

Belfast City Council Irish Language Policy

Background

1. Belfast City Council ('the Council') published its first Language Policy in 2006. This outlines its commitment to using Irish and Ulster Scots in correspondence with members of the public should they so choose to do so to support the heritage and traditions of the various language communities living in the city.
2. Further to its original Language Policy, in 2018 the Council adopted a Language Strategy 2018 - 2023. In keeping with the Council's long-term vision for the city, as set out in the Belfast Agenda, the Strategy aspires to create a place where linguistic diversity is celebrated and respected, and where those who live, work and visit Belfast can expect to access what Belfast has to offer, using forms of language with which they are familiar and comfortable. The aims of the Strategy are to:
 - Address language and communication challenges and opportunities within the Belfast Agenda outcomes;
 - Establish a transparent set of principles for promoting, protecting and enhancing the linguistic diversity of the city;
 - Increase the profile of different languages along with awareness and understanding of associated cultures, heritage and traditions;
 - Engage with language communities to address language barriers and promote equality of opportunity through the development and integration of different languages into mainstream civic life;
 - Enhance good relations within the city through the promotion of linguistic diversity and to celebrate the significance of language in the history and culture of the city;
 - Address staff training and capacity building needs in relation to the role linguistic diversity has in the workplace and in the delivery of services.
 - Work in partnership to promote linguistic diversity across the city, to move toward our shared vision of inclusive growth, where no one is left behind.
3. In adopting the Language Strategy, the Council was mindful of international and domestic legal obligations and standards which are set out at Appendix One. It was also informed by demand for the use of minority languages and feedback from wide-ranging consultation.

4. Irish language is part of the shared cultural wealth and heritage of everyone who lives in Belfast and is the first language of a growing community of our citizens in the city.
5. The European Charter on Minority Languages states that the adoption of special measures in favour of regional or minority languages aimed at promoting equality between the users of these languages and the rest of the population or which take due account of their specific conditions is not considered to be an act of discrimination against the users of more widely-used languages.
6. It is against this backdrop that the Council has developed its Irish Language Policy.

Purpose

7. The purpose of this Policy is to give a clear indication of the specific steps the Council will promote the Irish language within its own work and to support the growing community of Irish speakers in Belfast.

Policy aim

8. The aim of this Policy is to set out how the Council will promote the use of Irish language internally and in the wider Council area in accordance with the commitments outlined above and the specific steps it will take to doing this. It will do so in line with the six Guiding Principles for Promoting, Protecting and Enhancing Linguistic Diversity which were agreed by the Council's Strategic Policy & Resources Committee in June 2022. These are:
 - **Changing the perspective on languages in our city** to increase the profile of different languages along with awareness and understanding of associated cultures, heritage and traditions.
 - **Engaging with language communities** to increase equal opportunities and to enhance and protect good relations within the city.
 - **Improving organisational capacity** to address staff training needs and improve our language capabilities.

- **Working in partnerships with others** to promote linguistic diversity across the city to move towards our shared vision of inclusive growth, where no-one is left behind.
- **Identifying and implementing actions** in line with agreed priorities to promote, protect and enhance linguistic diversity.
- **Establishing efficient and effective solutions which** are proportionate to need, affordable and measurable.

Policy Statement

9. A person requesting service through the medium of Irish from the Council is entitled to the same standard of service as they would receive were they to request service in English, and for the availability of Irish language services to be made known to them at the outset of their dealing with the Council through active offer.
10. The Council will remove barriers to the use of Irish in public life.
11. The Council will promote the learning of Irish as a vibrant modern language
12. The Council will support the promotion of Irish language through its facilities, programmes and events.
13. The Council will take resolute action to promote and protect the Irish language across the Council area across its own public facing services.

