

Irish Sign Language Recognition Bill 2016 – A Call for your Support

Why is Irish Sign Language Recognition So Important?

Irish Sign Language (ISL) is intrinsic to the lives of at least 5,000 Irish Deaf people. As English is a second language for most of these deaf people, there is significant difficulty in accessing public services that hearing people take for granted. We regularly experience the effects of restricted access to supports, services and opportunities: Deaf people are up to 10 times less likely to attend university and are 2-4 times more likely to be unemployed than their hearing peers. They are 2-3 times more likely to suffer abuse (sexual, emotional, physical) than their hearing peers and 2-4 times more likely to experience clinically significant emotional distress. Challenges in accessing services in the legal, medical, educational & political sphere have just begun to be documented in Ireland following from work on EU funded projects like Medisigns and Justisigns, sometimes predicated on problematic policy measures and/or the quality of interpretation provided. The ISL Recognition Bill can dramatically improve the lives of deaf people and we call on your support in facilitating this change. The ISL Recognition Bill must be more than symbolic. The Government's proposal to delete large tracts of the Bill is deeply concerning. There is danger that we will be left with a Bill with little substance. It would be a grievous error to eliminate vast sections on the basis that they are otherwise provided for, e.g. via the National Disability Strategy. The following are key areas that need consideration:

Early Access to ISL and Accessible Education:

90% of Deaf children are born to hearing parents. As a result, both parents and children need as much support as possible to develop ISL skills to maximise the child's language acquisition as early as possible. It is estimated that the average hearing child accesses approx. 4,000 hours of quality language acquisition opportunity per year while deaf children receive an average of just 104 hours of ISL, and this, via the ISL Home Tuition Scheme. The effects of language deficit have repercussions which last a lifetime. These are compounded by a flawed school system: Limited provision of trained ISL/English interpreters and ISL teachers in schools frequently result in Deaf children receiving much more limited, fragmented education than their hearing peers. Some 80% of averagely intelligent deaf people leave school the reading age of an 8-9 year-old child. However, with the right supports, from appropriately qualified personnel, deaf children can achieve educational success.

Employment:

There is a direct link between early education, attainment of professional and/or educational qualifications, advancement into the labour market and social inclusion. Apart from financial autonomy, work and paid employment serves to develop a sense of belonging with positive mental health benefits and identification with the wider community. However, deaf people in Ireland continue to face barriers in employment and experience higher rates of poverty, social exclusion and under-employment.

Healthcare:

Too often, qualified interpreters are not provided in healthcare settings (e.g. GP, A&E, consultancy appointments, maternity care, palliative care). Sometimes deaf people are refused interpreters and family members or people with a rudimentary knowledge of ISL are inappropriately drafted in to assist. Miscommunication can ensue, leading to misdiagnosis, delayed and/or improper medical treatment. Informed consent is not secured in many situations and deaf patients report being confused and ill-informed about even the most fundamental aspects of their health. For example, an 18 year-old deaf woman was brought to hospital for an overnight stay and had surgery; years later she discovered she had had her wisdom teeth removed. No one had explained this to her at the time. Another deaf woman tells us that she did not sleep in hospital for several days post-surgery: she was cold and wanted an extra blanket, but no one on staff understood what she was trying to say. In one case, a 6 year-old child was asked to interpret for their deaf parents to secure consent for surgery on the child.

The Legal System:

Despite statutory instruments that allow for interpreters to be provided in criminal settings, too often they are not provided. In the past year alone, several cases were reported in the media on this issue. One deaf man was banned from his county by a judge who had not heard any evidence from him because no interpreter was provided in court, and a drunk driver had his case dismissed because Gardaí had not provided an interpreter when interviewing him. Deaf victims of crime do not have the same access to services as hearing citizens; there are many concerns about the text-based emergency service as deaf people do not receive any confirmation that their distress call has been received and will be acted upon.

Political Engagement:

Deaf citizens do not have equal access to services, state institutions or their political representatives. A clear example of this arose during the campaign for ISL Recognition: Members of the deaf community wanted to approach their local representatives to let them know why ISL Recognition was so important to them. However, when they tried to arrange meetings with their representatives, they were told that there was no funding available for interpreting costs, despite this being central to the discussion of why the ISL Recognition Bill must have teeth.

Cultural Life:

Ireland is renowned for its' art, culture and heritage. Yet, many of the artefacts of cultural life (museums, guided tours, theatre and cinema) are minimally accessible to the deaf community because linguistic access is not considered as a matter of course. Ensuring that ISL users are considered when events are planned will ensure access of opportunity to participate in the social and cultural heritage of our island. For example, a group of deaf people organised a tour of a well-known public monument. Despite advance booking, the site refused to leave the lights on even a little during the audio-visual part of the tour. The movie was not subtitled. The group had brought their own interpreter, but with the house lights out, the interpreter could not be seen; therefore they could not be 'heard'. Sometimes

simple accommodations are required to facilitate access, but depending on good-will does not ensure equal access.

Interpretation, ISL Teaching and the need for an ISL Council:

Trained ISL/English interpreters facilitate meaningful participation across the life cycle. However, at present, there is a very limited career trajectory available for interpreters, with the potential for attrition from the profession when consolidation and growth is needed to ensure deaf people have the access they need to be full citizens. Interpreting is not a 'protected profession' and, despite at least one EU Directive calling for state-driven statutory registration, this has not happened to date here. To protect the public, registration of appropriately qualified interpreters is needed. This will require implementation planning, a process that the ISL Council would be well positioned to oversee. The same is true for ISL teachers. While teachers of any other language must hold minimum qualifications, to date, no minimum requirement is in place for those recruited to deliver ISL Home Tuition, funded by the public purse. If we accept the linguistic status of ISL, then the same minimum requirements must be in place for ISL as for any other modern language taught in the state.

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Irish Deaf Society, Centre for Deaf Studies - Trinity College Dublin, Cork Deaf Association, Cork Deaf Club, Cork Deaf Enterprises, Council of Irish Sign Language Interpreters and Kerry Deaf Resource Centre.

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