

TWENTY YEAR STRATEGY FOR THE IRISH LANGUAGE

**Short discussion paper for the Advisory Group
(translation)**

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CAPACITY, RIGHT, OPPORTUNITY AND LEADERSHIP

OVERVIEW

I welcome the preparation of the twenty year strategy for the Irish language based on the objectives in the Government's policy statement on the language published in 2006.

The preparation and implementation of this strategy may be one of the most important exercises in relation to the future of the Irish language since the foundation of the State, if it entails the production and execution of a new agreed road map which will ensure the future of the national language of this country.

It is difficult for anyone now to have an accurate image of this country in twenty years' time: major changes will occur in every facet of life, including economic affairs, development, employment, technology, migration, community, population, social and other matters. Some of those changes will be within our own control, others will arise unexpectedly. Various changes will be as a consequence of political factors within the state, of North-South relations, or of European and world affairs.

The language strategy must engage with that new, as yet unknown, lifestyle and must attempt to shape the language factors associated with it.

I believe that it is of key importance that the strategy be fully comprehensive and cross-departmental so as to have the maximum effect and that it should include specific goals which will be ambitious yet achievable.

It is essential that the strategy identifies determined, prudent and balanced approaches which will bring the language from the margins to the mainstream of society. However, it will be crucial that the strategy is not too rigid or unyielding which would prevent adjustments as issues arise which are at present unexpected or unimaginable.

I understand that the objective of the strategy is to have 250,000 people speaking Irish daily in twenty years time. This is, without doubt, an ambitious challenge, the achievement of which will require an annual incremental increase of 6% from the current level of Irish speakers, year on year, for each of the 20 years. It also requires that at the end of the 20 years, the number of people speaking Irish on a daily basis will have increased 350% from the present level.

On the other hand, there are over 450,000 people who stated in the 2006 census that they use Irish on a daily basis within the education system

but who don't use it at all outside that sphere. If the strategy could assist in influencing some of this group to use Irish more frequently, on a daily basis, it would be a significant achievement in this project.

Therefore, I believe that the strategy should outline policies to develop language capacity, rights, opportunities and leadership to ensure a continuous increase in the Irish speaking community.

In general, I imagine:

- that an action plan for the implementation of the strategy with clear goals and appropriate timescales ought to be a core element of the project;
- that the responsibility for the implementation of the strategy ought to be vested at the most senior level of the state sector, in a High Level Group or its equivalent with the necessary authority, power and resources for the task;
- that the strategy ought to design a strong, independent mechanism to monitor the implementation of the strategy which would report regularly on the progress or lack thereof of the process;
- that concerns regarding the need for legislative or institutional change to ensure the proper implementation of the strategy should not limit, obstruct or interfere with the preparation of the most appropriate strategy for this matter of particular importance.

STATUS

The status of the Irish language is clearly defined in the constitution and it is now recognised as an official working language of the European Union.

There is a significant difference between the officially recognised position of the language and the statistical reality in relation to the capacity and use of the language as portrayed in official figures.

However, a vast array of official opportunities and advantages have been created by the state for the language over the years with the objective of ensuring its survival as a living language and its more widespread use within society.

If all those official opportunities and advantages created over the years by the State for the language were listed, it would seem difficult to believe that the Irish language could be under pressure or endangered in any way.

It ought to be a core component of the strategy that all elements of the State's language support system should function to full effect, that the results of those efforts ought to be measured and evaluated regularly, and that they ought to be amended when such were proven to be necessary.

RIGHT TO ACQUIRE AND RIGHT TO USE

I believe that policies ought to be developed within the strategy to ensure that individuals would be afforded the right and the opportunity to acquire the language (as native speakers in the Gaeltacht and/or through the education system) and, consequently to use that acquired language in society, particularly with the state sector.

RIGHT TO ACQUIRE – native speakers

I would propose that the strategy address the systematic and institutional changes required in order to provide the greatest possible element of support for the language in Gaeltacht areas where the language remains a living community language in order to ensure:

- that the choice of raising children with Irish as their native language will continue, that the number of people who make this choice will increase and that the appropriate support will be made available to those people to implement that choice;
- that the decline in the use of Irish as a means of communication within Gaeltacht communities is halted, particularly among young people, and that usage of Irish as a living community language is increased again gradually;
- that issues associated with the Irish language in the education system in Gaeltacht areas be dealt with as an urgent priority and that all state services in the Gaeltacht be made available through Irish;
- that the connections between community, employment and economic development in the Gaeltacht and their influence on language viability be recognised.

RIGHT TO ACQUIRE - Education system

There is widespread acceptance now that the education system does not ensure that all pupils who leave school have a basic fluency in Irish.

I stated in my Office's 2004 annual report that I believed that there was an urgent need for a comprehensive and impartial review of every aspect of the learning and teaching of Irish in the educational system with a view to ensuring that the continuous and substantial state investment in Irish would mean that students, having spent thirteen years learning the language, acquire a reasonable fluency or command of the language before leaving school.

