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Introduction

The Community Relations Council (CRC) is primarily concerned with promoting Community and Good Relations and the development of a shared and peaceful future. In recent years, CRC has actively sought to bring pressure to bear on all public agencies to take seriously the implications of ‘A Shared Future’, which has tasked government departments and agencies to develop and implement policies that establish **‘over time of a normal, civic society, in which all individuals are considered as equals, where differences are resolved through dialogue in the public sphere, and where all people are treated impartially. A society where there is equity, respect for diversity and a recognition of our interdependence’**.

Council welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this consultation on proposals for the protection, development and maintenance of the Irish Language in Northern Ireland. CRC views the Irish language as an integral element of the rich cultural tapestry which we all share. Our aspiration is to include the Irish language as an important part of our intercultural heritage, as a living contribution to our quality of life, open to everyone, including by those who currently have no knowledge or connection with the language.

There are currently many interest groups within the Irish Language community – those who have limited knowledge, those actively living the language on a daily basis in small cohesive communities, a growing number of parents choosing to educate their children through the medium of Irish, those who would like more opportunities to engage with the Irish language and those who have spoken, nurtured and promoted the Irish language throughout many generations. There are also many who have never engaged with the language. The Census figures and the NILTS in the consultation document reveal a larger proportion of Catholics familiar with and using the language, than their

protestant counterparts. Yet there are Irish language organizations responsible for promoting the Irish language and some of their development work is carried out on a cross community basis e.g. ULTACH and Gael Linn's language classes. Gordon McCoy carried out an interesting piece of work in the late nineties *'Protestant learners of Irish in Northern Ireland'* which explored issues around why they wanted to learn Irish, the delay in being introduced to the language via educational structures, individuals not knowing where to go to learn the language, misconceptions by other Irish language speakers as to your identity, and a general love of the language and wanting more opportunities to learn and live the language. This work needs to be built upon in order to encourage people, who have an interest in learning Irish to be able to access it and use it as a living language. .

Too often the issue of language has become part of a general historic antagonism, in which language itself is reduced to an emblem of cultural resistance or aggression. As we move forward to a shared future, a new approach to language should herald a fresh approach to cultural diversity in which we move away from exclusion and public neutrality and move towards inclusion of key aspects of identity. The task of political leadership in divided societies is to turn issues previously understood as the property of 'one side into opportunities to establish new links, partnerships and new appreciations for the entire community. The quid pro quo of rights in this area is that our languages are understood as the possession of the whole community, without violence and aggression or particular political connotation, and that steps to embed rights should be accompanied by active efforts to ensure real opportunities to participate in language activities for all. These should include opportunities for school adult and public education. Language therefore presents an opportunity to promote a new beginning in cultural diversity and inter-cultural engagement.

Language is an issue of cultural rights, cultural identity and inter-cultural communication. It is important to establish a basis whereby language speakers can function fully in all aspects of citizenship, in which due respect is paid to the cultural significance of language in the life, culture and history of a people or place and where the language does not act as an obstacle between people but a tool for better and deeper communication in a shared future.

With this in mind, CRC believes that the new act should draw on best international practice and law, applied to Northern Ireland circumstances.

1. At international level there are a number of legal protections for minority languages i.e. the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML) and the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (the government has signed up to both). CRC believes that these should guide government action in designing a new law.
2. At a local level the language has progressed over recent years with the Education Orders 1989/1998, the Good Friday Agreement/Belfast Agreement, and the establishment of Foras na Gaeilge in 1999. Furthermore the British Government

recently committed itself to bring forward this legislation during the St Andrew's Agreement in 2006. As this represents political consensus in Northern Ireland, such agreements that were reached under the St. Andrews Agreement should be endorsed.

3. Irish in Northern Ireland should not be treated in a manner less favourable than the treatment accorded to Gaelic in Scotland or Welsh in Wales. In neither case is there any evidence that legal support for these languages has further segregated society, nor impacted on access to the economy. Council acknowledges that comparisons between Irish, Gaelic and Welsh are imprecise and that practice in one place cannot be applied without proper consideration of the Northern Ireland context. Implementation issues will need to be addressed within a clear framework that builds on international and domestic best practice and contributes to a shared and equal future.

Language legislation is intended to support speakers, sustain cultural identity and promote cultural diversity. It must therefore not be confined to a ghetto of 'consenting adults in private' but be offered in the public space. In consequence, it must be accessible to people across Northern Ireland, promoting engagement for non-speakers through translation, normalisation and familiarity with common settings. Attention should be paid that language is not promoting greater segregation or subtle territorial segregation. In the Northern Ireland context, the promotion of inclusive engagement with language is easier in non-territorial spaces such as education, government and broadcasting and more complex in issues such as streetnames and signage. In the absence of political consensus, bilingual signage is likely to become a, more or less subtle, form of territorial marking. This has become the case in other parts of Europe (eg Austria, Belgium). Thought should be given on when, where and how bilingual street signage is to be applied across Northern Ireland. It may be that a tri-lingual approach (including Ulster Scots) would improve the public acceptability of such a venture. CRC believes that laws should seek to promote universal rather than partisan or sectional solutions to this challenge, and move towards an equity for minority languages that are sustainable. Given the depth of antagonism in Northern Ireland and the association of culture and religion with 'sides' in conflict, there is a risk that any action in this area will be divisive and deeply controversial. This cannot justify inaction or timidity, but it should shape the manner or way in which the challenges of change are approached. In the view of CRC changes in approach to the Irish language should be cast within a general commitment to sharing, diversity and tolerance, on the principle of non-violence and equality. The government should make clear that this approach will characterise all of its interventions in this area, with the goal of creating a warm house for all. In pursuit of this goal government should agree:

1. A willingness to engage with all cultural matters on the basis of similar principles. The principles of Equity, Diversity and Interdependence (EDI) should be used as a practical framework.
2. A clear practical commitment to public education aimed at people who are currently not using the language.

Pursued in this way, it must be made clear that legislation in no way encroaches on the rights of the English speaking community; rather, it is an opportunity to embrace another element of our rich culture.

CRC wants the legislation to broaden acceptance, respect and knowledge of the language and encourage a new audience and appreciation. The development phase of the action plan for the implementation of the legislation needs to devise actions that will enhance an understanding of the language and help individuals and groups relate to it more positively. There are many ways of achieving this i.e. the education system, arts and cultural activities, cultural centers e.g. museums and those involved in linguistic policy and promotion should be asked to advise accordingly.

Beyond these priorities, and a commitment to the principle that any act must meet the international obligations for minority languages as set out in the Charter and the Framework and meet Human Rights standards, CRC is not in a position to determine the content of the final act. Delivered in this way, this debate offers an opportunity for a new cultural maturity in Northern Ireland with the potential to found good relations on addressing real issues rather than avoiding difficult conversations. Council will contribute to the debate in the next round of submissions and hope that government and all those with an interest in language issues can find a solution that encourages intercultural dialogue rather than damage it.