

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER



Department of
Education
www.education-ni.gov.uk
Rathgael House
43 Balloo Road
Rathgill
BANGOR
BT19 7PR

Tel: 028 9127 9306
Email: private.office@education-ni.gov.uk

Henry Downey
Democratic Services Officer
Belfast City Council
Legal and Civic Services Department
City Hall
Belfast
BT1 5GS

DowneyH@BelfastCity.gov.uk

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Dear 

Thank you for your letter of 22 April regarding the Belfast City Council's Notice of Motion asking that the Sign Language Act includes provision for sign languages to be added to the Key Stage 1 and 2 Curriculum, with schools equipped to deliver these courses, as well as the introduction of sign languages as a GCSE for secondary school pupils.

As you may be aware, there is currently no statutory requirement for pupils to learn sign language in our schools. However, young people should be given opportunities to engage with and demonstrate the skill of communication and to transfer their knowledge about communication concepts and skills to real-life meaningful contexts across the curriculum.

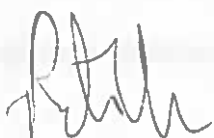
Modes of communication include talking and listening, reading and writing. Effective communication also includes non-verbal modes of communication, wider literacy and the use of multimedia and ICT technologies which may combine different modes. Pupils are encouraged to become effective communicators by using a range of techniques, forms and media to convey information and ideas creatively and appropriately. Therefore, schools may choose to introduce sign language in this context.

Our curriculum is broad and balanced and provides schools with considerable flexibility to adapt what they teach and to use approaches that best suit the learning needs of their pupils. This flexibility affords the freedom to include learning opportunities, such as sign language, should a school consider this a priority for their pupils.

Any changes to the current curriculum to make sign language a statutory requirement at Key Stages 1 and 2 would require a legislative change to the 2007 Minimum Content Order. My officials are liaising with colleagues in the Department for Communities, who have lead responsibility for taking forward the new Sign Languages Act, to discuss the impact and operational practicalities of the new Act.

Finally, with regard to introducing sign languages as a GCSE qualification at post primary, you may be aware that the Department for Education (England) is developing content for a potential British Sign Language (BSL) GCSE and hopes to consult on this later in the year. Following a period of consultation and if this process leads to approval of a qualification by Ofqual, then it will be available for delivery by centres in Northern Ireland. It is not possible to provide an accurate timescale for the potential rollout of this qualification at this time.

I trust this response outlines the Department's position.



PETER WEIR MLA
MINISTER OF EDUCATION