Communications

14. The Council will develop a list of key strategic Council documents and publications to proactively be made available in Irish. The 10 most common front-facing forms (online and hard copy) will be identified and translated into Irish for immediate use. The Council commits to publishing information leaflets, marketing and promotional materials bilingually in printed form and online. In instances where consultations are being conducted and the subject matter has the potential to impact the use of the Irish language or the Irish language community themselves, consultation questionnaires, engagement sessions and associated documents will be conducted proactively through the medium of Irish/bilingually as part of the active offer.

15. Belfast City Council will adopt a new bilingual (Irish/English) corporate identity and the bilingual logo will become the new, proactive, de-facto council logo to be used comprehensively across all corporate branding. The English-only version of the logo will be available upon request. The same typeface and font-size will be used for both languages and the Irish text will be as visible and legible as the English text. The Council will promote the availability of the Irish language Council logo, use of bilingual English/Irish corporate signatures and Irish language City brand for use in correspondence, documentation, literature etc.
16. The Council will provide and promote interpretation and translation services across the Council.
17. The Council will codify the arrangements for the use of Irish in Council meetings through the Council's Standing Orders. Members and those addressing the Council in Irish will not be placed at a disadvantage for doing so. Members of the public addressing the Council will be given the option of addressing the Council in Irish at their earliest interaction with the Council.
18. The Council commits to publishing regular and often bilingual English / Irish content across all social media platforms. Information posts, marketing initiatives, community / service announcements will take place in Irish and in English. The relevant officer(s) will work in conjunction with the marketing team to develop a comprehensive strategy on how best to promote the Irish language across the Council's platforms. The Strategy will set out clear annual goals, increasing annually, around the % of social media posts produced.
19. The Council will develop and maintain a functioning bilingual (Irish/English) website. A choice of languages, English/Irish, will first appear on the Council home page and users will be asked which language they wish to view the site in. The Council website will also develop, host and regularly update a specific Irish language page, with information about the Irish language services available from Council, information on classes throughout the city and on Irish medium education.
20. The Council will promote Irish language events in the city and provide information in Irish about major upcoming events and the launch of any key strategic Council initiative.

21. The Council will provide staff with a code of courtesy for indigenous languages and provision of cultural awareness training.

Signage

22. The Council will adopt a dual-language approach to signage in all its facilities. These signs will also include pictorial and tactile (Braille) options where possible.

23. The Council will, as part of a rolling programme, prioritise the erection of dual language signage in all of its facilities through a categorisation approach as set out in Appendix One. For the purposes of this policy the boundaries of the Gaeltacht Quarter will be expanded to include the Glen Road and Shaw's Road. For the purposes of this Policy the Gaeltacht Quarter is delineated in the map at Appendix Two.

24. For the purposes of this Policy, signs includes all informational and directional signage within facilities, signage and names outside of buildings and also signs at outdoor facilities such as parks and allotments. It also includes interactive displays, educational aids, information leaflets and other resources.

25. Translation for signage will be produced by an independent accredited Irish language translator and will be consistent across Council facilities, and will have regard to the proper use of standardised forms.

26. The erection of street signs in Irish are dealt with separately under the Council's Dual Language Street Signs Policy which was adopted in October 2022.

Responsibility

27. Overseeing the implementation of this Policy is the responsibility of the City Solicitor and Chief Executive. Progress in relation to delivery of the Policy will be reported to the Council's Language Strategy Working Group and Strategic Policy and Resources Committee. However, each Council Department is expected to play its role in supporting the delivery of the objectives of this Policy.

28. Managers will ensure cognisance is taken of the Irish Language Policy and the need to promote the Irish language at the earliest stages of any policy-development process elsewhere in the Council.

29. The Council's Irish Language Community Stakeholder Forum comprising representatives from Irish language groups and other interested parties from across Belfast will be a key partner in the implementation of this Policy and the wider Language Strategy. This Forum will be provided with an annual progress report and given an opportunity to provide feedback on the implementation of the policy and wider Language Strategy. The Council will also liaise closely with Foras na Gaeilge and any Irish Language Commissioner once appointed.

