



**Draft Belfast City Council Policy on Linguistic Diversity
consultation response: Altram: guth na luathbhlianta (voice of the
early years): Iúil 2017 (July 2017)**





'All languages are the expression of a collective identity and of a distinct way of perceiving and describing reality and must therefore be able to enjoy the conditions required for their development in all functions'. Article 7 of the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This paper is a response by Altram - the organisation representing the Irish-medium early years care and education sector in Northern Ireland - to the consultation document issued by Belfast City Council in May 2017 on the draft Policy on Linguistic Diversity. Throughout this response, Altram has used the terms 'Irish-medium' and 'Irish immersion' interchangeably. Immersion bilingual education has been defined as: 'Schooling where some or most subject content is taught through a second language. Pupils in immersion education are usually native speakers of a majority language, and the teaching is carefully structured to their needs'. (Baker, C, 2000, *The Care and Education of Young Bilinguals*, p 175).
- 1.2 Information on Altram's aims, objectives and work within and for the Irish immersion early years sector is attached at Appendix One.
- 1.3 Altram welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation and believes a robust linguistic diversity policy will enhance Belfast's efforts to move towards being an inclusive, diverse and shared city, welcoming and promoting many languages. This includes local minority languages as well as languages from our growing incoming communities.



2. Overview of Irish medium education

2.1 Altram, whose role is to support early years Irish immersion education is pleased to take part in this important consultation and to contribute to public dialogue on linguistic development and diversity and language rights. In a monolingual society, Irish immersion education is one of the few opportunities for children from monolingual families – particularly in areas of disadvantage - to develop fluency in a second language. Only a small percentage of parents of children in Irish immersion education are Irish speakers.

2.2 The Irish-medium education sector is growing, developing and thriving as parents recognise the benefits of bilingualism including:

- Wider communication (extended family, community, national links, employment)
- Literacy in two languages
- Broader enculturation
- Greater tolerance and less racism
- Thinking benefits (e.g. creativity, sensitivity to communication)
- Raised self esteem
- Security in identity
- Increased curricular achievement
- Ease in learning a third language
- Economic and employment benefits

(Baker, C, 2000, The Care and Education of Young Bilinguals, p 11)

2.3 Irish-medium early years settings are disproportionately located in areas of disadvantage - 21 of the 34 Sure Start areas contain an Irish-medium setting and some contain more than one.



2.4 The first Irish-medium pre-school in the north of Ireland was established in Belfast in 1978. By 1994, the number of Irish-medium pre-school settings had risen to 11. During 2015-2016 academic year the figures were:

Early years settings

The sector is made up of 61 groups across the region, including crèche and parent and toddler projects, playgroups, preschool and afterschool projects.

Primary schools

Schools: 28

Irish-medium units within primary schools: 8

Secondary schools

Schools: 2

Irish-medium units within secondary schools: 3

Number of children attending Irish-medium early years settings: 1157

Number of children attending Irish-medium primary schools: 3665

Number of children attending Irish-medium secondary education: 818

Belfast City Council's consultation document lists 3,000 children as receiving education through the medium of Irish in Belfast.

2.5 The Irish-medium early years sector faces some challenges common to the English-medium sector. This includes the recent (April 2016) introduction of a compulsory new early years qualification – the OCN level 5 – which is expensive (£1,800) - and early years staff are often having to self-finance to attend. This intensive training programme is based on a monolingual template with no reference at all to immersion pedagogy.

2.6 There are additional factors which are more challenging in Irish-medium, which can have a significant impact on the sector's ability to deliver. They include a frequent failure to appropriately factor in the needs of the sector in policy changes or initiatives or in policy guidance material or documentation - a lack of knowledge or awareness about Irish-medium within interfacing or support agencies. This is reflected in the current draft PfG 2016-2021 which includes no reference to Irish immersion education. The greatest challenge relates to issues of accreditation and training where the minimum standards framework is based entirely on English-medium, monolingual settings.