I also said that:

"I believe that it is necessary to look closely at every aspect of language learning – taking into account such matters as teacher training, the curriculum, textbooks and teaching resources, support services, teaching methods, inspection systems and examinations. The aim should be to develop an integrated and progressive system which will ensure competency in the language in return for the substantial state investment in this area of education."

I have not changed my mind on this issue since then.

I do not believe that this vitally important issue can be addressed by reference only to schools which teach through the medium of Irish. Varying strategies are required for schools which operate through the medium of Irish (in the Gaeltacht and outside it) and for other schools throughout the country which function through the medium of English. We must remain conscious of the fact that c.93% of Irish schoolchildren are not educated through Irish.

It is estimated that approximately 1,500 hours of tuition in Irish is provided over a thirteen year period to students from their first day in primary school until they complete their secondary level education. Millions of euro are invested annually in the teaching of Irish in the education system (in line with the teaching of English and other subjects) when account is taken of the percentage of the teaching timetable dedicated to the language from junior infants in primary school to Leaving Certificate level in secondary school.

This is the most important and most expensive element of the State's promotion of the language. It would appear very reasonable and sensible that the underlying policy objective ought to be that pupils would have acquired sufficient fluency in Irish on leaving the education system to make the language a useful method of communication for them in society. It would be difficult to fathom the logic of a policy that would fall short of this – enough fluency in the language to obtain marks in an examination but without sufficient fluency or ability to use the language in communications.

RIGHT TO USE

If it is state policy to support the right and opportunity to acquire the language (as a native speaker in the Gaeltacht and/or through the education system), it follows naturally therefore that the opportunity to use the language ought to be provided to those who would choose to use the language in communications in society in general and with the state sector and its organisations in particular.

The capacity and competence of the state in the provision of language usage opportunities must be increased. There is no doubt whatsoever that the ability of the state to provide services through Irish fell drastically in the 30 year period since the abolition of the Irish language requirement for civil service appointments. I have said in the past that I do not believe that the system designed to replace the “compulsory Irish” system – in which bonus marks were to be awarded for competence in both Irish and English for appointments and promotions in the civil service – was properly implemented, or in cases where it was implemented, that it achieved worthwhile results.

The Official Languages Act and provisions of other enactments relating to the status or use of the Irish language exist to deal with the provision of state services through Irish. It must, however, be admitted that the threshold for the supply of services through Irish is quite low and too often the role of the language in the provision of such services to customers is perceived as being marginal and is provided reluctantly.

I referred to this issue in my Office’s 2007 annual report where I stated that:

“I am not at all making the case for a return to compulsory Irish for state employees but I do believe that a policy of compulsory English is not adequate either when members of the public deal with state bodies...It does not appear now that the current recruitment and training regime in the state sector is sufficient to ensure that an adequate number of staff are competent in the Irish language so as to be able to provide its services through Irish as well as English.”

I have suggested that a “rebalancing” action may be required to ensure an adequate number of staff with competence in Irish in the civil and public service. A system to help achieve cross-community rebalancing through positive discrimination was found for the Police Service of Northern Ireland as a result of the Patten report. A similar effort would be required here, even temporarily, to have a positive effect in rebalancing staffing levels in the state sector to ensure sufficient staff with competence in Irish and in English.

Such a move should have no additional cost implications; in fact, it would be more economical for the state sector to employ people with competence in both Irish and English than the current system, which in many state organisations requires resorting to external commercial translation or training agencies.

At the moment, the development of language capacity in the state sector is generally addressed by the up-skilling of staff through training courses. Although this is in itself a commendable action, it does not always appear to achieve the desired level of fluency. It may, as a result, be an expensive exercise which does not always offer a guaranteed return. In fact, international statistics would suggest that hundreds of hours of training, up to six months' fulltime study, would be required in order to achieve the linguistic levels needed to provide a service to customers in the acquired language which would be equivalent to that of the mother tongue.

I would suggest that this matter might be dealt with more appropriately as part of the recruitment process and that this concept ought to be developed and confirmed in the twenty year strategy. Even in periods where economic restraints require embargos on new appointments to the civil service, recruitment will nonetheless be required to supplement staffing levels due to resignation, retirement or other factors.

Such an adjustment would also have further positive effect in the education system. If the acquisition of competence in Irish as well as English was perceived as providing an added employment advantage to those who achieved that additional skill, it would be an additional encouragement to students, teachers and parents.

In this way also, the link could be clarified and reinforced between the learning of Irish in the education system and the subsequent use of the language afterwards in communications generally, and particularly in the state sector.

It would be futile to make the case to students that a language which cannot be used in dealing with the state sector should be seen nonetheless as a living, modern language outside the school gates. A language which is abandoned by the state's administrative system is a language without status – insignificant, marginalised and in the halfpenny place.

