



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

**Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure**

**OFFICIAL REPORT  
(Hansard)**

**Core-funded Irish Language Groups**

**26 April 2012**

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

### Core-funded Irish Language Groups

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)  
Mr William Irwin (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Dominic Bradley  
Mrs Brenda Hale  
Mr David Hilditch  
Mr Michael McGimpsey  
Mr Oliver McMullan  
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín  
Mr Robin Swann

**Witnesses:**

Mr Arthur Scott	Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure
Mr Ferdie Mac an Fhailigh	Foras Na Gaeilge
Mr Seán Ó Coinn	Foras Na Gaeilge

**The Chairperson:** I welcome Mr Arthur Scott, director of culture in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL); Mr Ferdie Mac an Fhailigh, the CEO of Foras Na Gaeilge; and Mr Seán Ó Coinn, the deputy CEO. I apologise for the delay, gentlemen; as you will appreciate, we are in the middle of an inquiry into the creative industries and I have allowed members a little longer than usual because we are exploring the industry. I am trying to be as polite as possible. *[Laughter.]* Please make your opening statement.

**Mr Arthur Scott (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure):** Thank you for the opportunity to update the Committee on the progress being made by Foras na Gaeilge towards implementing the recommendations from the review of core funding.

It may be useful to recap briefly the background to this stage of the process. In April 2008, Foras na Gaeilge undertook a review of core funding, the main recommendation of which, endorsed by the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC), was that the core funding for the Irish language sector should be reconfigured by inviting funding applications from one or a limited number of organisations with a representational, information dissemination, resource and support provision and advocacy role for the sector.

The current proposal is that funding would be awarded by way of a number of discrete schemes, whereby local groups could take an integrated approach to the promotion of the Irish language,

including working in community, family, educational and youth settings. Foras na Gaeilge engaged with the core groups, and that included a public consultation on the proposed changes, which closed in June 2011. A steering group, comprising senior officials from both sponsor Departments and the chair and senior executives of Foras na Gaeilge, was established to review progress towards the implementation of the review. Following further discussions at North/South Ministerial Council meetings, it was agreed that interim funding should continue to be provided by Foras na Gaeilge to the 19 core-funded bodies until June 2012.

However, on 12 October 2011, NSMC requested Foras na Gaeilge to engage in a further consultation on draft schemes, particularly with the core-funded bodies, to consider necessary changes, prepare a detailed business case in support of the draft schemes and prepare a revised project plan in conjunction with sponsor Departments. On 9 January 2012, Foras na Gaeilge launched a further 12-week consultation process in relation to the draft schemes, which provided the Irish-language sector with a further opportunity to put forward views on the proposals, together with any suggested alternatives. Foras na Gaeilge prepared a revised project plan that envisaged the new competitive funding model being in place from 1 July 2013 and, on that basis, NSMC, at its meeting on 12 February 2012, agreed to further extend interim funding for the core-funded bodies from 1 July 2012 to 30 June 2013.

The second consultation period closed on 2 April 2012. Ministers, the sponsor Departments and Foras na Gaeilge proactively encouraged all those with an interest in the Irish language to engage with the consultation process. Foras na Gaeilge received responses to the consultations: 19 from organisations and 37 from the core-funded organisations. Some 14 individuals provided official submissions; 39 organisations and 85 individuals also provided feedback; and several hundred petitions were presented to Foras na Gaeilge. Those responses, and the feedback from the various methods that Foras na Gaeilge used to engage with the sector, are being analysed and will be presented for consideration and approval to the board of Foras na Gaeilge in June 2012.

During July 2012, the sponsor Departments expect to receive from Foras na Gaeilge the outcome of the consultation, together with the revised proposals and a comprehensive business case, including an updated equality impact assessment and a regulatory impact assessment supporting the revised proposals. The North/South Ministerial Council will consider the revised proposals in the autumn and, subject to agreement being reached, including the approval of both Finance Ministers, new arrangements are scheduled to be implemented from July 2013.

**The Chairperson:** Ferdie, do you want to make a comment at this stage?

**Mr Ferdie Mac an Fhailigh (Foras Na Gaeilge):** I will give you a quick rundown of the various ways that we have consulted. The consultation documents were on our website. We had individual meetings with each of the organisations. We had a meeting with the heads of all the organisations together. We had a meeting with the chairs of all the boards of the organisations together. We had four public consultations, one in each Province, and we had a number of focus groups with young people, parents and teachers.

