

Response to Strategy for Ulster Scots Language, Heritage and Culture

Introduction

The Ulster Unionist Party welcomes the opportunity to respond to this public consultation.

The basis for Ulster Scots, as well as the Irish Language, is within the Belfast Agreement which gives an equal footing in recognising the importance, respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity for both.

To quote a recent Ulster Unionist policy paper:

“Cultural identity is an important part of our make-up and in that respect Ulster Scots heritage, culture and language should be advanced and developed alongside the significant resources currently being deployed on the Irish language. Unionism has been on the cultural back foot in the past as we have had to defend our heritage, however the Ulster Unionist Party want to change that so we can celebrate our history with a sense of pride.”

As a Party we will continue to advance the Ulster Scots Culture throughout government and wider society in areas such as education, the media and the economy.

We would disagree with the Minister in her foreword where she states that Ulster Scots has been given little recognition or support from government as it was the Ulster Unionist Party who created and first held this portfolio, putting in place many of the structures which remain today. It is important that she concentrates on her own performance as Minister in relation to Ulster Scots.

Context and Vision

Ulster Scots has a rich cultural history and the strategy accurately portrays the historical context of that stretching back some 1400 years. The legislative contexts as well as commitments within the current Programme for Government are also clearly set out and we would particularly highlight the importance of paragraph 2.14 and the aim for Ulster Scots to attain Part 3 status within the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages.

Aims, Objectives and Stakeholders

The Ulster Unionist Party is broadly content with the aims and objectives of the strategy subject to below. However, the current Minister has yet to demonstrate any appetite to fulfil aims or objectives in relation to Ulster Scots and that must change.

As regards the stakeholders, we would welcome the recognition that there should be a cross departmental approach to delivering this strategy, however, we would express some concern that various Ulster Scots organisations are not considered as official stakeholders and this should be rectified. It is also essential that the wider Ulster Scots diaspora is consulted and that means engagement with Scotland – something which there is currently a distinct lack of.

The Westminster government is also a key stakeholder and paragraph 3.8 of the strategy states that *'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 far from ideal that in a response to an Assembly Written Question tabled on 4/10/12 the DCAL Minister stated *'I have had no specific discussions with Ministers in Westminster about Ulster Scots culture and heritage'*. There seems to be little recognition or support from the Minister in this regard.

Areas for Action

There are 5 areas for action set out in the consultation:

Education

The strategy outlines the concerning lack of resources for schools to teach about Ulster Scots. At both pre-primary and secondary level, actions include developing and making available suitable materials for education and this alludes to the fact that there are very few, if any, materials available currently. This is a situation which must be addressed.

The Ulster Unionist Party would like more detail on a number of the proposals within this section given that to 'promote', 'support' and 'encourage' are vague and general terms which do not hold the Minister or the Department to account.

On a more general point, the strategy refers throughout the areas for action to a number of feasibility studies, business cases, research and analysis. Whilst this background work is important it is more suitable for an action plan to contain more firm actions.

Media

The volume of Ulster Scots culture, heritage and language must be increased in television, radio, newspapers and the online media and to that extent we support the actions contained within this section of the strategy.

It is important that reporting is done in a fair and accurate manner and there is some way to go in achieving that. We are also concerned at the lack of equality in the promotion of the Ulster Scot culture through TV and radio and in terms of the financial support for production and transmission.

As stated above, the lack of contact which the current Minister has had with Westminster on some reserved matters is a major concern to us.

Use of Language

The Ulster Unionist Party strongly supports the aim to improve the Charter position for the Ulster Scots language by attaining Part 3 status. Part 3 of the Charter contains a list of specific actions that could be taken in support of a language and when a certain number and range of these are being fulfilled for a language, that language is said to have 'Part 3 status'. It is up to the Minister to work to achieve this for Ulster Scots.

Projects which familiarise and stimulate interest from the public in Ulster Scots must be taken forward. The current 'Liofa' project has been devoted substantial departmental time and resources and there must be equivalence for Ulster Scots.

Public Services

The actions identified within this part of the strategy are welcome and in keeping with the Belfast Agreement which looks at appropriateness and demand as key considerations. An Implementation Plan for public bodies is especially advantageous in allowing adequate scrutiny and accountability of their contribution towards Ulster Scots.

Culture

This is perhaps the most important area given the rich cultural heritage of Ulster Scots.

We believe in maximising the potential of genealogical tourism through promoting Northern Ireland as a destination whereby the millions of people worldwide from Ulster Scots or 'Scotch-Irish' descent can visit to trace their heritage especially areas such as America and Canada.

To that end, a Tourism Strategy should embrace our heritage of producing exceptional people, as much as it promotes our world class destinations, like the Giant's Causeway, and our great achievements, like the Titanic. The Minister should work specifically with her colleague in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to draw up improved aims in this section of the strategy.

The proud contribution of the Ulster Scots individuals to the development of America can play a significant role in raising the horizons and increasing the self-confidence of under achievers within deprived areas with an Ulster Scots basis.

Conclusion

Ulster Scots remains an important part of the historical culture of Northern Ireland and its potential, particularly as a means to attract tourism, is not currently being realised. The Ulster Unionist Party are hopeful that the actions contained within this strategy can be strengthened and built upon to maximise the opportunities which Ulster Scots can bring.