Review

30. The Policy will be subject to review after 2 years.

31. This policy will be reviewed and updated in light of any direction given by central government in relation to the Irish language, and any best practice standards set by an Irish Language Commissioner once appointed.

Appendix 1

European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages ('ECRML')

The ECRML is a European treaty (CETS 148) adopted in 1992 under the auspices of the Council of Europe to protect and promote regional and minority languages in Europe. The Irish language is included in the Charter, which was ratified by the UK Government in 2001. The UK Government included the Irish language as one of three languages (Scottish Gaelic and Welsh being the other two) registered under Part III of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. The UK Government signed up to specific undertakings for measures in areas including education, administrative authorities, media, culture, economic and social life and transfrontier exchanges.

Article 10 of the ECRML refers specifically to Administrative Authorities which includes Local Councils and sets out those provisions within the ECRML to which councils must adhere. The obligations under the ECRML include the following:

To ensure that users of Irish may submit oral or written applications in Irish to the administrative authority;

To allow the administrative authorities to draft documents in Irish;

To use Irish in debates in their assemblies, without excluding, however, the use of the official language(s) of the State;

To use or adopt, if necessary in conjunction with the name in the official language(s) of traditional and correct forms of place-names in Irish. To ensure that users of Irish can submit a request for public services in Irish. To allow the use or adoption of family names in Irish upon request. In order to comply with the above councils are obliged to provide translation or interpretation as required.

Article 12 details the following obligations:-

- With regard to cultural activities and facilities, especially libraries, video libraries, cultural centres, museums, archives, academies, theatres and cinemas as well as literary work and film productions, vernacular forms of cultural expression, festivals and the cultural industries, including inter alia the use of new technologies –the Parties undertake, within the territory in which such languages are used and to the extent that the public authorities are competent, have power or play a role in this field:

- to encourage types of expression and initiative specific to regional or minority languages and foster the different means of access to works produced in these languages;
- to ensure that the bodies responsible for organising or supporting cultural activities of various kinds make appropriate allowance for incorporating the knowledge and use of regional or minority languages and cultures in the undertakings which they initiate or for which they provide backing;
- to promote measures to ensure that the bodies responsible for organising or supporting cultural activities have at their disposal staff who have a full command of the regional or minority language concerned as well as of the language(s) of the rest of the population;
- to encourage direct participation by representatives of the users of a given regional or minority language in providing facilities and planning cultural activities.

The European Charter is based on a concept of non-discrimination, that is, the majority language group is not discriminated against by the implementation of actions designed to promote and protect the minority indigenous languages.

“The Parties undertake to eliminate, if they have not yet done so, any unjustified distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference relating to the use of a regional or minority language and intended to discourage or endanger the maintenance or development of it. The adoption of special measures in favour of regional or minority languages aimed at promoting equality between the users of these languages and the rest of the population or which take due account of their specific conditions is not considered to be an act of discrimination against the users of more widely-used languages”

Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities

Unlike the European Charter (which focuses on languages) the Council of Europe’s Framework Convention focuses on linguistic minority groups. It does not place any directly enforceable obligation on local councils but includes a number of provisions in relation to minority languages.

Much of the discourse in recent years in relation to the Irish language in Northern Ireland has focused on the issue of minority rights and that Irish speakers are a distinct minority group within Northern Ireland. The Framework Convention, to which the United Kingdom

is a signatory, makes particular reference to the rights of minorities in terms of the use of minority language. The relevant provisions are set out below:

Article 10

“The Parties undertake to recognise that every person belonging to a national minority has the right to use freely and without interference his or her minority language, in private and in public, orally and in writing. In areas inhabited by persons belonging to national minorities traditionally or in substantial numbers, if those persons so request and where such a request corresponds to a real need, the Parties shall endeavour to ensure, as far as possible, the conditions which would make it possible to use the minority language in relations between those persons and the administrative authorities.”

