

Language Strategy Working Group

Friday, 1st September, 2023

LANGUAGE STRATEGY WORKING GROUP MINUTES HELD IN PERSON AND REMOTELY

- Members present: Alderman Rodgers; and
Councillors R. Brooks, Groogan, Long,
Walsh and Whyte.
- In attendance: Ms. N. Largey, City Solicitor/Director of Legal and
Civic Services;
Mrs. S. Williams, Governance and Compliance Manager;
Mr. C. McGuigan, Irish Language Officer;
Mr. M. Johnston, Language Officer;
Mrs. S. McNeill, Policy, Research and Compliance
Officer ; and
Mrs. L. McLornan, Democratic Services Officer.

Election of Chairperson

The Working Group agreed that Councillor Walsh be elected to serve as its Chairperson.

Apologies

No apologies were reported.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 2nd March were taken as read and signed as correct.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were recorded.

Language Strategy - Background and Progress Update

The Governance and Compliance Manager provided the Working Group with the background to the Language Strategy 2018-2023 and an overview of the work which had taken place to date.

She explained that the Language Strategy 2018-23 comprised two pillars: to protect and promote awareness of the two indigenous languages, Irish and Ulster Scots; and to promote access to, the inclusion of and awareness of sign languages, languages of new communities which lived in Belfast and communication for disabled people.

She outlined a number of annual events which the Council had been involved with, including Seachtain na Gaeilge/Irish Language Week, Ulster Scots Week and Burns' Night events, International Mother Tongue Day, International Day for People with Disabilities and Sign Language Week events.

In relation to stakeholder engagement, she explained that a Sign Language Forum and Disability Advisory Panel, an Irish Language Stakeholder Forum and an Ulster-Scots Language Stakeholder Forum had been established. A meeting had also been held with a new stakeholder forum to liaise with Minority Ethnic communities in Belfast.

In relation to the promotion and development of Irish and Ulster Scots, the Governance and Compliance Manager advised the Members that they were both at very different stages and had different needs, with the Ulster Scots stakeholder groups focusing much more on the cultural heritage than the language. She reported that the Council had supported the development of a booklet on Ulster Scots place names within the City and that the first Council press release in Irish had been released in January 2023, promoting the City Cemetery Visitors' Centre Irish language tours.

The Working Group was advised of the availability of translation and interpretation requests in respect of Council documents. It was also reminded that services such as the on-demand video interpreting service for Sign Languages (SignVideo) were available at the City Hall, Cecil Ward, Belfast Zoo, Tropical Ravine and at its leisure centres. The Members were also advised that interpreting and translation support had been made available for Ukrainian refugees and that a braille menu was in place at the Bobbin café in City Hall.

The Governance and Compliance Manager outlined that two British Sign Language courses had been delivered to date for front-line staff and that Council staff at City Hall, Malone House, and Belfast Castle would be able to complete Autism NI Impact Award training in September 2023.

In terms of issues which had arisen since the Language Strategy 2018-23 had been adopted, she highlighted that there was a lack of an agreed position in relation to specific languages, especially the Irish language, and that there was a need for individual political decisions, particularly in relation to the development of policies in relation to Council signage.

She outlined that, in response, the Language Strategy Working Group had been formed as a non-decision making group which could make recommendations to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee for agreement, the first meeting of which had been held in February 2022. New dedicated stakeholder fora for the Irish Language and Ulster-Scots had also been established in March 2023 and that multi-year action plans would be consulted with stakeholders before issuing for public consultation.

An internal Language Strategy Officer Working Group had also been formed, with staff from Marketing and Communications, Customer Focus, Good Relations, Tourism, Culture, Heritage and Arts, Building Control, Corporate HR, City and Neighbourhood Services, Physical Programmes as well as the Language officers. The Officer Working Group had developed a detailed, prioritised Action Plan which had been agreed by the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee in November 2022.

Noted.

