



Subject:	Language Strategy - Proposed Strategic Approach
Date:	23rd April, 2021
Reporting Officer:	John Walsh, City Solicitor / Director of Legal and Civic Services
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Restricted Reports	
Is this report restricted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?	
After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sometime in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>

Call-in	
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

1.0	Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues
1.1	The purpose of this report is to request approval for a proposed strategic approach for the implementation of the Language Strategy.
2.0	Recommendations
2.1	The Committee is asked to approve the establishment of: <ul style="list-style-type: none">i. a cross-party, bi-annual / quarterly Member Language Strategy Working Group;ii. a new external Irish Language Forum and a new external Ulster-Scots Forum to add to the existing Council stakeholder fora for the other language communities; andiii. an internal Language Strategy officer working group.
3.0	Main Report
3.1	Background The Council launched its Language Strategy in April 2018 (set out in Appendix 1) which has two key purposes:

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Indigenous languages: to protect and promote awareness of our indigenous languages: Irish and Ulster-Scots; and 2. Other languages: to promote access to, inclusion of and awareness of other languages: sign languages, the languages of new communities who live in Belfast, and languages and communication for disabled people.
3.2	<p>The Language Strategy was introduced to reflect:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To protect and promote awareness of our two indigenous languages: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • historical international frameworks aimed at protecting and promoting regional and minority languages¹ which, while not legally binding until enshrined into domestic law, the UK is a signatory state; • commitments under the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement 1998 and the St Andrews Agreement 2006; • regional strategies and frameworks such as DCAL's Irish Language and Ulster-Scots Strategies in 2015; • developments in approach to language issues in Belfast City Council and other councils in NI 2. To promote access to, inclusion of and awareness of other languages <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • changing demographics in the city population and the need to promote access to Council services in languages other than English • national laws promoting diversity and inclusion.
3.3	<p>Background to the Development of the Language Strategy</p> <p>The Council first considered the issue of language and the implications of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in 2002. In 2006, the Council agreed a Language Policy to address legislative obligations based on the needs and priorities of linguistic groups and to act as a guide for Council officers. This policy was subsequently extended in 2007 to cover signage in all Council facilities that “the signs inside Council properties be either pictorial, tactile or in English or a combination of these, but that a multi-lingual Welcome sign be provided where there is appropriate demand”.</p>

¹ UN's International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), 1966; UN's International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), 1966; Council of Europe's European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML), 1992; Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM), 1994

3.4	<p>The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission was critical of this decision in its 2010 Briefing Paper on Minority Language Rights, noting that because it stipulates that the name of the facility can be in English only that it “in effect, prohibits the use of Irish in signage on all of the Council facilities”. Their view was that the policy generally conflicts with the spirit of and is also incompatible with several articles of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML) in particular Article 10 which applies to Administrative authorities and public services.</p>
3.5	<p>The Council agreed to review the Language Policy in 2012. In November 2013, a revised Language Policy which incorporated legal advice from a QC to ensure the Council’s compliance with all relevant legal obligations was brought through the Party Group Leaders’ Forum and Historical Centenaries Working Group however no agreement was reached. The group recommended at their meeting in October 2012 that the current guidelines should be extended to incorporate Irish versions of the official logo and branding since this would regularise the current position. The Irish version would then be available for use by individual Members and organisations.</p>
3.6	<p>At that time, the demands of Local Government Reform prioritised work streams in that area and consequently the 2006 Language Policy remained in place. In late 2016 a decision was made to revisit the 2006 Language Policy and following refreshed engagement with key stakeholders a draft Policy on Linguistic Diversity was issued for consultation in 2017. This included three draft policies aimed at Irish, Ulster-Scots and other languages which are set out in the Language Strategy document. Following the outcome of the public consultation, in September 2017 Members a set of recommendations including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The draft Linguistic Diversity Policy should be re-branded as a Language Strategy, outlining a strategic approach to the development of accessible and inclusive communications; • Separate strands of work should be established under the strategy, for example – Irish Language, Ulster-Scots Language, Sign Language, New Communities’ Communications and Language, and Communications and Language Strand for those with a Disability; • Each strand should be assessed fully to inform appropriate resourcing, for example with dedicated human and material resources that are tailored to the particular needs and priorities of that language community; • To take forward these recommendations, an action plan should be put in place with immediate effect, setting out a staged approach to full implementation, with resources made available for each strand in order to provide continued momentum to the emerging strategy.

