

Strategic Policy and Resources Committee

Tuesday, 15th May, 2012

SPECIAL MEETING OF STRATEGIC POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

- Members present: Councillor Hargey (Chairman); and
Councillors Attwood, Convery, Garrett, Lavery,
Maskey, McCarthy, McVeigh, Mac Giolla Mhín,
Ó Muilleoir and Reynolds.
- Also attended: Councillor Kyle.
- In attendance: Mr. P. McNaney, Chief Executive;
Mr. C. Quigley, Assistant Chief Executive/Town Solicitor;
Mr. R. Cregan, Director of Finance and Resources;
Mr. S. McCrory, Democratic Services Manager; and
Mr. J. Hanna, Senior Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

Apologies for inability to attend were reported from Alderman Newton and Councillors Hendron and Newton.

Presentation on the Use of the Irish Language in Public Life

The Committee was reminded that, at its meeting on 23rd March, it had agreed that a special meeting be held to receive a presentation from representatives of POBAL on the use of the Irish language in public life. It was reported that Ms J. Muller, POBAL, together with Mr. P. Primley, Translator, Central Translations (NI) Limited, were in attendance and they were admitted to the meeting and welcomed by the Chairman.

Prior to the commencement of the meeting, the Chairman outlined the proposed format of the presentation and question and answer session which would be conducted in both the Irish language and in English.

With the assistance of visual aids, Ms Muller outlined the results of the 2001 Census in relation to the use of the Irish language which indicated that 167,000 people in Northern Ireland had a knowledge of Irish, with 36,317 of those living in Belfast. She stated that 50% of those persons lived outside West Belfast and highlighted a number of district Wards where people had indicated a knowledge of Irish.

Ms. Muller then referred to an opinions survey which had been undertaken earlier in the year by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. She indicated that it was a small sample survey which highlighted that 70% of the respondents were in favour of the use of the Irish language or were neither in favour nor against it. Of those, 66% of Catholics and 14% of Protestants were in favour of the use of the language in public life, whilst 40% of Protestants were neither in favour nor against.

She then reviewed the legislative and policy background to the use of the Irish language in public services, which included the Good Friday Agreement, the St. Andrew's Agreement, the St. Andrew's Act 2006 and the Education Order 2000, which had placed a duty on the Department of Education for Northern Ireland to "encourage and facilitate Irish Medium education". She referred specifically to the Treacy Judgement 2011, which related to the transport system for schooling, which stated that the Government had a duty to provide for pupils in the Irish-Medium Education and that such education should be treated as a special case.

She referred also to the duties imposed on public bodies in respect of the use of Irish as outlined in International Charters and Conventions such as the Human Rights Act and Convention, the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. She indicated that a Committee of Experts reviewed the application of the European Charter for Regional Minority Languages every three years and the last findings, which had been published in 2010, had indicated that the Committee was not content with the progress which had been made in Northern Ireland in implementing changes.

Ms. Muller then referred to the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and stated that the Advisory Committee had published earlier this year its third report which indicated that there was still some hostility towards the use of the Irish language in Northern Ireland and that there were not enough opportunities to use the language when dealing with local administrative authorities. The Advisory Committee had also commented on the limited progress which had been made regarding the erection of bi-lingual signposting, particularly road signs, and specifically referred to the decision of the Council to reject a proposal to erect such signs in the City. She then outlined the other findings which had been included in the report in respect of the Irish language which included a strong statement and recommendation in relation to the need for Irish language legislation, the Irish language media and the importance of funding for the voluntary sector.

In conclusion, Ms. Muller stated that there was a dynamic and growing Irish-speaking community in the City, that Irish was subject to protections and that public authorities had duties in this regard. She indicated that the publication of the expert findings had provided the Council with an opportunity to develop and promote an active approach to the Irish language and show that it was taking its responsibilities seriously in this regard. She stated that POBAL had published a document on the use of Irish language in public services and was seeking councils to use this to form the basis of a policy.

Ms Muller then answered a number of questions from the Members and the Chairman thanked her and Mr. Primley for attending and they retired from the meeting.

During discussion, the Chief Executive indicated that use of the Irish language was one of the issues which was being considered as part of an overall language policy which was being addressed by the Joint Group of the Party Leaders and the Historic Centenaries Working Group, following which a report would be submitted to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee.

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The Committee noted the information which had been provided in relation to the presentation and the comments of the Chief Executive in regards to the Language Policy.

Chairman