 | The Sign Language Partnership Group (SLPG) led by the Department for Communities (DfC) was established as a forum in 2007 to bring together the government Departments and key organisations and representatives representing the Deaf community to improve access to public services for sign language users. The Council's Language Officer sits on the SLPG. |
| 3.3 | In 2016, a Sign Language Framework was launched by DfC, which provides details to address the lack of support and historical under investment for ISL and BSL, including proposals for legislation to officially recognise, promote and protect both languages and to provide support for the parents and families of deaf children. |
| 3.4 | On 23 rd January 2025, Communities Minister Lyons announced at the Executive that he was introducing the draft Sign Language Bill to the Assembly. This took place on 18 th February 2025. The Sign Language Bill has been referred to the Assembly's Committee for Communities so that the Committee can consider and take evidence on the Bill and report its opinion to the Assembly. |
| | <u>Call for Evidence – Sign Language Bill</u> |
| 3.5 | The Committee is seeking views from stakeholders on the objectives, proposals and potential consequences of the Bill. Link to Sign Language Bill. |
| 3.6 | The Bill has 15 clauses. Clauses in Chapter 2 of the Bill requires prescribed organisations which includes Councils to carry out duties to ensure information and services provided are as |

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| | <p>accessible to individuals in the deaf community as they are to individuals who are not in the deaf community and to offer or facilitate the use of British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language for the benefit of the individuals in the deaf community in accessing information and services provided by the organisation. Prescribed organisations will be required to develop and implement five year Sign Language Action Plans and to submit updates to the Department for Communities.</p> |
| 3.7 | <p>The Council has prepared and submitted a response to each clause by the submission deadline, Friday 9th May 2025.</p> |
| 3.8 | <p>Committee will note that the Council has already committed to the proposed obligations in the Sign Language Bill. We have a Language Strategy which includes Sign Languages as one of the language strands. We have a Language Action Plan which covers actions to improve Sign Language provision within the Council. Our work to date in relation to Sign Languages is set out below.</p> |
| | <p>British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language Charter - In March 2019, the Council signed up to the British Deaf Association's British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language Charter and one of the pledges made was to ensure council staff working with Deaf people can communicate effectively using British Sign Language and/or Irish Sign Language.</p> <p>Sign Language Users' Forum - A Sign Language Users' Forum consisting of local Sign Language users was established in June 2019 and meets twice a year to advise, guide and support the Council to respond better to the needs of Sign Language Users in Belfast.</p> <p>Staff training - Sign Language courses are provided to council staff.</p> <p>Video Relay Service/Video Remoting Interpreting Service - The Council established a contact with SignVideo in 2020 to deliver interpreting support for Sign Language customers contacting the Customer Hub and visiting council venues.</p> <p>City Hall Visitor Exhibition & Tropical Ravine Sign Language Videos - Sign Language visitors can access translated videos via the Council's YouTube channel when visiting the Visitor Exhibition at the City Hall and at Tropical Ravine, Botanic Gardens.</p> <p>Public events - Sign Language interpreters are present at Council public events during the year e.g. Christmas and St Patrick's Day.</p> <p>Communication Support - Sign Language users can request a Sign Language interpreter for appointments/meetings. Documents/leaflets can also be requested in British Sign Language and/or Irish Sign Language.</p> |
| 3.9 | <p><u>Financial & Resource Implications</u></p> <p>None at this time.</p> |

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| 3.10 | <p><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Implications</u></p> <p>The Sign Language Bill if passed will promote equality of opportunity for Deaf Sign Language Users.</p> |
| 4.0 | Appendices – Documents Attached |
| | Appendix 1 - Response to the NI Assembly |