



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

**COMMITTEE FOR
CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

Indigenous Language Strategy

22 October 2009

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Barry McElduff (Chairperson)
Mr David McNarry (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr P J Bradley
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mr Francie Brolly
Lord Browne
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Raymond McCartney
Miss Michelle McIlveen

Witnesses:

Mr Kevin Hamill)
Mr Donal Moran) Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure
Mr Arthur Scott)

The Chairperson (Mr McElduff):

I welcome Mr Arthur Scott, Mr Donal Moran and Mr Kevin Hamill from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

Mr Arthur Scott (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure):

I thank the Committee for giving us this opportunity to provide an update on the progress of the strategy for indigenous or regional minority languages for Northern Ireland. Section 28D of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 places a duty on the Executive to adopt a strategy that sets out how they propose to enhance and develop the Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture and to

enhance and protect the development of the Irish language.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure intends to meet those commitments through the indigenous or regional minority languages strategy. He has indicated that he considers the strategy to contain several high-level principles; namely, that it should be overarching, non-prescriptive, needs-based and deliverable within existing resources.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) chairs and provides a secretariat for the interdepartmental charter implementation group (ICIG) that co-ordinates the implementation of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. The group is made up of representatives of all the Northern Ireland Departments and the UK Departments that operate in Northern Ireland. It is proposed that the indigenous or regional minority languages strategy could be underpinned by the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, and that each Department would set out its own plans to achieve the objectives of the languages strategy.

It is likely that the interdepartmental implementation group will remain as the mechanism for reporting each Department's progress on charter implementation issues. The group has previously engaged with the Ulster-Scots Academy Implementation Group, Foras na Gaeilge and Pobal on some relevant aspects of the development of the strategy. The implementation group also has access to information from previous consultations on the proposed Ulster-Scots academy and proposed Irish language legislation. The interdepartmental group will be an extremely useful resource to draw on during the strategy's development. A consultation on the strategy will form part of the policy development process.

The development of a single strategy for regional minority languages is designed to highlight our shared heritage and a desire to strive towards parity for the languages. Ulster Scots and Irish are essential parts of our cultural wealth and should be equally cherished as part of the cultural fabric of our society. The Minister's vision is that Irish and Ulster Scots will be treated with equal recognition and respect, and that the strategy will reflect that.

Although the strategy is still in the early stages of development, its proposed aims are as follows: to create a framework in which our indigenous or regional minority languages can flourish and be shared by all who wish to use them; to protect and support the development and learning of the languages; to promote wider understanding of the background to the languages

through recognition and respect for the relevant culture, heritage and tradition that underpins each; and to promote a shared and better future for all.

In considering the overall strategy, the Executive must also consider resource issues and whether additional funding can be made available. If additional resources are not forthcoming, however, Departments may have to consider the reallocation of current funding in order to resource work on languages in line with the priority that they gave to the language agenda, among other pressures.

Since taking up his post, the Minister has reviewed the existing draft Executive paper and has undertaken some investigation and research into language issues. That included a visit to our nearest UK neighbour, Scotland, to discuss the position there on Scots and Scottish Gaelic, sister languages to Ulster Scots and Irish. The Minister believes that the Ulster-Scots and Irish languages are valuable parts of our shared cultural heritage and that Northern Ireland can learn important lessons from the Scottish experience about depoliticising language issues and developing the community's perception of the languages.

The Minister wishes to take time to ensure that the language strategy is developed in a mature and reflective way that ensures that the strategy will provide the space for the languages to develop in a non-contentious way. When the Minister has concluded that groundwork, he intends to submit a paper to the Executive setting out the high-level principles on which a strategy for indigenous or regional minority languages in Northern Ireland might be based, and seeking their views on how the strategy should be developed.

I am happy to answer any questions that the Committee may have.

The Chairperson:

Thank you. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McCarthy:

We had many blind people in the Long Gallery on Tuesday, and their needs are not included in the languages strategy. Have you any plans to include Irish or British sign language in the strategy?

Mr Scott:

The strategy will be overarching. There are also concerns about deaf people, and the strategy could accommodate those concerns.

Mr McCarthy:

It “could” include them? Will it? The people to whom we spoke in the Long Gallery on Tuesday were adamant that they needed so many things, and we would like to see a strategy that provides them with them.

Mr Scott:

It will certainly be one of the issues that we will look it.