We have received a number of proposals from that. Some of them include proposals for further research. People now recognise that there is a need for change. There are proposals that we only accept joint applications from organisations, and that organisations come together in fields of work that are closely associated. We have had one proposal that we cut funding for organisations, starting in the first year with 30% and building on that annually as we go ahead.

The report has to be drawn up and we have external, independent people drawing up a report on all the submissions. Those will then be discussed by the development committee and the board, and proposals will be brought to the board based on that. They will then be forwarded to the sponsor Departments and the Finance Department. For information, the submissions that we received are all available on our website.

**The Chairperson:** Your analysis of the consultation responses is still at a very early stage. The Northern Ireland groups were very hostile to the previous consultation. Have you noticed a change in their response to this consultation through your engagement with them?

**Mr Mac an Fhailigh:** No. The majority of the Northern Ireland organisations are still hostile. One of them has joined a new umbrella group; another proposed that some organisations funded by Foras na Gaeilge fall under the remit of other Departments. Most of the Northern Ireland organisations are still of the opinion that, due to the different sociolinguistic and legal stances of the language in the two jurisdictions, a special case should be made for organisations based in the North.

**Mr D Bradley:** Tá fáilte romhaibh, agus go raibh maith agaibh as bhur gcur i láthair. You are welcome, and thanks for the presentation. At the outset, many believed that the process — you would probably say the same — was driven by funding issues rather than by any evidence-based research approach aimed at achieving or agreeing the most effective ways of promoting and developing the Irish language on the whole island. Therefore, they are saying that the schemes are not evidence-based but are almost plucked out of the air. I do not know what lies behind the schemes or whether the content of a particular scheme is what is needed for the promotion or development of the language, and that the schemes-based approach is simply more of the same but through a different vehicle. We have no indication that the schemes-based approach will be any more successful at promoting or developing the language than the old core-funded approach.

Another criticism — you mentioned it yourself — is that change has been introduced too suddenly and that it should have been phased in gradually rather than being done in one fell swoop. You can see the effect that that has had on the core-funded organisations, and not just those in this jurisdiction; the groups in the South are not particularly enamoured of the change either.

The other criticism that I heard was that the renewed consultation was virtually a rerun of the initial consultation with some tweaking around the edges. The core-funded organisations report to me that they felt that there was no willingness to change and that the whole process is merely a *fait accompli* rather than a partnership approach. They think that change should be based on sociolinguistic research, mapping where resources and activity need to be directed, and that delivery should be based on the most effective vehicles and informed by international best practice. Those are fairly strong criticisms, and I am interested in hearing your response.

**Mr Mac an Fhailigh:** First, the schemes were not plucked out of the air; a great deal of work was put into them by the development committee and the board. The schemes are based on the internationally recognised language-planning principles of status, acquisition and usage of the language. The areas of work that the schemes address are the areas that Foras na Gaeilge feels are important for the development of the language in areas of youth, education support and community development. There has been an accusation that there is no willingness to change the schemes. I do not know how many times we said at each of the individual meetings with the organisations, and at the public consultation meetings in each of the provinces, that everything was on the table if there were alternative proposals.

The NSMC asked us to carry out a consultation process on the draft schemes, which we did. We also said that if people had alternative proposals, we would be prepared to put them on the table and discuss them. As I said at the start, we received a number of proposals this time, for example, to allow amalgamations, to accept only joint applications, to cut funding, to do more research and so forth.

This is a massive change, and no one likes change, but we are not doing this simply for financial reasons. There are 19 core-funded organisations, and there is one organisation that does not have a member of staff. That means that there are 18 heads of organisations, 18 secretaries and 18 backroom staff. There has to be a better way of promoting the language whereby we can free up some of those staff members to undertake promotional activities and work out in the communities, which is where the work is needed. The idea of this process is to ensure that services for the Irish-language community and for the English-speaking community are provided in a more efficient and effective way, and that there is value for money.