LANGUAGE LEGISLATION

Although the Official Languages Act was enacted in 2003, it was July 2006 before all of its main provisions took effect.

By mid-2008, regulations in relation to section 9 of the Act were yet to be introduced and language schemes were yet to be confirmed for three out of every four public bodies (although schemes were confirmed in many of the major organisations which have the greatest interface with the majority of the population.)

I think it would be appropriate that the Official Languages Act be reviewed in 2013, ten years after its enactment.

I believe that such a review would lead to the strengthening of provisions of the legislation. The Act should by that time be well embedded in the state sector and any weaknesses, if they existed, which ought and needed to be amended could be identified. It may appear appropriate then to include provisions in relation to the proactive supply of services through Irish, to add additional direct obligations under the legislation and to make other appropriate amendments.

The functions, powers and authority of An Coimisinéir Teanga under the Act are similar to that of other ombudsman offices and compliance agencies and, consequently, are adequate at present for the work in hand. It may be appropriate to review this in 2013 when the legislation will be 10 years in existence and to consider whether sufficient resources – personnel, financial and others – available at that stage to the Office are adequate to fulfil the statutory obligations laid down by the Oireachtas.

USING RIGHTS

Is it sufficient for the 20 year strategy to gauge and plan the different policies that would be essential to ensure that one would have the right and opportunity to acquire Irish (as a native speaker in the Gaeltacht and/or through the education system) and to then ensure the right to use the acquired language in society, in particular within the state sector?

I believe that new strategies are also required to bridge the gap between existing language rights and the practical use of the language.

The strategy needs to stress the importance of leadership from elected members of the public, particularly members of the Houses of the Oireachtas, and should identify policies to move the language from its marginal position in public discourse at present to a more central role in debates and other proceedings in parliamentary affairs.

Section 6 of the Official Languages Act confirms the right to use either official language in the Houses of the Oireachtas or in its committees, sub committees and joint committees. However, almost all debates take place in English at present, something which reflects the significant divide between existing language rights and the use of those rights. Nonetheless,

the current Taoiseach and leaders of the main opposition parties, all of whom are Irish speakers, have created an opportunity recently for progress in this area and have laid a foundation which has the potential for development.

RIGHTS AWARENESS

I believe that a major, continuous language awareness campaign is needed to increase the public's awareness of the importance of our national language to our identity.

I believe that part of this campaign should be firmly embedded in the education system to increase the understanding of the importance of the language to the next generation, in the same way as emphasis is placed on environmental issues, awareness of climate change, the energy crisis etc.

This type of language awareness campaign ought to be an element of lifelong learning with clear messages to influence the public in general about the importance of the language.

A SINGLE UNIFIED STRATEGY

The state's language policies and actions work individually and separately instead of as one coherent, strategic unit.

It is not always evident that the support given to the Irish language in the education system, in broadcasting on RTE Raidió na Gaeltachta and TG4, in the development of the Gaeltacht, in providing state services through Irish, in publications, literature, the arts and in a multiplicity of other ways is all part of the same project, or even that it ought to be part of the same project.

I think that the strategy should develop policies to build on the principles such as those suggested by the OECD in seeking collaboration between public bodies to achieve better results and that each individual action which has language promotion at its heart would be seen as part of an overall agreed, multi-faceted language project. Partnerships could also be encouraged with other stakeholders who support the language outside the remit of the state sector including the Gaelic Athletic Association, Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann and other organisations.

The language situation, and the public's confidence in its future, would be enhanced if the 20 year strategy ensured that so many single, independent actions were united in one agreed major national effort.

It should be clear from the strategy that the Irish language is part of our national identity and that no independent, sovereign nation has ever, of its own accord, abandoned such a unique and integral tenet of its heritage.

In relation to timescales, I imagine that if the strategy is published at some stage during 2009 that consideration should be given to its implementation from the beginning of 2010 up to 2030 which would allow some time for preparation for its introduction. It would also be advisable to identify key performance indicators to be achieved over periods of six years:

- 2016 (to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the Easter Rising)
- 2022 (to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the state)
- 2028 (to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the first Gaeltacht boundaries)

CARPE DIEM

Finally, I think that now is the time to act to ensure that a visionary, long-term, ambitious strategy is created for the Irish language. Certainly much has been achieved in recent times particularly in relation to the status of the language and the creation of usage and employment opportunities for Irish language speakers, in the public sector and in broadcasting especially. Indeed, it could be said that the Irish language is currently at the heart of society in a much more overt way than at any time since the establishment of the State. Nonetheless, this progress has been somewhat limited and we must strive to achieve the *ne plus ultra*. We must, in particular, build on this progress through creating new recruitment systems which ensure that more effective ways are developed to use Irish in the public sector.

I will be delighted to develop the points made in this discussion paper when I meet the Advisory Group as arranged in September 2008. In the meantime, I would like to express my appreciation for the invitation to contribute to the deliberations of the group and, in particular, express my thanks for any consideration given to the matters addressed in this document.

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