Mr McCarthy:

You referred to the resources, and the pressure on those resources. Does that mean that each Department will have a choice over the priority that it gives to language issues and, therefore, the freedom to do as much or as little to promote and enhance languages as it sees fit if the resources are not available?

Mr Scott:

Given that the strategy will have to take account of the resource needs, yes, Departments will have to reflect on what pressures they face and take into account the fact that the principles of the strategy are needs-based. They will have to look at the demands, and each Department’s demands may be different. Therefore, it would be difficult to be prescriptive.

Mr McCarthy:

OK. If the resources are not there, choices will have to be made?

Mr Scott:

I imagine so, yes.

Mr McNarry:

Where does the matter sit as an Executive priority, given the current Budget constraints?

Mr Scott:

As I have outlined, the Minister hopes to bring the strategy to the Executive. I have no information on the priority afforded to it by the Executive.

Mr McNarry:

That is all very nice. Your background briefing paper states:

“The purpose of the paper will be to get a steer from Executive Colleagues on the proposed approach.”

It appears that a reduced commitment is being sought. We talk a great deal about many things, but we are now in new circumstances when it comes to the available resources and money. The Executive have given a commitment to the strategy, but is that commitment now under pressure?

Mr Scott:

We have talked about the inclusive nature of the matter. Given the changed circumstances, and following on from the response given to Mr McCarthy on resources, it is important that everyone be taken with the decision. The Minister wants to give the matter careful consideration. However, I am not in a position to say where it sits in the Executive’s priorities, other than to say that the Minister has given a firm commitment to take the strategy to the Executive and to share with his colleagues the way forward so that there can be inclusivity in the way in which it is taken forward.

Mr McNarry:

Do you think, Chairperson, that we could find out where the commitment sits and what effect the current budgetary constraints are having on it? I appreciate that Mr Scott is not in a position to know that. However, it appears that one does not want to raise expectations. Stop me if I am wrong in my reading between the lines, but I feel that I am being told that everything is all right providing that we have the money, but if we do not have the money, we need someone to tell us that we do not have the money.

Mr Scott:

That is one of the factors to be considered, bearing in mind the resource issues. As far as I am aware, there have been no changes to the high-level principles that explain the nature of the strategy. However, it is difficult to comment when the strategy has not been developed fully, and it is difficult to say what the resource implications may be and how they will play against the overall priorities the Executive may face.

Mr McNarry:

Therefore, we will have to wait and see, and we will be told whether the resources are available once the strategy is fully developed.

Mr Scott:

When the strategy is developed, it will, from a practical point of view, be easier to assess the possible resource implications. As I said earlier, if it is needs-based, Departments' demands could differ.

Mr McNarry:

Does the potential exist for the Executive to farm out the issue to the Departments and, instead of the Executive making commitments and taking decisions, it will be left to individual Departments to work through the issues using their own resources? That could result in a situation in which only some Departments are involved.

Mr Scott:

No. The Executive will take the decision in line with the St Andrews Agreement commitment. However, there will be flexibility in how each Department approaches the implementation of the strategy.

Mr D Bradley:

Given that it was on the previous Minister's agenda, how long has the strategy been in the pipeline? How much work has been done on it, and what stage is it at now? Apart from the visit to Scotland, what linguistic methodology will be used to develop the strategy? Will visits be made to other countries, such as Wales or the South of Ireland? Will language groups in the North of Ireland be consulted? What is the end date for producing the strategy?

Mr Scott:

Work on the strategy started in December 2008. I have been in this post for three weeks. Therefore, my colleague will answer the more detailed questions.

Mr Donal Moran (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure):

The Committee will be aware that the strategy has been in development for some time. The

previous Minister presented the high-level paper to the Committee in December 2008. Since then, work has been done to develop the high-level principles. However, since the new Minister came into post, he has reviewed the position and has outlined his view on how the strategy should progress.

Through the ICIG, we engage with Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency and have requested their input. The focus is now on the high-level principles. If the Executive agree to those, we will drill down and beef up the strategy.

The Chairperson:

Is it fair to say that the strategy was in the same position a year ago?

Mr Moran:

It is fair to say that the high-level principles paper was the position last year. The new Minister has brought a fresh focus and wants to do more groundwork on how to make progress on the high-level principles. That is the position.

Mr D Bradley:

Will there be consultation with language groups in Northern Ireland?

