



## **Irish Deaf Society Education Policy Paper**

The Irish Deaf Society seeks to achieve and promote the Equality and Rights of Deaf people in Ireland. On the grounds of the Irish Constitution and Human Rights and international legislation, the ambition of full access to citizenship and society is sought through the empowerment and mobilisation of the Deaf community. With an awareness of their identity and their rights as individuals, Deaf people in Ireland are enabled to celebrate their culture and continue to ensure the upholding of Irish Sign Language recognition and break down the barriers of discrimination. This policy paper on Education sets out the agreed position of the Irish Deaf Society in September 2022 for use in consultation.

### **Consultation with Deaf and Hard of Hearing People**

As a Disabled People's Organisation (DPO), the Irish Deaf Society emphasises the principle of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ('the UNCRPD')<sup>1</sup> that disabled people and our representative organisations must be consulted on all decisions which impact our lives, not just on legislation specifically focussing on disability. Consultation should result in meaningful engagement, meaning that DPOs input must be genuinely taken on board, adopted wherever possible, and that clear explanations are provided wherever DPO recommendations cannot be adopted. As outlined under the UNCRPD, DPOs must be involved in consultation processes from the planning or design stage onwards.

Ireland is a signatory to the UNCRPD, and as such, has undertaken to ensure and promote the full realisation of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all persons with disabilities without discrimination of any kind on the basis of disability.<sup>2</sup> Article 30 of the UNCRPD provides that disabled people are entitled, on an equal basis with others, to recognition and support of their specific cultural and linguistic identity, including sign languages and deaf culture.

### **The Irish Sign Language Act 2017**

The 2017 Act recognises Irish Sign Language ('ISL') as a language of its own right as well as recognises the linguistic rights of deaf people in Ireland to use, develop and preserve ISL as

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<sup>1</sup> DPOS are civil society organisations of persons **with** disabilities as distinct from other disability organisations and charities **for** persons with disability. The CRPD emphasises that for an organisation to qualify as a DPO, it must be (largely) an organisation of persons with a disability where a majority of persons with disabilities form the management, staff, members, volunteers and user groups.

<sup>2</sup> Article 4

their native or preferred language.<sup>3</sup> The community of persons using Irish Sign Language shall have the right to use, develop and preserve Irish Sign Language.<sup>4</sup>

The Act explicitly places a duty on all public bodies to provide ISL users with free interpretation, and obliges them to engage only with qualified and registered ISL interpreters in the Register of Irish Sign Language Interpreters. It also places obligations on the Minister for Education with regard to educational provision.

This policy paper acknowledges the minimum obligations set out in the legislation, and is addressed to the significant gap between the legislation and the standards for the education of Deaf and Hard of Hearing children and adults which are recognised internationally.

It should be noted that the rights of Deaf and Hard of Hearing people in Ireland are protected by the Equal Status Acts 2000-2018, which protects individuals on 9 equality grounds from discrimination in access to goods and services, and explicitly names obligations on public and private educational establishments. There are also obligations on public bodies in respect of equality under the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty, which imposes a statutory obligation on public bodies to have regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and treatment for staff and service users and to protect the human rights of staff and services users.

### **Language deprivation and the importance of early intervention**

Most Deaf and Hard of Hearing children are born to hearing parents who lack sign language skills. This results in a delay to language acquisition at an early age. The developmental milestones for sign language are similar to those of spoken languages. Sign language critically allows a child to develop strong capabilities as a 'first language' which can support other languages. It provides an important bridge for the Deaf or Hard of Hearing child.

Sign language is an important facilitator of early communication between a child and the people around them, as well as essential emotional and cognitive development. Deaf children with Deaf parents who sign with them experience language from birth, like hearing children. Hearing parents who learn sign language can provide a positive linguistic environment for development. As the learner grows older, sign language development supports elements of comprehension including broad conceptual knowledge; knowledge and abilities required

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<sup>3</sup> Section 3.1

<sup>4</sup> Section 3.2

specifically to comprehend a text; thinking and reasoning skills and motivation to understand and work towards goals.<sup>5</sup>

Article 25 of the UNCRPD calls on governments to provide early intervention to Deaf and Hard of Hearing children and provide services to prevent further disabilities.

Effective early intervention consists of:

- Information about sign language to be given to parents at the time of diagnosis
- Training for Visiting Teachers on the functions of sign language and how to support language acquisition at an early stage, and how sign language interacts with other interventions or supports for Deaf and Hard of Hearing people
- Support for parents and families to learn sign language should be of high quality and age-appropriate
- Access to sign language in pre-school education for Deaf and Hard of Hearing children

### **Home Tuition Scheme**

The Irish Sign Language (ISL) Tuition Scheme provides funding for a weekly tuition service. Tutors visit the home of a Deaf or Hard of Hearing pre-school child or school-going pupil to provide initial teaching in ISL for the child, their siblings, and parents or guardian. In some cases the skill requirement for tutors as proficient is not sufficient to deliver tutoring that is more than a functional introduction to the language.