Revised Draft Language Strategy Action Plan

The Working Group considered the Draft Language Strategy Action Plan and the proposed next steps. The Governance and Compliance Manager explained that, following pre-consultation engagement with the Irish Language Stakeholder Forum, the Ulster Scots Stakeholder Forum, a sub-group of the Migrant Forum and the Sign Language Forum, some actions had been amended or removed and that some additional actions had been added for the Council's consideration. Following Council approval, the Draft Action Plan would be issued for a twelve week public consultation exercise. Subsequently, an updated Action Plan would be brought before the Working Group, to proceed from April 2024.

A number of Members stated that they were keen to see progress on the Draft Irish Language Policy. They added that Irish Language groups had requested that they would be able to see the Draft Irish Language Policy before it was published for public consultation. A Member added that Ulster Scots groups would likely wish to see it in advance as well.

A number of Members stated that a proposed audit of the languages spoken by staff within the Council was a good idea. A Member requested that other languages be included within the audit and any formation of informal staff language networks, not just Irish or Ulster Scots.

The Members were content with the use of the term Minority Ethnic languages and agreed that it was important to remember that the Strategy included Sign Language and other languages used in the City.

A Member stated that he felt that a number of the actions within the Action Plan were beyond the Council's remit and that others were missing. He sought clarity on what benchmarking had taken place by officers in relation to the Strategy, and the impact that the Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022 placed on it. He added that, in order to increase the accessibility of Council facilities to Irish speakers, perhaps a staff member who could speak Irish at the reception in the City Hall would be more beneficial and cost effective than real-time translation of Council meetings.

A further Member agreed that it was important that the Strategy reflected best practice, such as in the Republic of Ireland or Wales.

A Member asked that the Action Plan in relation to the Council's operating partners, such as GLL, would include the provision of appropriate signage and information to assist those with Autism or Special Educational Needs. She added that "how to" videos, illustrating what the different areas of the centres looked like inside, for example, were particularly useful for those who were non-verbal or autistic. She added that more could also be done to help those within the deaf community.

The Governance and Compliance Manager explained that one of the Language Officers had been working with Council staff in relation to those with SEN/Autism and accessibility and provision of Sign Language on-demand video services within the Leisure Centres on an iPad at reception.

The Member added that the Action Plan appeared to be top heavy in terms of Irish and queried how much engagement had taken place with Ulster Scots groups. The

Governance and Compliance Manager confirmed that officers had met with both the new Irish Language and Ulster-Scots Stakeholder Forum on a monthly basis and held dedicated sessions in relation to developing the Action Plan. The City Solicitor reiterated that the asks from the Irish Language and the Ulster Scots groups were very different, with the Ulster Scots groups' asks being much more focused on the cultural heritage than the language itself.

The City Solicitor explained that she understood the Members' frustrations with the timeline and that officers wanted the Action Plan agreed in order that actions relating to providing increased accessibility could be progressed as soon as possible. She advised that the draft Irish Language Policy was due to be discussed at CMT and would then be brought to Members for initial consideration before any pre-consultation engagement with stakeholders.

In relation to the proposed budget, the Governance and Compliance Manager advised the Working Group that the Action Plan summarised work under existing budgets but that some actions would be costed for further consideration by Members. The City Solicitor added, however, that a number of the short term actions would be met from within existing budgets.

A Member stated that the visibility of the Irish language was important to Irish speakers and requested that the wording of point 1.11 of the Action Plan, in relation to the use of Irish Language on the Council's social media, be amended, as it should not be limited to issues where the subject "related to Irish". The City Solicitor and Governance and Compliance Manager stated that they would look at the wording and, additionally, that, in terms of Action 1.14, they could specify that a certain number of articles or pages of the City Matters publication would be in languages other than English in a rolling programme.

The Working Group noted the update which had been provided and agreed that the Draft Language Action Plan be submitted to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee for its approval, with the Working Group's comments included.

Chairperson