	<p>The three draft policies were redefined into specific community needs (see section 3.5 of the Language Strategy) and it was stated “that the development of different policies under the strategy will accommodate the different aspirations and priorities of each language community, balanced through needs and constraints”. Draft aims for each language work strands were set out. The draft language policies are included in an appendix to the Language Strategy for reference.</p>
3.7	<p>The Council has also made some individual decisions in relation to signage such as a welcome sign in Falls Park in 1999; that banners and hoarding in the Gaeltacht Quarter as part of the City Dressing Plan 2012/13 and the Investment Programme in 2012 would be in both Irish and English; and in 2012, it was agreed that the Nollaig Shona (Happy Christmas) sign donated by An Cultúrlann would continue to be erected at the East entrance to the City Hall. More recently, as Members will be aware, the Council has carried out public consultations in relation to leisure centre signage. Members have also agreed an approach to revise the Dual Language Street Signs Policy which is subject to a separate report to this Committee.</p>
3.8	<p>The launch of the current Language Strategy was followed by the recruitment of two language officers in September 2018 with the approval of an Action Plan in December 2018 to cover the period up to March 2020. Highlights from this programme of work are set out in Appendix 2 across all five of the language strands. This has included hosting events for Seachtain na Gaeilge/Irish Language Week for schools and schoolchildren; launching a <i>Pocket Guide to Ulster-Scots Place Names in Belfast</i>; signing the British Deaf Association British Sign Language & Irish Sign Language Charter and becoming the first public sector organisation in Northern Ireland to offer SignVideo which allows Sign Language users to contact the council using a live video Sign Language interpreter; developing a ‘<i>Valuing Languages</i>’ film with Queen’s University Belfast showcasing 15 languages used in Belfast today; and developing a dedicated webpage to support people with disabilities to access the Council’s services. It should be noted that resourcing issues in the Equality and Diversity Unit, which are now being resolved, has delayed progress in this area.</p>
3.9	<p>Key Issues</p> <p>In order to take forward the further development of the Language Strategy, it is now proposed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To establish a political governance structure to enable Members to contribute to and inform the further development and implementation of the Language Strategy

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To establish two additional external stakeholder fora to enable discussion with and feedback from the language sectors in the city to add to the existing consultation fora for the other language sectors • To establish an internal officer working group to ensure a joined up corporate approach on areas related to language such as physical signage, documents translation, website/communications, promotion of heritage and culture • To develop an updated action plan for each strand of the Language Strategy including the development of language-related policies and protocols to be considered within the Council's existing budgetary constraints. <p>It should be noted by Members, that the Council may be facing unprecedented budgetary challenges in the coming years and these actions plans will have to be developed in light of these circumstances.</p>
3.10	<p>Governance</p> <p>It is proposed that a cross-party Members' Language Strategy Working Group is established to look at language issues and how these are addressed. This group would meet quarterly in the first instance and as required and would comprise one representative from each party. Representatives from different language sectors would be invited to address the group in order to promote understanding of the issues in this area. Direct engagement with the Council's external language stakeholder fora would also be arranged. The Working Group would also receive updates and consider proposals from the Language Officers on their areas of work and would make recommendations on proposed actions plans and policy development. These recommendations would then be referred to Strategic Policy and Resources Committee for agreement, as required.</p>
3.11	<p>External Stakeholder Engagement</p> <p>It is also proposed to establish groups to ensure that the Council can meaningful engage with relevant stakeholders on each strand of the Language Strategy. The Council already has groups relating to Sign Language (Sign Language Users' Forum), New Communities (Migrant Forum) and Disability Communications (Disability Advisory Panel). It is suggested that two new external fora are established for Irish and Ulster Scots. This would ensure there is a mechanism for communities in each language strand to identify and prioritise issues and influence the development of the Council's approach. It would also be an opportunity for the Council to communicate progress on current actions to these groups. It is envisaged that the two new groups would meet three times a year.</p>

3.12	<p>Internal Corporate Co-ordination</p> <p>To ensure a corporate joined-up approach the existing Equality and Diversity Network – Operational (or if needed a sub-group established) will be used to share information and co-ordinate work in relation to the Language Strategy. It is suggested this should comprise council officers from across the council including Marketing and Corporate Communications; the Good Relations Unit; Physical Programmes; Heritage, Culture and Arts and the Customer Focus Programme as it relates to matters such as physical signage, translation of documents, use of website/communications, and the promotion of heritage and culture (in particular place names).</p>
3.13	<p>Public consultation on leisure centre signage and other language-related queries</p> <p>It is suggested that the results of the public consultation on leisure centre signage is considered through this Working Group giving due consideration to the views expressed in the responses to the consultation. This decision was deferred to a later date by Strategic Policy and Resources at the outset of the pandemic.</p> <p>In addition, some physical projects are approaching completion with queries already arising related to requests for English / Irish signage, for example in the new Collin Park, which is funded by Urban Villages and will transfer to the Council following completion; and work on the City Cemetery Refurbishment project which is due to be completed in the autumn. The Council has recently received identical email requests for Irish / English signage in 11 parks reflecting the need to promote a wider understanding of the Council’s current agreed policy position in relation to signage in other languages.</p>
3.14	<p>Action Plans 2021-23</p> <p>Draft action plans for each of the five strands of the Language Strategy will be developed in consultation with members of the external stakeholder groups. It is proposed that these action plans would be considered and agreed by the new Language Strategy Working Group. Any outstanding actions from the previous action plan have been included in the draft new action plans and progress would be reported through the Language Strategy Working Group.</p>
3.15	<p><u>Financial and Resource Implications</u></p> <p>This work will be covered by existing budgets.</p>
3.16	<p><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u></p> <p>The promotion of equality of opportunity and good relations are key principles within which the Language Strategy is delivered. The Language Strategy was subject to the Council’s usual screening process.</p>

4.0	Documents Attached
	Appendix 1 - Language Strategy 2018-2023 Appendix 2: Highlights from Programme of Work 2018-present