In order to provide a quality service to the child and family service users, the Scheme must include the appointment of Deaf tutors, native ISL signers, support and supervision services, quality management, a complaints system and CPD for Tutors. Other supports that should be provided include age-appropriate curriculum guidance, mechanisms for reviewing and sharing good practices, and guidance for families on the curriculum provided.

Deaf people should be encouraged and supported to participate as Tutors since they provide essential access for families to communities of the Deaf in Ireland as well as first-hand cultural knowledge from these communities about the development of the language, Deaf identity, communities of practice and Deaf perspectives as well as serving as Deaf role models.

### **International standards in education for Deaf and Hard of Hearing people**

Article 24 of the UNCRPD requires the State to ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning directed to:

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<sup>5</sup>Mathews, E.S. & M. O'Donnell, Reading and Deaf and Hard of Hearing Pupils in Mainstream Education in Ireland, Dublin City University, 2018.

- a. The full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and human diversity;
- b. The development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential;
- c. Enabling persons with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society.

This includes deaf students accessing an inclusive, quality, free and accessible primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live, including support to facilitate their effective education, and effective individualised support measures provided in environments that maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion.

### **Inclusive Education**

Inclusive education that fosters the needs of every Deaf and Hard of Hearing student should be the standard and the primary aim of all educational settings. We affirm the position of the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) in advocating for inclusive education for Deaf learners that is of high-quality education with direct instruction in sign language, access to Deaf teachers and Deaf peers who use sign language, and a bilingual curriculum that includes the study of sign language.

We call for education for Deaf and Hard of Hearing students that is accessible, targeted at the individual learner, and at the same level as that of their hearing peers. This can be provided in a separate Deaf school, a unit within a mainstream school or with appropriate support in a mainstream classroom.

High quality education for Deaf and Hard of Hearing students:

- Direct instruction in sign language
- Access to Deaf teachers and Deaf peers who use sign language
- Bilingual curriculum that includes the study of sign language
- Supportive and inclusive signing environments
- Opportunities to develop strong sense of linguistic and cultural identity

The World Federation of the Deaf describes barriers to the effective education of deaf children as including:

- lack of trained teachers (including Deaf teachers as role models)
- lack of teachers who are fluent in sign language
- lack of a learning environment and pedagogy that is conducive to Deaf students' effective learning
- the absence of quality education in sign language

- lack of comprehensive policy and programming support for sign language learning by families with deaf children.
- lack of supportive and inclusive signing environments that support students to thrive and to acquire a strong sense of linguistic and cultural identity.<sup>6</sup>

The State is required by Article 24.3 of the UNCRPD to specifically enable disabled people to learn life and social development skills to facilitate their full and equal participation in education and as members of the community, facilitating means and formats of communication and orientation and mobility skills, facilitating peer support and mentoring, facilitating the learning of sign language and the promotion of the linguistic identity of the deaf community; ensuring that the education of persons, and in particular children, who are blind, deaf or deafblind, is delivered in the most appropriate languages and modes and means of communication for the individual, and in environments which maximize academic and social development.

Mainstream schools are environments that often do not provide adequate access to and direct instruction in sign language, including instruction from Deaf teachers. For many Deaf learners, this type of placement does not support inclusion. Inclusive education must meet the standard of having adequate access to and direct instruction in sign language, including instruction from Deaf teachers.

Accommodations such as interpreters and note takers must be accompanied by opportunities to study with other Deaf students and with teachers, including Deaf teachers, who are themselves fluent in sign language, by the provision of bilingual learning materials, and by opportunities to study sign language as a school subject to a high level of academic proficiency.<sup>7</sup> Deaf teaching assistants or SNAs may supplement but not replace Deaf teachers. Online resources in ISL or with subtitles can be used to supplement oral English online resources, but cannot replace direct instruction.

There are evidenced challenges in assessing literacy, comprehension, and general knowledge of Deaf and Hard of Hearing children<sup>8</sup>, with a negative impact on the accuracy of the assessment. Assessments must be supported and developed for use with sign language users. Parents should be fully informed about the supports in place for assessment.