Article 11

“The Parties undertake to recognise that every person belonging to a national minority has the right to use his or her surname (patronym) and first names in the minority language and the right to official recognition of them, according to modalities provided for in their legal system. The Parties undertake to recognise that every person belonging to a national minority has the right to display in his or her minority language signs, inscriptions and other information of a private nature visible to the public. In areas traditionally inhabited by substantial numbers of persons belonging to a national minority, the Parties shall endeavour, in the framework of their legal system, including, where appropriate, agreements with other States, and taking into account their specific conditions, to display traditional local names, street names and other topographical indications intended for the public also in the minority language when there is a sufficient demand for such indications.”

The Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities monitors the compliance of signatory nations with the Framework. One of the themes commented on throughout their reporting is how the use of the minority language in publicly visible signage can add to a sense of belonging for the minority language community.

“Multilingual cultural and touristic signage offers considerable potential for the use of topographical names in minority languages as it uses these languages and toponyms in a field (heritage preservation) that is appreciated in all parts of

society, raises awareness of the cultural contributions made by national minorities and has a practical function.”

Bulgaria, 4th, 2020, para. 141

“The display of bilingual or trilingual signposts as a demonstration of the diverse character of the region, traditionally and at present.”

Croatia, 4th, 2015, para. 66

-“Such bilingualism carries for persons belonging to national minorities as an affirmation of its presence as an appreciated and welcome part of society.”

Latvia, 3rd, 2018, para. 130

-“The Advisory Committee recalls the important symbolic value of bilingual topographical indications as affirmation that the presence of linguistic diversity is appreciated and that a given territory is shared in harmony by various linguistic groups.”

Netherlands, 3rd, 2019, para. 116

“...significant symbolic value for integration that bilingual or trilingual signposts, or the re-introduction of historical place names, carry for the population as an affirmation of the long-standing presence of national minorities as appreciated and welcome part of society.”

Georgia, 2nd, 2015, para. 85

The commentary above shows the positive impact of the use of minority languages in signage and how this can improve community relations and respect.

Belfast/Good Friday Agreement

Strand three of the Agreement contains a series of commitments in respect of economic, cultural and social issues, including a general provision relating to minority languages:

“All participants recognise the importance of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity, including in Northern Ireland, the Irish language, Ulster-Scots and the languages of the various ethnic communities, all of which are part of the cultural wealth of the island of Ireland.”

The Agreement commits the British Government to take resolute action to promote the language, to facilitate and encourage the use of the language in speech and writing in public and private life where there is appropriate demand and to seek to remove restrictions which would work against the maintenance and development of the language.

The St. Andrews Agreement 2006

The St. Andrews Agreement included a commitment to an Irish Language Act “based on the experience of Wales”. The introduction of this Act has been significantly delayed, however, the 2020 New Decade, New Approach agreement does include a commitment to legislate for the Irish language.

Foras na Gaeilge Guidance Document - Irish languages services in the new councils

In light of the review of public administration, in 2014 Foras na Gaeilge published a guidance document for the new local councils relating to best-practice in Irish language provision and protection. The document suggest the following areas of action in order for councils to be in line with international best practice:

- Branding
- Documents
- Council staff (audit & training and awareness)
- Correspondence
- Services for Irish language media
- Social media
- Council websites
- Translation and interpretation services
- Signage
- Support for schools
- Support for the public
- Development of an Irish language policy

Council of Europe’s 3rd Monitoring Report on the UK’s implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities

(Paragraph 147) - “The Advisory Committee was disconcerted to hear that some representatives of the authorities consider that promoting the use of the Irish language is discriminating against persons belonging to the majority population. Such statements are not in line with the principles of the Framework Convention... It also reiterates that... implementation of minority rights protected under the Framework Convention [is] not be considered as discriminating against other persons.”