**Mr D Bradley:** Will you reshape and modify the schemes in light of the responses that you got?

**Mr Mac an Fhailigh:** In light of the responses that we got, there will be discussion at the development committee and at board level on how we progress the decision of the NSMC. As I have said repeatedly, everything is on the table.

**Mr D Bradley:** I do not want to use up too much time, because I know that Mr McMullan wants to get in at some stage. The schemes themselves are largely titles. How much work has been done on the detail of what lies behind each scheme?

**Mr Mac an Fhailigh:** The criteria for each scheme, its staffing levels and funding are laid out in the consultation document.

**Mr D Bradley:** I am thinking more of the activities that lie behind the schemes rather than the staffing levels.

**Mr Mac an Fhailigh:** The results that we expect to get from the schemes are laid out in the consultation document as well.

**Mr D Bradley:** OK. You told the consultees that you were open to other models, which is to be welcomed. Why, in the first place, was a menu of models not presented in the consultation process as is usual?

**Mr Mac an Fhailigh:** The history of all this goes back to April 2008 when I proposed to the core-funded bodies that they should set up co-operation committees, one of which met only once. I feel that the current model is inefficient, because we have 18 heads of organisations and 18 backroom staff. Therefore we have been asking for proposals on how to change the current model all along. We now have concrete proposals for people to come together and for us to accept only joint applications; everything will be on the table for discussion by the development committee and the board.

**Mr Seán Ó Coinn (Foras Na Gaeilge):** In some ways, we were a wee bit disappointed that the organisations were so critical of the process. We can understand, as Ferdie said, that a major change is envisaged, but it does not reflect the high level of very real engagement between ourselves and the organisations at the one-to-one meetings.

There might have been an expectation among the organisations that Foras na Gaeilge would have said in those meetings that, yes, we are prepared to do x and y and to implement x or y changes. It would be very premature of us to do that until we get all the information from the various submissions and to collate the notes from all the meetings. The final decision, of course, will not be for the executive of Foras na Gaeilge; it will have to go through our development committee and board and then go to the Departments and Ministers.

The organisations' critical comments may reflect an aspiration that we would have been able to say, yes, we will make x, y and z changes rather than listening very carefully to what they were saying and taking that away and deliberating on it. However, we want to get away from the them-and-us scenario that has beleaguered the process since it began so that we can talk in partnership with the organisations to see how best we can effect the changes that everybody recognises need to be made.

**Mr D Bradley:** It certainly looks very polarised at the moment, with Foras na Gaeilge in the red corner and the core-funded organisations in the blue corner, and a few punches being thrown across here and there. I would very much welcome a coming together of the two polarities to agree a solution.

You have your duties and responsibilities; however, the other organisations see themselves as having their aims, objectives, duties and responsibilities. I do not think that there is much to be gained for the promotion and development of the language if we are in a stand-off.

**Mr Mac an Fhailigh:** It is a very challenging time not just for the organisations but for Foras na Gaeilge as well; it is also a very challenging time for the language. You said it yourself: the red corner/blue corner stand-off does the language no good, and, at the end of the day, the good of the language is what we are all interested in.

Unfortunately, Foras na Gaeilge and its board have some hard decisions to make. We have been given an instruction by the NSMC to see whether we can achieve agreement with the organisations on the way forward. I do not think that everyone on all sides will be happy. That is not possible. However, some very interesting proposals were made in the responses and submissions that we received.

The development committee, whose members work full-time, met last week and read some submissions; there was then a very worthwhile discussion on the way forward. There is another meeting next week, one the week after and one the week after that. It is a very busy time for that committee.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** Go raibh míle maith agaibh, agus tá fáilte romhaibh go dtí an Coiste inniu. Thank you for your presentation. I concur with much of what Mr Bradley said, so I do not intend to rehash it. However, my reading from many of the groupings, and perhaps even from the wider Irish-language community, is that there is not that fundamental gear change across the board that may be the case with a number of individuals. Nor was there a reticence about the proposals per se. However, there was, perhaps, a lack of confidence in the entire process and the methodology used. Perhaps that is a criticism to take on board.

As I said, however, Mr Bradley has probably articulated most of what I was thinking. Can you give any indication of the findings of the regulatory impact assessment?

