

Towards an Irish Language Strategy for Northern Ireland



Executive Summary

Aodán Mac Póilin

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Introduction

This Report is an initial response by the ULTACH Trust to the *Draft Strategy for Protecting and Enhancing the Development of the Irish Language* published by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) in July 2012.

The draft strategy is to be welcomed as the first attempt to define a coherent approach to the revival and revitalisation of the Irish language in Northern Ireland.

Our Report was compiled within a very short timescale, and is not as fully developed as we would have wished. Nevertheless, we hope that it will make a positive contribution to the debate around what would, could or should constitute an effective Irish language strategy for this jurisdiction.

We have highlighted two main areas where we believe that the strategy requires further development.

Firstly, we believe that the draft strategy fails to reflect the cross-community principles envisaged in the Northern Ireland Executive's *Programme for Government, 2011-2015*, which sees the Irish Language Strategy as a key 'building block' of Priority 4, 'Building a Strong and Shared Community'.¹

Secondly, we are concerned that the draft strategy does not provide an adequate analysis of the current political, social or linguistic context in which the strategy must take place. It does not draw on a robust evidence base, and is not always grounded in widely accepted socio-linguistic principles.

ULTACH's Report also touches on other topics, among them an analysis of the dynamics of social interaction in a minority language context, differences between the situation of the language north and south, the particular challenges involved in promoting the language on a cross-community basis, and the implications of (as yet unpublished) plans to cease core-funding the Irish language voluntary sector in Northern Ireland in the summer of 2013.

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¹ A similar, and not unrelated, failure is evident in Foras na Gaeilge's draft discussion paper, *Pléphointí do Straitéis 5 bliana Fhoras na Gaeilge*, circulated to the core-funded organisations on 12 September 2012 for informal consultation.

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Overview

Towards an Irish Language Strategy for Northern Ireland ('the Report')² is primarily a response to the *Draft Strategy for Protecting and Enhancing the Development of the Irish Language* ('the NI Draft Strategy').

ULTACH Trust welcomes the *NI Draft Strategy*, the first attempt by any statutory agency in Northern Ireland to formulate a coherent state-led language policy for this jurisdiction. The draft strategy has a number of strengths: it promotes a coordinated approach across a range of government agencies, it rightly identifies intergenerational transmission of the language through the family as the gold standard in language revitalisation, and it provides a useful summary of the current legislative framework.

We believe, however, that we have identified a number of areas where the *NI Draft Strategy* is less persuasive. The Report argues that the strategy has not given due attention to the priority identified by the Northern Ireland Executive in its *Programme for Government 2011-2015*. It also re-examines the issues in light of the socio-linguistic and political contexts of this society, and in terms of widely accepted language planning principles. Where we differ from the analysis and theoretical underpinning of the *NI Draft Strategy*, or where we have identified gaps, we offer, and attempt to justify, an alternative view. In some cases, this has involved going back to first principles to explain why we have come to a particular conclusion.

Key Issues

Towards an Irish Language Strategy argues that the *NI Draft Strategy* should explore the cross-community commitment by the Northern Ireland Executive which is implicit in the *Programme for Government*, and should engage with the challenges and opportunities offered by this policy imperative.

It explores some of the 'complex social changes' involved in any language planning project, focusing on the specific challenges of increasing the use of an indigenous minority language in the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland.

² My colleague Gordon McCoy, as well as Pat McAlister and Áine Andrews of Altram, made valuable contributions to earlier drafts of this Report. For her sustained input and numerous recommendations at all stages of its development, and for contributing a chapter to the Report, I am particularly grateful to my colleague Róise Ní Bhaoil.

It advises against simplistic policies that are not based on sound sociolinguistic and language planning principles.

It questions an assumption that policies developed for the Republic of Ireland can be translated wholesale into the Northern Ireland context, where constitutional, legislative, political, social, administrative, and policy considerations are significantly different.

It warns against policies which place too much emphasis on the relationship of Irish-speakers with the state, and not enough emphasis on the relationship of Irish-speakers with each other.

It expresses grave reservations about proposed measures that rely on legislation which has not yet been passed and is not likely to be passed.

Main Recommendations

ULTACH proposes a radical re-alignment of the thrust of the draft strategy. In particular, it proposes a two-pronged approach.

1. The first approach relates to the promotion of the Irish language on a cross-community basis.

This is derived from the priority set out in the Northern Ireland Executive's *Programme for Government, 2011-15*, which identifies proposed strategies for Irish and Ulster Scots as key 'building blocks' of Priority 4, 'Building a Strong and Shared Community'. Priority 4 describes the strategies primarily in terms of community relations:

... building relationships between communities ... unlocking the potential of the culture, arts and leisure sectors as instruments for positive change. Additionally, it seeks to ... advance social cohesion and integration.

ULTACH would argue that this Government priority has not received due attention in the *NI Draft Strategy*.

We also recognise that, as Priority 4 is directed mainly at community relations, it may not necessarily have the linguistically desirable outcome of increasing the use of the language in society.

2. The second approach is directed solely at linguistic outcomes – specifically, at defining desirable linguistic outcomes and identifying options for achieving them.

In the context of linguistic outcomes, ULTACH Trust proposes a radical re-focusing of the strategy as it relates to language planning.