(Paragraph 126 & 158) - “The Advisory Committee has been informed that, in some instances, the need for keeping good relations has been used as justification for not implementing provisions in favour of persons belonging to minorities, such as the erection of bilingual signs... Additionally, it finds it problematic that the official policy is to limit the erection of such signs to certain areas where the issue would not raise controversies. The Advisory Committee is concerned that this approach is not in line with the spirit of the Framework Convention... the aim of which is to value the use of minority languages... with a view to promoting more tolerance and intercultural dialogue in society.”

Committee of Experts 5th Monitoring Report on UK Compliance with UK undertakings of ECRML

“In July 2020, COMEX published their 5th monitoring report which measures the UK Government’s compliance with their undertakings to Irish under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Language. They published 20 recommendations which would constitute the fulfilment of those undertakings in their entirety. Among those recommendations, there were recommendations to;

h. Ensure that users of Irish may submit oral or written applications in Irish to local branches of the national authorities, the authorities of Northern Ireland, local authorities and public service providers.

Introduce simultaneous translation facilitating the full use of Irish in the Northern Ireland Assembly and in local councils.

k. Facilitate the adoption and use, by local and regional authorities as well as public service providers, of place names in Irish.

The vast majority of these recommendations remain unfulfilled or unresolved; through the adoption of a progressive, Irish language policy, the council have a chance to align with recommendations set out by international experts.”

Department for Communities Guidance Document for Local Authorities on the implementation of the European Charter for Regional Minority Languages (2016)

“The adoption of special measures in favour of regional or minority languages aimed at promoting equality between the users of these languages and the rest of the population or which take due account of their specific conditions is not considered to be an act of discrimination against the users of more widely-used languages.”

Human Rights Commission - ‘Minority Language Rights: The Irish language and Ulster Scots, Briefing paper on the implications of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, European Convention on Human Rights and other instruments’

“... the Commission has drawn attention to the fact that there is no “right to be (sic) offended” by another party exercising a right. This is a general principle of freedom of expression (European Convention on Human Rights -ECHR Article 10, which must be read in conjunction with ECHR Article 14 on non-discrimination on grounds that include language). The Commission is aware of arguments that there are ‘sensitivities’ regarding the Irish language. In general restricting use or promotion of Irish to accommodate the ‘sensitivities’ of others would be incompatible with freedom of expression.”

Department for Culture, Arts and Leisure: Report on Consultation for Draft Irish Language Act (2015)

"ASSESSMENT OF IMPACT ON EQUALITY

4.4 The available evidence suggests that those speaking and possessing some knowledge of Irish are more likely to be Catholic, nationalist, young, without a disability, with dependants and single. There were no differences in relation to

gender and racial group. No data is available in relation to sexual orientation.

4.5 It's DCALS view that establishing Irish language legislation will have a positive impact on Irish speakers and therefore indirectly on Catholics, nationalists, single people, younger people, people without a disability and people with dependants. In DCALs view there are no discriminatory or adverse impacts.

ASSESSMENT OF IMPACT ON GOOD RELATIONS

4.6 DCAL considered that the introduction of an Irish Language Bill has the potential to improve good relations, as it will give the Irish language more equality and accessibility platform for all sections of the community."

New Decade, New Approach Agreement (2020)

The New Decade, New Approach Agreement was reached in 2020 in order to restore power sharing at Stormont. One of the key components of this was an agreement to bring forward legislative protection for the Irish language. This included a provision for the appointment of an Irish Language Commissioner who will develop a set of best practice language standards which will apply to public authorities in relation to the promotion of Irish and the use of Irish in their services.

Recommendations for an Irish Language Strategy – Report of the Expert Advisory Panel

The New Decade, New Approach Agreement also committed to the development of an Irish Language Strategy, as distinct from an Irish Language Act. The aim of the Strategy would be to enhance and protect the development of the Irish language over the next twenty years. To this end, the Department for Communities commissioned an Expert Advisory Panel Report on an Irish Language Strategy as the first stage in a policy development process.