2.7 Altram has developed a strategic State of the Sector report into Irish-medium early years education which has identified an appropriate training framework for the sector taking cognisance of the above issues. This report contains key recommendations including:

- That Altram develops a time-bound Workforce Development and Training Plan
- That Altram develops a Workforce Strategy for the Irish-medium early years sector
- That Altram, with strategic partners, develops a Sustainability Framework
- That the Irish-medium early years sector develops a communication strategy
- That Altram considers the need for objective research into factors that contribute to positive outcomes for children in Irish-medium early years settings, with particular emphasis on language acquisition



3. Overview of policy context

3.1 The following list gives a flavour of many diverse policy areas on which Irish-medium early years provision impacts and which will be enhanced by a robust Belfast City Council Policy on Linguistic Diversity within Belfast City Council which meets the needs of Irish speakers, particularly children in Irish-medium education and users of other minority languages.

- Draft PfG 2016-2021 outlines 14 outcomes, including the outcomes: ‘we have a more equal society’ and ‘we are a shared society that respects diversity’. A robust Belfast City Council Policy on Linguistic Diversity will help the Northern Ireland Executive to deliver these key outcomes.
- Languages for the Future (Department of Education, 2012) recommendations:
 - 2.1 ‘That pupils have the opportunity to study at least two languages in addition to their mother tongue from the earliest possible age;
 - 2.2 That the teaching and learning of languages in pre-primary/nursery provision be encouraged;
 - 11.2. That the provisions of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, ratified by the government of the United Kingdom, are fully applied and that, as an officially recognised indigenous language on an equal footing with Scottish Gaelic and Welsh, Irish should be afforded the full status and privileges that such standing entails.’
- The requirement imposed on the Executive by the St Andrew’s Agreement Act 2006 ‘to protect and enhance the development of the Irish language’.
- The DCAL draft Irish Language Strategy 2012 requirement, which identifies ‘family transmission’ as the first of six key areas for action where real progress can be made to protect, enhance and develop the Irish language.
- Together Building a United Community (TBUC): Key Priority 4: Our Cultural Expression: ‘...we are committed to developing an open and tolerant society in which everyone is free to mark and celebrate their identity, or indeed identities, in a peaceful and respectful manner’. In addition, TBUC states that: ‘...we recognise that cultural identity and expression can have significant community relations impacts both between the two main traditions here and within the context of increasing diversity’. A healthy Irish language sector is a key expression of cultural identity and expression for Irish speakers and learners. Underlying principles for this strategy include: respect; tolerance; inter-dependence; inclusion and diversity, all of which a healthy and sufficiently resourced Irish language community can deliver and promote.



- The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, ratified by the United Kingdom government, officially recognises that indigenous languages within Ireland need to be placed on an equal footing with Scottish Gaelic and Welsh. The Charter stipulates that the Irish language should be afforded the full status and privileges that such standing entails.
- In 2007, the European Commission produced a *Final Report of the High Level Group on Multilingualism*. This report argued that the fact that multilingualism has been made an EU policy area is a clear indication of a heightened awareness on the part of the Commission of the increasing importance of the multilingual challenge for Europe.

3.2 As evidenced throughout this document, supporting the Irish language will help to deliver on key agreements aimed at dealing with the past and moving Northern Ireland toward a more cohesive, united and shared society. The TBUC strategy outlines a vision of a society where ‘cultural expression is celebrated and embraced’. Recognition, use and promotion of the Irish language is key to this vision being realised.

3.3 Altram believes that Belfast City Council, in considering the development of policy and programmes relating to linguistic diversity in Northern Ireland, should have due regard to the undertakings in respect of language (and the Irish language in particular) which the United Kingdom Government and Northern Ireland Executive have entered into, particularly since the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. These involve commitments at United Nations, European and national levels.

3.4 More information continues to become available from local and global sources about the long-term benefits of quality early years services, to the economic and social development of individuals and their communities. Bilingualism gives added value - helping to develop children’s social, communication, cognitive and creative skills in their immediate pre-school year as evidenced throughout this response. It is vital that this that this crucial area of work is supported, promoted and nourished at strategic policy and government levels.

3.5 Further detail of the relevant policy framework can be found at Appendix Two.



4. Overview of Altram response to Belfast City Council's Policy on Linguistic Diversity consultation

4.1 Altram welcomes the consultation document as a positive attempt by Council to formulate a coherent policy aiming to improve and strengthen language rights and linguistic diversity within the city which could contribute to building a more culturally diverse society. Altram believes a robust policy has the potential to provide protection for Irish speakers and speakers of other minority languages across the city. Altram welcomes Council's efforts to update its 2006 Language Policy and to respond to increasing linguistic diversity within the city, including a vibrant and burgeoning Irish language sector.

