



## **Department of Social and Family Affairs**

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### **New Report Paves The Way For Development Of High Quality & More Accessible Sign Language Services For Over 5,000 Deaf People In Ireland**

#### ***Report Also Identifies Potential Of Evolving New Technologies In Significantly Improving Sign Language Services***

The Minister for Social Affairs, Séamus Brennan T.D., today launched the report on the Review of Sign Language Interpretation Services and Service Requirements in Ireland. The report is seen as an important milestone in the development of a high-quality and more accessible sign language interpretative service for some 5,000 deaf people in Ireland.

The report also identifies the potential of new technology to significantly improve sign language services through remote interpreting while at the same time maintaining the importance of the traditional face to face interpretation services.

Users of interpretation services include deaf people, State and semi-state organisations and a range of voluntary and private organisations. Current interpretation services are provided mainly to the education sector and courts services and to a lesser extent to a range of different individual situations, including medical and hospital appointments as well as accessing State services, interviews and social situations.

The Department of Social Affairs Disability Sectoral Plan, which is a key part of the Government's Disability Strategy, requested Comhairle/Citizens Information Board to prepare a scheme relating to Sign Language Interpretation Services in Ireland. Prospectus Strategy Consultants were commissioned to undertake a review of sign language services and service requirements in Ireland. The report that is being launched today is an important milestone in the development of improved access to sign language interpretation services by deaf people in Ireland in relation to public services and also to the range of community and social interactions required by all citizens to fully participate in society.

Minister Brennan said: "It is estimated that there are 50 sign language interpreters in Ireland at present, with 44 on the database of Irish Sign Link which was set up in the late 1990's by the National Rehabilitation Board. These interpreters are freelance and self-employed and some are part time. As 26 of these are currently working in



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Dublin a significant shortage of interpreters in many parts of the rest of the country has been identified. There is also the issue that, at present, there is no formal accreditation or registration system of Irish Sign Language /English interpreters in Ireland. It is clear from this report that what has emerged from consultations with the main stakeholders is the definite need and demand for a high quality, well resourced and well managed interpretative service for deaf people. The service needs to have a reliable booking service, well-trained interpreters, and to be able to provide access to interpretation services in rural as well as urban areas. What we are determined to deliver is a national service that reaches all parts of the country, that guarantees that every member of the deaf community has access to interpretation services and that nobody has their right to communicate through the indigenous language of the deaf limited or curtailed”.

Minister Brennan welcomed the report findings that rapidly evolving technologies can be used to significantly improve access to the sign language and communications service. “While this should not be seen as an alternative to the further development of the traditional face-to-face interpretation services, I strongly support also harnessing new innovative approaches and methods. For example, there is currently a relatively low level of usage of videophones, so the report finds that this area has significant potential for the future, as has new technological developments with mobiles, television, and web cams”.

The report, as well as reviewing the current situation in Ireland, looked at international best practice in countries such as Denmark, Scotland and New Zealand with similar populations to here, and at Finland which is regarded internationally as a model of good practice, as well as England and Wales.

The report recommends a model for delivering sign language services and proposes a phased approach to setting up the new service with the emphasis initially on developing a new organisation to take over and enhance interpretation services currently provided by Irish Sign Link. The report also sets out the funding requirements for the new service and Minister Brennan said that he has made funding available in 2006 and also hoped to be able to provide further funding in 2007.



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The report says that ownership of the new service by a named statutory body was seen as essential to ensuring the development of a well resourced, properly funded infrastructure. Comhairle/Citizens Information Board has established a Steering Group to progress the development of the new service that is made up of people with the skills, expertise and background knowledge to guide the direction of the new service.

It is recommended that the new service be set up in two phases. Phase 1 would establish a new entity, as a limited company, which will develop and deliver sign language interpretation services. The service will include leading the development of interpretation services, establishment and management of a central booking service, developing a website, with booking via email and assessing technology and piloting a remote interpreting service. Phase 2 would be the developing and rollout of a remote interpreting service.

No formal sign language interpretation services existed in Ireland until 1998, when Irish Sign Link (ISL) was set up by the National Rehabilitation Board (NRB). In 1999, Irish Sign Link was established as a limited company with charitable status by the National Association for the Deaf, Irish Deaf Society and the Irish Association of Sign Language interpreters. The Board of ISL comprises of two representatives each from the Irish Association of Sign Language, The Irish Deaf Society and the National Association for Deaf People, with an independent Chair.

ISL has been the national booking agency for sign language interpretation since then. It is accommodated in the NDA offices in Clyde Road, which is inadequate for its needs. The service has been primarily self funding, from fee income, however it has suffered from lack of resources and has been financially supplemented by both the Department of Social and Family Affairs and Comhairle/Citizens Information Board for the last number of years.

**Ends**