

Response to the Strategy for Protecting and Enhancing the Development of the Irish Language

Starting Point

The basis for consideration of both Ulster Scots and Irish is the Belfast Agreement 1998 as set out on page 11 of the consultation, as opposed to *'viewed in the context of commitments given following the 2006 Agreement at St Andrews'* which is stated in the Ministerial foreword. This is an important distinction.

A main starting point should be that any Irish Language provision should be based solely on the principle of appropriate demand and this is reflected in the Belfast Agreement which said the British Government will act in relation to Irish *'where appropriate and where people so desire it'*. The strategy alludes to this in some areas but not others and this should be rectified.

The Belfast Agreement also clearly places Irish and Ulster Scots on equal footing and that parity must be maintained as the development and enhancement of both continues.

Vision and Context

Part two of the strategy is about vision and context in respect of the Irish Language and paragraph 2.9 outlines a number of aims. The Ulster Unionist Party would express concern about the final two on this list which are to:

- *ensure that in public discourse and in public services the use of Irish or English will be, as far as practical, a choice for the citizen to make and that people can do their business in Irish and;*
- *ensure that Irish is more visible in our society, both as a spoken language and also in areas such as signage and literature.*

There is no clear need being demonstrated in terms of current practices not working adequately whether in public services or business. The exorbitant cost of introducing Irish language in this way with translation and interpreters etc. has also not been fully extrapolated.

Further to that, and perhaps most concerning, is the disadvantage under which non-Irish speakers would be placed in the facilitation of this aim both in terms of potential employment opportunities and carrying out of business activities.

There are also vast cost implications to making Irish more visible in society with an example being the current Regional Development Minister Danny Kennedy deciding against the introduction of bilingual road signs due to budgetary constraints.

It must be remembered that English is the first language – all Irish and Ulster Scots speakers speak English as their language of choice.

Areas for Action

The Strategy sets out 6 key areas for action within Part 4.

Education

Education and particularly the advancement of Irish Medium Education (IME) are a particular focus as one of the key areas for action. However, the Strategy fails to grasp the financial reality presently within the Education Department.

The emphasis should be on tackling literacy and numeracy issues among the worst effected groups, such as protestant working class boys, as opposed to scholarships, dictionary's and awareness courses for the Irish language.

Furthermore, the various calls in this section for extra Irish language teachers at all levels of education from pre-school to third level education fail to take cognisance of the lack of employment opportunities which exist for newly qualified teachers as things stand. It could also lead to discrimination against protestant teachers.

The words of Education Minister John O'Dowd should also be borne in mind, when he spoke of the sheer number of empty desks in our schools diverting badly needed resources away from the core business of providing pupils with a high-quality educational experience, before we ask for reviews of thresholds for entitlement to capital funding for IME primary schools.

Family Transmission

Family transmission of the language through early intervention can certainly be encouraged but it is not the role of the state to become involved in family life and this is therefore primarily an issue for each individual family.

Administration, Services and Community

Key actions in administration, services and community contain a raft of measures for the introduction of Irish into public service but these must be matched appropriately to demand. The Ulster Unionist Party see no role for Irish language being conducted on a larger scale within the legal system, which is already subject to vast amounts of delay whilst attempting to curtail the massive cost of legal aid, or local government, which can ill afford to be burdened by the extra time and cost which would accompany these proposals.

The equality of opportunity issue for non-Irish speakers has been dealt with above as has the effect of making language a more divisive issue.

We would place on record that it is the role of Foras Na Gaeilge to promote the Irish language, not local authorities, the legal system or international representation measures within Washington or Brussels.

Media and Technology

Media and technology is dealt with within this part of the strategy and Broadcasting is an important aspect of that.

The Strategy states in an earlier section, *'responsibility for some public services, such as Broadcasting, remains with the Government in Westminster. Engagement with the responsible Minister in Westminster to seek cooperation from their Departments on the aims of this Strategy will be critical.'*

It is therefore concerning that in a response to an Assembly Written Question tabled on 4/10/12 the DCAL Minister responded *'I have had no specific discussions with Ministers in Westminster about Ulster Scots culture and heritage'*.

We must ensure that what is important for Irish Language is also seen as important for Ulster Scots and that is not currently being reflected as evidenced by the above.

Legislation

Legislation and the status of the language must be considered very carefully. The Ulster Unionist Party will remain opposed to an Irish Language Act which would be a costly and divisive way forward.

Officials presenting to the DCAL Committee on 20/9/12 made it clear that legislation was not necessary to take forward any of the strategy on Irish Language. The Minister has indicated her intention to proceed with legislation in any case and the Ulster Unionist Party would warn against such an unnecessary and exclusive approach.

It must also be reiterated that there is no legislative requirement for an Irish Language Act.

Economic Life

Lastly, economic life is an important consideration in all policies which are taken forward by the Executive and the Ulster Unionist Party would make two points on this.

Firstly, the economic potential of bilingualism is best served through the advancement of languages such as German, French, Chinese and Spanish and that must be accepted within an Irish language strategy. Secondly, it is simply not economically viable to prioritise issues such as services and signage in Irish in a wider economic context.

Conclusion

It is our opinion that large parts of this strategy are not about the development of the Irish Language, rather it is about taking control of the language issue, politicising it further and using it to the detriment of the Protestant Unionist community.

The Belfast Agreement has worked well in relation to the Irish Language with evidence of growth and success. The Interdepartmental Charter Implementation Group (ICIG) and Foras Na Gaeilge also continue to carry out important roles in the development of this language and it is right for that work to go on.

It is therefore not a requirement to introduce further bureaucratic steps in order to enhance and develop the language further. This is for three reasons; there is no demand within the wider society, there is no money to carry it forward and it is not a necessary component for the enhancement of the language. It is time to move towards projects which are self-sustaining.