The Expert Advisory Report makes a range of recommendations about the Irish language and public services including:

- That comprehensive Irish language legislation is enacted;
- That local authorities develop Irish language policies and strategies;

- That Irish speakers are available to avail of government services through the medium of Irish and that these should be of the same standard as the service provided in English;
- That all public bodies take resolute action to promote Irish internally in their work and to maximise the amount of services available through Irish;
- That publicly available forms are available in Irish;
- That public bodies have bilingual Irish/English corporate identity;
- That public buildings have bilingual Irish/English signage inside and outside the building;
- That the use of Irish is maximised on the public-facing websites of public bodies;
- That key corporate documents are made available in Irish;
- That Council's provide a simultaneous translation service and anything said in Irish in meetings is accurately reported in Irish in reports and minutes;
- That local authorities should have due regard to the needs of Irish speakers when developing local development plans;
- That local authorities adopt street naming and townland policies in line with international best practice;
- That local authorities undertake tourism and cultural initiatives through Irish.

Appendix One

Categorisation of Council Facilities for Signage

Category	Priority Level	Types of Facilities	Factors defining priority
1 (a)	Top Priority, to be completed first	<p>All BCC Facilities in the Gaeltacht Quarter;</p> <p>Parks, Playgrounds, Walks, Pitches & Local Leisure Centres in close proximity to Gaelscoils;</p> <p>City-Centre Facilities (City Hall, 2RA, Belfast Stories etc).</p> <p>City-Wide Family Resources (Belfast Zoo; Belfast Castle etc).</p> <p>City-wide resources being upgraded or New Facilities being built will automatically come into this category</p> <p>City Centre Public Realm Signage (street signposts)</p> <p>*Where a facility ie a park, includes other Council facilities, all BCC facilities on that site will be upgraded at the same time (Example: Waterworks Park, Playground, MUGA Pitch, Community Gardens, Walk, Toilets).</p>	<p>Census Demographics (Some ability in Irish %) more than 15% "have some ability" as per Ward</p> <p>Proximity to Gaelscoil / Irish language group</p>
1 (b)	To be completed after all Category 1(a) facilities have been upgraded	<p>a) Remaining facilities in Wards agreed for Category 1 (Car-parks, Public toilets, Open-Spaces, Greenways / Hills, Graveyards, Community Centres, Recycling Centres / stations etc.)</p>	<p>Census Demographics (Some ability in Irish %) more than 15% "have some ability" as per Ward</p> <p>Proximity to Gaelscoil / Irish language group</p>
2 (a)	Medium-term urgency	<p>a) Parks, Playgrounds, Walks, Pitches & Leisure Centres in Wards with people between 15%-5% with "some ability in Irish" in 2021 Census</p>	<p>Census Demographics (Wards: Some ability in Irish 15%-5%)</p>
2 (b)	Medium-term urgency (2)	<p>Parks, Playgrounds, Walks, Pitches & Leisure Centres in Wards/areas with people between 10%-</p>	<p>Census Demographics (Wards: Some ability in Irish 15%-10%)</p>

		15% with "some ability in Irish" in 2021 Census but which may form part of a larger area where there is little knowledge of Irish	
2 (c)	Long-term priorities	a) Remaining facilities in Wards identified for Category 3 (Car-parks, Public toilets, Open-Spaces, Greenways / Hills, Graveyards, Community Centres, Dumps, Recycling Centres / stations etc.)	Census Demographics (Wards: Some ability in Irish 15%-5%)
3	Non-priority Facilities, to be actively considered when requiring a refurbishment	a) Facilities (excluding city-wide resources) in Wards with less than 5% of people with "some ability in Irish" as per 2021 census. b) Bins	Census Demographics (Wards: Some ability in Irish: Less than 5%)

Appendix Two

Map of Gaeltacht Quarter