**Mr Mac an Fhailigh:** The regulatory impact assessment will be updated based on the report from the whole consultation process; it will be updated as we go along and get the report and the discussions at development committee and board level.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** Therefore there will be no indication until at least July.

**Mr Ó Coinn:** It is probably important to point out that the timescales that we mentioned in our submission to the Committee have, of necessity, to be flexible because one important aspect of what we continue to do over the next few months is to engage with the organisations. If that throws up delays that are worth having in the interest of moving the process forward, we will have to allow that to happen — obviously with the forbearance of the Departments and the Minister.

The RIA and EQIA are two important documents in informing the decision-making process. In that context, it is important that they accompany the business case that goes to the Department and that they are not finalised until we have taken a final decision at board level, and that that then informs the decision-making process in the funding Departments.

**Mr Scott:** The main effect of the draft impact study that was carried out earlier in the process following its being agreed by the Committee was that there would be job losses in the sector if this restructuring went through. Based on the information from the equality impact assessment that was done for the most recent consultation, that is more likely to have an impact in the North on those employed in the sector and also on people from a Catholic background. That is the current impact; therefore the consultation will look a little at whether there needs to be any mitigation of that with regard to other issues that were picked up in the equality impact assessment. That was the main impact of the exercise.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** However, you would agree that part of the dichotomy that was previously referred to and the difficulties have to do with timeline and delivery.

**The Chairperson:** When do you expect to come back to the Committee to give a summary of the consultation responses?

**Mr Mac an Fhailigh:** We hope to have a very interim report from the development committee to the board in May, and we hope to have a full report on the consultation process to the board in June. However, the timescale has to be flexible, given the level of responses and the level of information that

has to be drawn out of those responses, as they will have to be included in a report and discussed by the development committee.

**The Chairperson:** Therefore it may not be before summer recess.

**Mr Mac an Fhailigh:** It may not.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you.

**Mr Swann:** We are looking at funding being withdrawn from some of the core bodies. How does that compare with the Minister setting up a business case for a £30,000 development officer under Líofa 2015? Surely, what Líofa 2015 is trying to do is a comparison with the values of the English language by the Ulsterman trust. Is there not a contradiction in what is happening to the core-funded bodies and the Minister taking on her own funding?

**Mr Scott:** Líofa 2015 is a separate departmental initiative that the Minister launched, particularly targeted here in the North. There is a business case for that post; it is in position for one year.

**Mr Swann:** Surely, what that is trying to achieve is the same as the Ulsterman trust.

**Mr Scott:** I think that I explained previously to the Committee that the Minister asked Foras na Gaeilge about the Líofa initiative, but Foras was not in a position to do it at that time. The Minister wanted to press ahead, so she made it a departmental initiative.

**Mr D Bradley:** I would have thought that it was an operational matter that could have been carried out by Foras na Gaeilge rather than by the Department.

**Mr Scott:** I think that I have already explained why the Minister decided to go forward with that initiative, and Foras na Gaeilge gave some advice on it. The initiative is to be taken forward by the Department with the person who is appointed to take it forward. It is complementary, obviously, to the overall efforts with regard to Foras na Gaeilge's responsibilities.

**The Chairperson:** Is it not saying that the core-funded groups are not doing their job when the Minister has to take the lead?

**Mr Scott:** That is an interpretation that you could place on it, but I do not think that any group can ever claim to have a monopoly on best practice. The figures speak for themselves with regard to the response from across the community in the North to the Líofa initiative. Clearly there was a gap, and that gap has been filled. Whether it will be filled on a long-term basis will be evaluated. Obviously, the business case will be evaluated and that position reviewed.

**Mr Swann:** Your organisational remit for the Ulsterman trust is to promote language issues on a cross-community basis. Is that not the same?

**Mr Scott:** There are certain elements of that perhaps, but Líofa was a particular initiative to encourage people to do something by 2015.

**The Chairperson:** OK, we will leave it at that. We will see you again once the consultation report has been completed.

**Mr Scott:** May I suggest that we treat that as an action point with regard to project planning so that it enables us to be flexible? We could do it as an action point in that the Committee would like to be briefed on the outcome of the consultation process and before a decision is taken by the Foras na Gaeilge board. Would that be helpful?

**The Chairperson:** Yes, that would be helpful.