We propose that the nurturing and development of Irish-speaking networks and communities be placed at the centre of the language planning process, and that all other language planning activities be built around that core priority. Such themes as language acquisition, the development of a support infrastructure, the activities of state bodies would all be focused on, and measured by, their ultimate role in building and maintaining sustainable Irish-speaking networks and communities.

ULTACH's Report has strong reservations, detailed in the body of the Report, about the *NI Draft Strategy's* Aims, Objectives and Areas for Action. It therefore recommends that new Strategic Policy Objectives be adopted, in support of which new Aims, Objectives and Actions should be developed.

ULTACH proposes the following Strategic Policy Objectives and Aims:

Strategic Policy Objectives

- **The promotion of the Irish language to the entire community of Northern Ireland in a way that will contribute towards 'building a strong and shared community';**
- **The development of sustainable Irish language networks and communities.**

Language Planning Framework: Aims

1. Foster positive attitudes towards the language:
 - reduce negative preconceptions about the language and its speakers, with a particular although not exclusive focus on the Protestant and unionist community in Northern Ireland;
 - achieve recognition from a significant body of people of all religious and political persuasions that the language is an important strand in the common heritage of the entire community of Northern Ireland;
 - nurture positive attitudes towards the language, including, as well as persuading more individuals to engage with the language, wider acceptance of the desirability of state support for language revival and revitalisation.
2. Support effective language acquisition:
 - provide opportunities to learn Irish to as wide a range of people as possible;
 - increase the number of people who can speak the language;
3. Develop active language networks and communities:
 - provide opportunities to use Irish to as wide a range of people as possible;
 - increase the number of people who use the language on a regular basis to a significant extent;
 - provide support for the strengthening and development of sustainable networks and communities of Irish-speakers;
 - provide support for a significant increase in the number of families opting for intergenerational transmission of the language within the family.
4. Provide infrastructural support:
 - provide appropriate state support for the achievement of the above desirable outcomes;
 - provide or support services which will contribute to the above desirable outcomes.

Such a framework could form the basis for a range of Actions:

Actions

In this Report ULTACH has not defined or suggested specific actions or activities which could or should be linked to achieving the core aims set out above. It is clear, however, that each Aim will have a number of Actions.

For example, the Aims relating to effective language acquisition will have a wide range of contributory activities, which may be grouped by theme as Areas for Action. Education would be one such Area, covering a spectrum of activities from the statutory – Irish-medium education, Irish as a subject within the statutory education system at primary, secondary and post-secondary levels – to the non-statutory e.g. informal lifelong learning (including self-learning courses for adults), targeted courses for parents of children in Irish immersion education.

Additional Recommendations

- 1. As suggested in OFMDFM's guide to effective policy making, we believe that the Aims and Objectives of the *NI Draft Strategy* should be clearly linked to a robust evidence base, a clear analysis of the issues, and a coherent rationale underpinning policy proposals. They should be laid out in a way that is coherent and logical, and the Areas for Action should be clearly linked to Aims and Objectives;**
- 2. A mechanism should be established to facilitate and monitor interdepartmental and inter-agency coordination of services aimed at the resolute action they are required, by law, to take to promote the Irish language. With or without an Irish Language Act, there is a pressing need to ensure that decision-makers in the public services are aware of their responsibilities towards the promotion of the Irish language, and an equally pressing need to ensure**

coherent, sustained cross-institutional action.

3. **Voluntary organisations which operate solely or primarily on a Northern Ireland basis, and form a critical element in the current support infrastructure for Irish, should not be excluded from funding by the *NI Draft Strategy*.**
4. **Given the uncertainty around the proposed Irish Language Act, we recommend a two-tiered approach. Some critical proposals in the *NI Draft Strategy* depend for their efficacy on the passing of an Irish Language Act. There is legitimate doubt that an Irish Language Act will, in fact, be passed. Should an Irish Language Act be passed, one set of proposals is feasible. Should it not be passed, another set of proposals will be necessary. The proposals made in this Report relate solely to the second contingency.**

Towards an Irish Language Strategy for Northern Ireland

Aodán Mac Póilin, ULTACH Trust

ULTACH Trust was founded in 1990 to 'promote the Irish language to the entire community of Northern Ireland'. As the first state-funded Irish language promotion agency, ULTACH carried out a wide range of functions. As well as promoting the language on a cross-community basis, it distributed grants, published a wide range of reports, resources and articles, and campaigned on issues such as Irish-medium education, Irish language arts and Irish language television. This last campaign finally bore fruit after 13 years with the foundation of the Irish Language Broadcasting Fund in 2003. The Trust also became active in other organisations, such as the European Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages and the Irish-Scottish initiative Colmcille. Staff also participated in organisations such as the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council, the BBC Broadcasting Council, Foras na Gaeilge, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta, Cultures of Ireland, the Irish Language Broadcasting Fund, Northern Ireland Screen. This breadth of experience has given the Trust a wide overview of Irish language issues, cultural politics, socio-linguistics, language planning.

Following the Good Friday Agreement, other Irish language organisations with far greater resources began to deal with areas such as funding, education and broadcasting, and ULTACH was able to concentrate on its unique strengths, promoting the Irish language in a divided community, promoting the language on a cross-community basis, and developing Irish language learning resources.