4.2 Northern Ireland is the only part of the United Kingdom (apart from England) which does not have a specific language act – the Welsh language has had protection since 1993 and Scots Gaelic since 2005. In January 2016, the Northern Ireland Executive refused to adopt Acht na Gaeilge/the Irish Language Act. This omission is not referenced in the consultation document – section 3.4 – Central Government Strategies – creating a significant void. There is a risk that Belfast City Council's Policy on Linguistic Diversity will be operating in a vacuum without a strategic, underpinning Acht na Gaeilge/Irish Language Act. It is vital that this is referenced as a core aim within Belfast City Council's Policy on Linguistic Diversity.

4.3 Altram believes that a robust Policy on Linguistic Diversity from the biggest Council in the north of Ireland will send a positive message to other Councils in the region to adopt, implement and promote similar policies. It will add to a bank of existing Council policies such as Newry, Mourne and Down District Council's Bilingual Language Policy to facilitate and encourage the promotion and use of both the Irish language and English in the Council area.

4.4 Altram believes that the effective implementation of this policy will assist local and national government to deliver on a wide range of policies outlined throughout this document.



- 4.5 There is only one reference in the Proposed Language Framework (Appendix one) to Irish-medium education: ‘...Support for Irish-medium schools – the provision of Irish versions of information generally provided to schools in relation to all Council services and events.’ Altram believes more detail is required here - there has been concern for some years in the United Kingdom regarding the decline in the level of language learning in schools, colleges and universities. This concern has been shared by many in Northern Ireland. Irish-medium education is a key and accessible tool to address this decline.
- 4.6 Quality Irish-language immersion early years care and education has the potential to deliver the benefits outlined above and the sector in the north of Ireland has many years’ experience in providing the relevant services. These points have been addressed in Languages for the Future – Northern Ireland Languages Strategy, a report produced by an expert working group for the Department of Education in September 2012. The report reflected on the international prioritisation of second language acquisition, with the key objective to ‘promote languages as a key skill for life’. The strategy noted the positive, unique contribution of the Irish-medium sector to second language acquisition and set out recommendations for a Northern Ireland Languages Strategy. Altram believes that Belfast City Council’s Policy on Linguistic Diversity should embrace these recommendations and recognise clearly the unique role of the Irish-medium education sector in contributing to linguistic diversity across the city.
- 4.7 There is an emphasis in the consultation document on translation and interpretation to deliver language rights and linguistic diversity. Altram agrees that translation and interpretation are important enabling instruments, but more support and development services need to be included in the Council’s policy.
- 4.8 Altram welcomes emphasis in the consultation document on ‘tolerance and dialogue’ to promote a more cohesive society. However, Altram believes that protection and promotion of the Irish language needs to be at the core of the document as a clearly stated aim and placed within a language development as well as a respect context.
- 4.9 Altram welcomes the draft policy’s recognition of ‘the increasing ethnic diversity of the city’. Altram supports the approach within the policy to ensure that people for whom English is a second language are not disadvantaged in their communications with Council.
- 4.10 Altram believes that all languages are deserving of respect, but would argue that the circumstances and needs of indigenous languages and those of ethnic minority languages are different. It is widely recognised internationally that specific actions are required to protect and promote languages that are under threat. Altram recommends that the principle of ‘language of choice’ should be embedded in the Council’s policy.



4.11 The Council's document proposes different policies for different languages within the context of the overall Language Framework – Irish Language, Other Languages and Ulster Scots. Altram welcomes this recognition of the specific needs of different language groups and the inclusion of an action plan and built in review which will be 'resourced properly'. Altram would welcome further information on what these policies will be based on. Altram believes that policy must be based on objective need and on the understanding of the particular importance of indigenous languages in the country/countries in which they are traditionally spoken.

4.12 Altram welcomes the proposal to appoint an '...Irish Language Officer to promote Irish within the Council and in the Council area, with responsibility for the development of an action plan to ensure the promotion of Irish language can be effectively provided by Council, including awareness raising and language training...'. Altram believes this will help to strengthen, nourish, support and promote the Irish language within the city.