Mr Moran:

Subject to ministerial direction, once the Executive agree the high-level principles, officials will be asked to draft the strategy for agreement, part of which will involve engagement with the various language groups. I do not know whether it will involve engagement with officials or groups in the Republic, but it will involve engagement with language groups in Northern Ireland.

Mr D Bradley:

What is the predicted end date?

Mr Moran:

After submitting the paper to the Executive, and subject to their agreement, we estimate that it could take 42 weeks to deliver a strategy, including a 12-week consultation period.

Mr Scott:

It depends on the nature and complexity of the responses. The timeline could vary.

Mr McCartney:

Arthur said that work on the strategy began in December 2008. Was that the conclusion of the preparation work?

Mr Moran:

Work was ongoing before that date. I do not know the exact start date.

Mr McCartney:

Had a volume of work already been completed by the time that the Minister decided to take a fresh look at the strategy? Could the Committee see and review that work?

Mr Moran:

Some work was done on engaging with the previous Minister. Changes were suggested and thoughts made known about the high-level principles. I am not sure whether releasing the information to the Committee would be allowed under policy-under-development guidelines.

Mr McCartney:

The Committee will meet the Minister on 10 December 2009. What should we expect to hear about beefing up the four high-level principles that the strategy will be “overarching”, “non-prescriptive”, “needs-based”, and “deliverable within existing resources”? Will it be simply those headlines or will a bit of substance be added?

Mr Moran:

The position on 10 December will be dictated by what happens with the progression of the strategy before then. If the strategy is submitted to the Executive before that date, the situation may have changed. Therefore, it depends on what happens between now and 10 December.

Mr McCartney:

Is there commentary on those four headlines or has that yet to be provided? Is your work to date providing commentary for the high-level principles or has it simply established the four headlines?

Mr Moran:

The high-level principles paper is more substantive. It goes into quite a lot of detail on, for example, the issues of sign language and other ethnic minority languages.

The Chairperson:

Does the paper mention the Irish language?

Mr Moran:

It does.

I reiterate that the Minister has said that he views Irish and Ulster-Scots as being key elements of our shared cultural heritage.

The Chairperson:

Do members have any further questions?

Mr McCartney:

Your background briefing paper lists the aims on which the draft strategy framework will likely be based. Will there be indicators of how those aims will manifest themselves and be realised? Will that form part of the presentation from the Minister?

Mr Moran:

Again, that will depend on what happens between now and 10 December. My understanding is that the meat of the strategy — an action plan for delivery — will be the next stage. Once the high-level principles are agreed, we will get into tying down the aims.

Mr Brolly:

The fourth high-level principle is “deliverable within existing resources”. Surely the putting together of high-level principles should not be dependent on resources. High-level principles are high-level principles whether we can afford to implement the strategy or not.

Mr Scott:

It is a reasonable principle for the Minister to include.

The Chairperson:

With respect, it is very difficult to hear what you are saying, Arthur. The evidence session is being recorded by Hansard, and people want to hear what you have to say.

Mr Scott:

I apologise.

It is reasonable in a public sector context to include the question of resources, because there are not endless amounts of resource. That is a key principle, and the Minister is being clear about that from the outset.

Mr Brolly:

Therefore, if there were no money, there would be no principles.

Mr Scott:

I do not think so. It may well be more to do with expectations. The Minister has set out what he hopes that the strategy will do. The issue of resources may manifest itself more in the time that is taken to deliver the strategy as opposed to its being a barrier to doing anything.

Mr Brolly:

Yes, I appreciate that.

The Chairperson:

I am going to leave it at that.

Mr McCarthy:

Before you finish, Chairperson, may I ask one further question? Is it not the case that, in recent times, £2 million was taken from the Ulster-Scots budget because it could not be spent? How can that be rationalised? On the one hand, it is being said that no resources may be available yet, on the other hand, £2 million was taken back unused during a monitoring round.

Mr Scott:

Can you clarify whether you are referring to the Ulster-Scots Agency or money for the proposed

academy?

Mr McCarthy:

I am confused.

Some Members:

The Ulster-Scots academy.

Mr Scott:

It is normal practice with projects that, if there is slippage, the money is surrendered in order that it can be used elsewhere. That reinforces the point that I made that we are always trying to make the best use of available resources. There are not endless resources.

The Chairperson:

Thank you, Arthur, Donal and Kevin for your presentation.