
A Milestone for Access for Deaf Irish Sign Language users

This article has been prepared by the above Authors and edited by Barbara Waters, AHEAD Journal Editor.

Introduction

ISL is used by approximately 5,000 Deaf people in the [Republic of Ireland](#) and it is estimated up to 40,000 people use ISL (such as family members, interpreters, co-workers etc. (Irish Deaf Society 2021).

A historical milestone was reached in December 2020 with the commencement of the [Irish Sign Language Act 2017](#) (ISL Act). The ISL Act has important implications in particular for the Deaf Community, Irish Sign Language (ISL) Interpreters and Public Bodies.

Irish Sign Language Act 2017

The Irish Sign Language Act 2017 recognises ISL as an official language of the State. The State recognises the right of Irish Sign Language users to use ISL as their native language and the corresponding duty on all public bodies to provide ISL users with free interpretation when availing of or seeking to access statutory entitlements and services.

The ISL Act places an obligation on all courts and public bodies to provide ISL users with free interpretation when accessing public bodies.

The Act also makes reference to funds being provided to enable access in ISL to 'social, educational and cultural events and services (including medical) and other activities' (ISL Act Section 9).

Steps towards implementing the ISL Act 2017

Two major pieces of work have been underway to support the implementation of the ISL Act. These are the Register of Sign Language Interpreters and the development of guidance to support public bodies in fulfilling their obligations.

1 Register of Sign Language Interpreters

This scheme is currently being developed by [Sign Language Interpreting Service \(SLIS\)](#) and [Citizens Information Board \(CIB\)](#).

The Act places an obligation on a court or public body to only use ISL Interpreters whose competence has been verified. This led to the establishment of the Register of Irish Sign Language Interpreters (RISLI).

The new [Register of Irish Sign Language Interpreters \(RISLI\)](#) was established in December 2020, in time for the

commencement of the ISL Act.

Section 7 ISL Act 2017

'A court or public body, in compliance with its obligations under this Act, shall not engage the services of a person providing Irish Sign Language interpretation unless the person's qualifications have been verified under an accreditation scheme funded by the Minister for Social Protection.

A court or public body can only engage interpreters who have met the registration criteria and been verified by the Register of Irish Sign Language Interpreters (RSLI).

RISLI is governed by a [Registration Panel](#) of up to 11 members, who serve in a voluntary capacity to maintain the voluntary professional register. SLIS provides secretarial support to RISLI and administers the decisions of the Registration Panel.

RISLI aims to:

- protect users of interpreting services through a standards-based registration system
- set and ensure adherence to standards for the provision of ISL by public bodies
- support public bodies to facilitate the use of professional ISL services so the Deaf community can exercise their rights and entitlements
- support professional ISL interpreters to meet and maintain standards
- promote social inclusion of ISL users including access to public bodies

There are a total of 86 interpreters, including 5 Deaf interpreters registered with RISLI. Deaf Interpreters are Deaf or hard-of-hearing professionals who possess fluency in ISL and in-depth knowledge of Deaf culture and the Deaf community. Deaf interpreters usually work alongside a 'hearing' interpreter colleague in situations such as where the Deaf client is not a native user of ISL or has special needs or in mental health settings.

Registered interpreters are required to complete a set number of continuous professional training and work practice hours annually. Registered interpreters are also obliged to act in accordance with the professional Code of Conduct. RISLI operates a Complaints and Mediation policy, where complaints can be made against a registered interpreter for failing to abide by the Code of Conduct.

More information

A directory of registered interpreters and Guidelines for working with interpreters is available from www.risli.ie

Contact RISLI at: Email: admin@risli.ie Mobile: 086 138 0180

2. The Development of Guidance for Public Bodies

A research partnership between UCC (School of Applied Social Studies & Institute for Social Sciences in the 21st

Century), Cork Deaf Association and Kerry Deaf Resource Centre carried out a project with the aim of addressing inadequate access provision in public bodies for Deaf ISL users, which had been evidenced in previous Irish research (e.g. Citizens Information Board, 2018). **Funded by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission's Grant Scheme 2018**, this collaborative project has resulted in the development of guidance intended to support public bodies in fulfilling their obligations in accordance with the Irish Sign Language Act 2017 (Section 6) and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014 (Section 42).

The guidance is directly informed by input from members of the Deaf community in Ireland, based on their experiences of public bodies. Under the guidance, to achieve positive and meaningful engagement with ISL users, public bodies, including courts, should:

- Ensure funding and clear policies are in place for the booking, sanctioning and payment of sign language interpreting access (to include in-person interpretation and remote web-based video services).
- Create and maintain accessible communication systems to ensure that ISL users can communicate independently and autonomously with public bodies.
- Foster positive, inclusive attitudes and demonstrate commitment to providing equitable, non-discriminatory access to ISL users.

