

# Language Strategy Working Group

Monday, 27th April, 2026

## MEETING OF THE LANGUAGE STRATEGY WORKING GROUP

- Members present: Councillor Walsh (Chairperson);  
Alderman Rodgers; and  
Councillor R. Brooks.
- Also attended: Councillor Bower (representing Councillor Long).
- In attendance: Ms. N. Largey, City Solicitor/Director of Legal and  
Civic Services;  
Mr. E. McConville, Director of External Affairs,  
Communications and Marketing;  
Mr. R. Connolly, Policy, Research and Compliance Officer;  
Mr. M. Johnston, Language Officer;  
Mr. C. McGuigan, Irish Language Officer; and  
Mrs. L. McLornan, Committee Services Officer.

### **Apologies**

Apologies were reported on behalf of Councillors Groogan and Long.

It was noted that Councillor Bower was attending the meeting in place of Councillor Long.

### **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of 30th January, 2025, were taken as read and signed as correct.

### **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

### **Presentation - Commissioner for the Ulster Scots and the Ulster British Tradition, Mr. Lee Reynolds**

The Chairperson welcomed Mr. L. Reynolds to the meeting.

He explained that the New Decade New Approach agreement in 2020 had proposed the official recognition of the Ulster Scots language and the appointment of an Ulster Scots/Ulster British Commissioner. He had subsequently been appointed as the Commissioner of the Ulster Scots and Ulster British tradition, from November 2025, for a period of five years.

He advised the Working Group that his principal aims were to enhance and develop the language, arts and literature associated with Ulster Scots and to give advice in relation to the Ulster British tradition. He added that there would also be a complaints element to his role, the terms of which were yet to be established.

The Working Group was advised of the various pieces of legislation from which he would primarily be working and highlighted that Ulster Scots had been recognised as a minority language through the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

In regards to the promotion of the language, he stated that a legal duty had been placed on the Department of Education, in February 2025, and that he wanted to look at a three year implementation plan and related curriculum reform. He outlined that education was a key priority for him and that he would be seeking to engage with schools and colleges as part of that work.

In response to a Member's question, he outlined that his approach to the promotion of Ulster Scots was not going to be the same as the Commissioner for the Irish Language, and that the two languages should not be seen as "competitive" with each other.

The City Solicitor explained that she was keen that the Council would be kept informed regarding their schools' engagement programme and the legal opinion in respect of the level of protection afforded to the language.

The Chairperson thanked Mr. Reynolds for his time and he retired from the meeting.

#### **Update on the draft Ulster Scots Policy**

The City Solicitor explained that she intended to bring the final draft of the Ulster Scots Policy to the next meeting of the Working Group.

She added that work had been carried out on Ulster Scots street names and that those would be brought forward imminently.

Noted.

#### **Update on the Sign Language Bill**

The City Solicitor provided the Working Group with an update on the upcoming Sign Language Bill (Northern Ireland) 2025. She outlined that the legislation would require public bodies in NI to take reasonable steps to ensure that the information and services provided by it were accessible to individuals in the deaf community. It would also give official and equal recognition of British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL) as languages of Northern Ireland and promote the use and understanding of both.

In response to a Member's query, the City Solicitor confirmed that officers would be conducting a language audit of all staff to ascertain what languages staff spoke and to what level. The Member requested that the staff audit of how many Council staff had knowledge of British or Irish Sign Language be expedited.

The Language Officer advised the Members that the Council offered Level 1 BSL to a number of front-line staff but that there was currently a shortage of sign language teachers in NI. He pointed out that the Bill would require more Sign Language translators

and interpreters and, while they were awaiting guidance from the Department for Communities on the full impact of the Bill, it had provided assurance of more tutors.

The Working Group thanked officers and noted the update.

### **Irish Language Policy - verbal update**

The City Solicitor updated the Working Group on the recent court case in relation to the Council's operation of the Call-in procedure and how there had been some confusion in the media's reporting of it.

She clarified that the Council's Irish Language Policy had been called-in and that it was currently under consideration by a Barrister. The Members would be updated once the Counsel's Opinion had been received.

Noted.

### **Irish Language Programming during Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann 2026**

The City Solicitor and the Director of Communications presented the following report to the Working Group:

#### **“1.0 Purpose of report or summary of main issues**

**1.1 The purpose of this report is to update the working group on the ongoing work by officers in relation to the use of during Irish language during the Fleadh and to seek approval for the setting up of an Irish Language Sub-Committee for the Fleadh.**

#### **2.0 Recommendations**

**2.1 The Working Group is asked to note the contents of this report, provide feedback as necessary.**

#### **3.0 Main report**

##### **3.1 Background**

**Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann 2026 will be held in Belfast between 2nd and 9th August 2026. The Fleadh will also be held in Belfast in 2027. There is a strong emphasis in the Fleadh on the promotion, use and visibility of the Irish language. The use and promotion of the Irish language has been raised by stakeholders with Council officers during previous engagement around the issue.**

**3.2 The MAC has been identified as an Irish language hub during the Fleadh week and a programme will be developed of Irish language activity in the MAC during that week. Input will be sought from local Irish language organisations and musicians, as well as Irish language groups from outside Belfast through an expression of interest process. An external producer has**

been appointed and will help with programming these activities.

The MAC programme will be subject to ongoing discussion through the sub-committee of the Forum which will be the dedicated Irish Language Committee for the purposes of the Fleadh.

- 3.3 The Fleadh will be an authentic typical Fleadh experience in terms of the visibility of Irish. By way of example, a business toolkit will be available proactively in Irish. We will continue to explore ways to promote the visibility of Irish in accordance with our commitments in the Language Strategy Action Plan around tourism.

Irish will be visible in the communications and marketing output during the Fleadh. This will include the use of Irish on temporary signage in the city, and in the Council's media and social media output where resources and timing allow.

3.4 **Next steps**

Members are asked to note the contents of this report, provide feedback as necessary.

4.0 **Monitoring and Reporting**

- 4.1 The working group will be provided with a further update on progress at its next meeting.

5.0 **Financial and Resource Implications**

None associated with this report.

6.0 **Equality, good relations or rural needs implications**

None associated with this report.”

The Working Group noted the update provided.

Chairperson