Research is needed on the evaluation of educational outcomes in Irish education for Deaf and Hard of Hearing students, to examine the literacy achievements of Deaf students in a bilingual

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<sup>6</sup> WFD Position Paper on the Language Rights of Deaf Children

<sup>7</sup> World Federation of the Deaf Position Paper on Inclusive Education 10 May 2018

<sup>8</sup> Mathews, E.S. & M. O'Donnell, Reading and Deaf and Hard of Hearing Pupils in Mainstream Education in Ireland, Dublin City University, 2018.

environment vis-à-vis those in other contexts, Irish Sign Language development milestones, development of English as a second language in a bilingual environment, positive outcomes concerning educational achievement and emotional development where ISL is a recognised language.

### **Teacher Training**

Under Article 24.3(4) of the UNCRPD, the State is required to take appropriate measures to employ teachers, including teachers with disabilities, who are qualified in sign language, and to train professionals and staff who work at all levels of education. Such training shall incorporate disability awareness and the use of appropriate augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication, educational techniques and materials to support persons with disabilities.

Achieving quality inclusive education for Deaf learners requires teachers' proficiency in sign language, knowledge and development of quality bilingual curricula and pedagogy, awareness of the need for high expectations for Deaf learners as bilingual learners, and the provision of teacher education that supports Deaf candidates' achievement of teaching credentials.

Training for teachers in Sign Language is necessary to support inclusive Deaf education in Ireland, including ongoing training to support hearing teachers in improving their proficiency in ISL.

A Teacher of the Deaf course must be established in Ireland, currently the only option for Irish teachers is to take this course in the UK. This course must include education in Irish Sign Language so that teachers develop near-native levels of proficiency<sup>9</sup> and education in the social model of disability so that teachers understand the role of sign language in creating and dismantling barriers to communication. Existing teachers must be required to attain proficiency in ISL and an understanding of life as a Deaf person from a cultural perspective.

The State must deliver a clear strategy to educate and train Deaf people to become teachers and deliver education to children through ISL. Enabling Deaf people to become teachers is essential to providing strong linguistic environments and development for Deaf learners. There must be further teacher education opportunities and support for Deaf adults, who frequently face barriers to tertiary education. Deaf teachers are crucial in order to deliver quality bilingual education programs. An interim system for training Deaf teachers must be implemented and a long term-strategy for recruiting and training Irish Deaf people as teachers needs to be established.

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<sup>9</sup> as described by the Common European Framework of Reference for Language for sign languages

### **Third Level, Tertiary and Adult Education**

Article 24.5 requires the State to ensure that persons with disabilities are able to access general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others.

There is significant under-representation of those who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing (D/HH) accessing higher education in Ireland, although there has been some recent increase in numbers alongside increasing availability of interpreters. There is a need to clearly identify students accessing education in ISL in statistics, not only their hearing status. Access to quality education at second level and raised expectations of Deaf and Hard of Hearing students will increase numbers.

Access to courses of their choice is key for Deaf and Hard of Hearing students. To ensure effective education and subsequent employment, supports must be high quality, regularly reviewed, and feedback from students supported. There are no allocated third level and few other adult courses which are taught through sign language. Full-time students receive funding for interpreters during timetabled academic contact hours.

There is no such equivalent for part-time students. Access to interpreters should be provided for part-time adult education courses as well as full-time, particularly to support Deaf and Hard of Hearing adults who have not previously had the benefit of high-quality Deaf education, and at private educational institutions. Many privately owned colleges are not willing to provide ISL interpretation despite being a service provider within the meaning of the Equal Status Acts as an institution providing goods/ services, including education - one of the reasons they rely on is the nominal costs, however, we need to argue that the right to accessing education prevails the nominal costs, especially if related to big private colleges/universities.

For full-time students, funded interpreters should also be available for additional services in the university or college which a student may need, to access learning supports, careers advice, additional workshops or counselling and similar services, and where they can facilitate entry to sports and societies. Students and interpreters must be supported in acquiring and choosing academic language (including specialist vocabulary), and regular usage of the same interpreters facilitated, including using interpreter teams where possible to develop subject understanding and communication. Students and interpreters need guidance on the appropriate interpreter protocols and expectations of quality, as well as how to provide and accept performance feedback. Where courses go online, Deaf students must be considered

in all planning and implementation efforts during the shift to remote and online education and all course materials must be accessible.

### **Consultation on educational policy, practice and supports**

Deaf and Hard of Hearing people should be included in all consultations on the development of education and policies on provision of educational supports. Deaf and Hard of Hearing adults have much to contribute, based on their experiences and shared knowledge within communities of the Deaf in Ireland, on how Deaf learners can be supported at every stage of their lives. Parents and Teachers of the Deaf should be able to benefit from discussions with Deaf graduates and former learners in Irish institutions, and from qualified Deaf teachers and tutors.