The guidance was launched by Senator Mark Daly (Cathaoirleach of Seanad Éireann) at an online event on 29th January 2021, at which Dr John Bosco Conama (Centre for Deaf Studies, TCD and Irish Deaf Society) delivered a keynote focussed on the implementation of the ISL Act 2017.

A pdf of the guidance, together with further information on the project, is available via the following link:

<https://www.ucc.ie/en/iss21/researchprojects/researchprojects/islaccesspublicbodies/>



Coimisiún na hÉireann
um Chearta an Duine
agus Comhionannas
Irish Human Rights and
Equality Commission

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PROVIDING ACCESS FOR DEAF IRISH SIGN LANGUAGE USERS GUIDANCE FOR PUBLIC BODIES

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This guide is intended to support public bodies in fulfilling their obligations in accordance with the Irish Sign Language Act 2017 (Section 6) and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014 (Section 42). To achieve positive and meaningful engagement with ISL users, public bodies, including courts, should:

Ensure funding and clear policies are in place for the booking, sanctioning and payment of sign language interpreting access [to include in-person interpretation and remote web-based video services].

- Engage the services of trained and accredited sign language interpreters. For more information: <https://rsl.ie>
- Ensure that the provision of interpretation shall be at no cost to the person involved
- Understand the importance and purpose of sign language interpretation, recognising its value to all parties in public body communication, both hearing and deaf
- Make policies around interpretation easy to access. Such policies should:
 - Be applied consistently throughout the organisation to avoid ad hoc patterns of access provision
 - Feature in the induction of new public sector employees & upskilling of current employees
 - Be regularly reviewed and updated to keep in line with best practice
 - Have built-in compliance monitoring and a clear procedure for handling complaints

Create and maintain accessible communication systems to ensure that ISL users can communicate independently and autonomously with public bodies.

- Maintain adequately resourced text messaging, video-calling and email systems, which are monitored on a par with telephone-based communication, and which have a reliable and timely reply facility
- Feature ISL and subtitled information across communication channels, including websites and social media
- Design communication systems which allow appropriate time frames for ISL-English interpretation to be provided to an acceptable standard

Foster positive, inclusive attitudes and demonstrate commitment to providing equitable, non-discriminatory access to ISL users.

- Engage on an individual basis with each ISL user to establish their communication preferences, ideally from the first interaction
- Recognise and understand public bodies' obligations under law to promote equality of opportunity and to protect the human rights of persons to whom they provide services, including ISL users
- Explore opportunities for staff in public bodies to undertake Deaf Awareness Training and to acquire ISL skills, in line with broader diversity awareness

The content of this guide is informed by input from members of the deaf community in Ireland, based on their experiences of public bodies. <https://www.ucc.ie/en/lss21/researchprojects/researchprojects/islaccesspublicbodies>



Fig 1. Image of providing access to Deaf ISL users guidelines for public bodies

3. The Role of the National Disability Authority (NDA) with regard to the Irish

Sign Language Act 2017

In addition to the measures described above, the National Disability Authority (NDA) has been given the responsibility to report to Government on the operation of the ISL Act 2017 on behalf of the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

To understand and report on how well the Act is working for ISL users, the NDA wants to hear about their experiences of accessing public services through ISL and their rights under the ISL Act. Public online meetings in early March, an online survey launching in March, and direct submissions are planned. For the survey link email HCOLeary@nda.ie noting you would like to be emailed about the ISL Act Survey or use the following link <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/TR7Y73F>

Visit www.nda.ie/isl for more information.

References

Irish Sign Language, Irish Deaf Society, 2020; available from <https://www.irishdeafsociety.ie/irish-sign-language/>; Accessed 05 February 2021.



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Margaret O'Connor, Quality Development Officer in Sign Language Interpreting Service (SLIS). Working with key stakeholders, Margaret researched and developed the national registration and quality assurance scheme for Irish Sign Language interpreters. Currently, she provides secretarial support to RISLI and administers the decisions of the Registration Panel. Margaret has been working with SLIS since 2011, where previously she worked as Access Officer.



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Gill Harold is a lecturer in the School of Applied Social Studies and a research associate of the Institute for Social Science in the 21st Century (ISS21) at UCC. A social geographer, her research interests centre on social identity, difference and questions of active citizenship. Gill's doctoral research (IRCHSS-funded) explored Deaf experiences and the everyday social construction of place. Her postdoctoral research (IRC-funded) at the Centre for Criminal Justice and Human Rights (UCC) explored the experiences of Deaf victims of crime. Most recently, Gill collaborated on this IHREC-funded project in partnership with co-researchers Susan O' Callaghan (Cork Deaf Association) and Willie White (Kerry Deaf Resource Centre).

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