

**Feedback**

**on the review of the**

**‘Enhancement to Irish Sign Language (ISL) Scheme provision’**

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## 1.0 Introduction

1.1 Chime is the National Charity for Deaf and Hard of Hearing people. Chime was founded in 1964 and is dedicated to a society where deafness or hearing loss does not limit individual potential, personal choice or quality of life. Chime works to achieve this through advocating for a more accessible and inclusive society and providing a range of personal support services for Deaf and Hard of Hearing (D/HH) people. Chime's services entail a holistic approach, addressing the person's social, technological and emotional needs.

1.2 Chime has been invited to provide feedback to the Department of Education on the review of the first phase of the 'Enhancement to Irish Sign Language (ISL) Scheme provision'. The feedback provided in this document will be generally brief and succinct, as we and others have previously provided feedback to the Department on this scheme.

## 2.0 Feedback on phase one of the ISL scheme

2.1 There was widespread criticism of the criteria for phase one of this scheme, which involved very narrow medical requirements. This approach flew in the face of Department policy elsewhere to move away from a diagnosis led approach, and most objective observers concluded that this was to exclude as many potential beneficiaries as possible. Indeed, the narrow medical criteria seems to confirm that the Department reluctantly introduced this scheme following a high profile High Court case.

2.2 The Department's Circulars for the scheme justify the "specific medical requirements" on the basis of "ensuring that available resources are focussed on supporting pupils and families where specific intensive support is required in order to access the curriculum." We understand that after almost three years, there have been just four appointments to date under the scheme. This is well below the expected number of appointments, and is despite the fact that we understand there were at least half a dozen approved applicants on a panel in 2023!

Overall this seems to evidence the lack of really conscientious commitment by the Department to provide intensive support where required for students who need this scheme.

2.3 We understand that there have been **TWO** ISL Specialist Classroom Support roles appointed to date under the scheme. This is a derisory total for a national scheme that was announced with much fanfare.

We also understand that these two roles are working really well and benefitting greatly the education of the two students involved. This is very welcome but not surprising, as it is to be expected that when a competent communicator in ISL is supporting access to the curriculum for a Deaf student that there would be a significant improvement in the student's learning and overall progress.

This contrasts with the highly unsatisfactory 'SNA ISL Communication Support' approach, which means that students are either supported by individuals who do not have the required competencies in ISL, or have interrupted support as an SNA with appropriate qualifications in ISL can expect salaries well above those of SNAs and so leave their positions. Again, the Department is well aware of these issues and needs to move away from this mealy mouthed approach to the education of Deaf students.

2.4 We understand that in the last year, again after much delay, there have been two appointments made in respect of the ISL Advisor Role. We are not informed on the specific activities for these roles to date and so cannot comment fully on their impact. What we can say is that in respect of their primary duties under this role, (e.g. "to support schools in the development of a whole school approach to meeting the needs of students who are Deaf or hard of Hearing," and "will also support and upskilling (sic) school community in ISL..."), and given there are over 5,000 Deaf and Hard of Hearing students in our schools around the country, two ISL Advisors could realistically only have had a limited impact.

2.5 The fact that phase one of the scheme has been in place for almost three years with such narrow eligibility criteria has meant that a number of Deaf children who could benefitted from the scheme have been prevented from doing so. The Department is well aware of these small number of cases. Three years is a long time in a child's education, and it is extremely regrettable that these children will likely experience lifelong limitations in terms of their growth and development due to restricted educational experiences and learning opportunities.

### **3.0 Proposals for future phases of the scheme.**

3.1 The criteria for inclusion in this scheme should be person-centred and not medically based or prohibitively restrictive. All children in mainstream schools whose preferred and optimal learning mode of communication is ISL should be eligible for this scheme. This might include a small number of children who are not deaf, but due to other complex needs, their optimal communication mode for learning is in fact ISL. As such, the criteria should reflect the sentiments of the Department's Circulars for the scheme, (minus the medical criteria), that the scheme should cater "for those students attending a mainstream school whose primary means of communication is ISL." A new phase of the scheme should reflect the ethos of the Department's Vision that "every child and young person...is actively supported to reach their full potential."

3.2 The criteria for inclusion in the scheme should allow for child and parental choice in relation to communication preference. For example, a Deaf child whose parents are also Deaf and whose first language is ISL should be eligible to benefit from the scheme. The scheme should not involve narrow criteria that attempts to coerce parents into pursuing non-ISL options for their Deaf child in the first instance, where ISL is clearly the family's primary means of communication. Also eligibility criteria should not be construed to coerce parents to place their child in a Deaf school or unit that is not of their choice (e.g. due to distance or the age of their child).

### **3.0 Comments on education supports for students whose first language is ISL.**

3.1 This scheme, with appropriate changes, has the potential to greatly enhance the education of a small cohort of Deaf children, specifically those children whose first language is ISL and who are attending mainstream schools. As already stated, Chime understands that the two young people who are currently being supported by an ISL-SCS are progressing very well in their education. They now have much improved access to the curriculum and greatly enhanced learning opportunities.

However, Chime does not believe that all Deaf students whose first language is ISL have equivalent access to the curriculum in ISL, e.g. some students in Schools for the Deaf. Therefore Chime recommends that the Department conducts an audit of Deaf schools to determine the extent to which Deaf students whose first language is ISL have access to the full curriculum. This would be in accordance with its Vision and Mission to actively support every student “to reach their full potential” and to ensure that all students “have access to a positive learning experience...to realise their full potential,”

Where gaps are identified in accessing the curriculum, the Department should take immediate steps to ensure that students in these schools have full access to the curriculum in ISL, similar to the two students who are currently assigned an ISL-SCS.

3.2 Chime is aware that one of the two Deaf schools in the country only offers the Leaving Certificate Applied programme to its students. This is a clear example of the Department’s poor commitment over the years to the education of Deaf and Hard of Hearing students, but not the only one. Chime is determined to improve this status quo. With regard to those Deaf students who attend the Deaf school in the Midwest region of the country, we urge the Department to introduce access to the full Leaving Certificate programme for these students.

4.3 Chime’s final comment in this submission is to say that there needs to be a step change in the Department’s approach to the education of Deaf and Hard of Hearing students generally. This applies to the future development of the Enhancement to ISL Scheme provision itself, and to the broader range of supports in education for Deaf and Hard of Hearing children. The stated objective is that these students will achieve educational outcomes on a par with hearing peers of a similar ability – yet the Department refuses to gather data on the outcomes, while at the same time reducing their access to a vital support for them, namely the Special Education Teaching model.

The Department claim in their values that they are “accountable” and “open to change...” We remain hopeful that the Department may begin to live these values with respect to the education of all Deaf and Hard of Hearing children in the near future.

If any clarification is required on any issue raised in this feedback, please contact:

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