4.13 Altram supports the POBAL recommendations put forward in its comprehensive research and audit of the needs of Irish language groups in Belfast (2017). These are as follows:

- Establishing a new department within the Council: Language and community development, tourism, arts and Good practice / Capacity building
- The creation of full-time post(s) of Irish language officer/officers within Belfast City Council
- Developing criteria to recognise the added value of the Irish language within each funding scheme of the Council, including the multiple annual core funding scheme
- Making available Language Awareness Training courses to Council staff and Councillors

The Union shall respect its rich cultural and linguistic diversity, and shall ensure that Europe's cultural heritage is safeguarded and enhanced'. Article 3.3 of Lisbon Treat



Appendix 1

Altram - The Early Years Irish Language Immersion Support Organisation

Background

1. Altram was founded in 1990 by preschools in Armagh, Belfast, Derry and Newry. It is the only support organisation in Northern Ireland qualified, experienced and actively providing early years specialist advice, training, development information and support to the Irish-medium early years statutory and voluntary sector. It also represents the sector on various statutory and funding bodies and advises central government as necessary. Altram receives core funding from the Department of Education and funding for early years specialist posts from Childcare Partnerships. It also obtains project support from a variety of sources.
2. Altram's objectives are
 - To help deliver quality early years care and education services as widely as possible to meet need and demand,
 - To do so through Irish in a full-immersion context, as a major contribution to developing children's Irish language skills, and as an introduction to full-immersion primary school provision,
 - To contribute to Irish-medium care and education as a cornerstone of an Irish-speaking community.



3. Altram's services include:

- Regional outreach early years specialist support, including curricular advice and hands-on support for Irish-medium statutory nurseries and nursery classes, early years Family Support centres, non-statutory pre-school groups, PSEEP groups, Sure Start Programmes for Two Year Olds;
- Six training cluster days annually (delivered in Belfast and Derry) for staff of Irish-medium PEAGs, preschools and early years across the north;
- Development and delivery of relevant immersion education programmes;
- Accredited child protection training and Access NI child protection registration;
- Information service on managing and delivering IM early years projects and programmes;
- Support for development of new Irish-medium early years projects;
- Management and capacity-build support e.g. up-to-date guidelines for project committees;
- Responses to relevant consultations
- Production of Irish language resources e.g. books, for the sector;
- Provision of high quality materials for play resource development;
- Toy and book Library;
- Representation on statutory and funding bodies;
- Planned research into outcomes, including linguistic outcomes, in Irish-medium settings

4. Policy context in which Altram operates

Throughout its development Altram has been guided by the research, strategic and operational objectives of its major partners in the statutory and voluntary/community sectors. Over time the following have been relevant:

- UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Children First – Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy: Policy Statement -1999
- Review of Children First – Report – 2005
- Our Children & Young People - Our Pledge: Strategy 2006-2016
- Review of Irish-medium Education – DE Report – January 2009
- Families Matter – Regional Family and Parenting Strategy - March 2009
- Sure Start Programme for Two Year Olds: ETI Evaluation – June 2010
- Early Years (0-6) Strategy – June 2010 - December 2012
- ETI Chief Inspector's Report - 2008 – 2010
- Development of Children's Language & Communication in Pre-School Settings funded by Department of Education – ETI Evaluation – Feb. 2011
- Child Care Partnership Plan 2011-2014
- Learning to Learn – Draft Strategy – DE 2012



Structures

5. Altram runs two regional offices, in Belfast and Derry. It has four full-time and one part-time staff in Belfast and two full-time staff in Derry. The team includes four full-time early years specialists, one in the Western Board area, two covering the Eastern, Northern and Southern Boards and the fourth acting as Regional Irish-medium Early Years Programme Support Specialist.

Altram Representation

6. Altram represents the Irish immersion sector on Northern Ireland statutory funding bodies, policy development and programme delivery organisations and lobby groups. It is currently represented on the following bodies:
 - Childcare Partnerships
 - PEAGs board
 - Early Years Regional Strategic Funding Panel
 - SureStart
 - Local area childcare forums
 - Keeping Safe Co-ordinators
 - Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (the Department of Education NDPB representing Irish-medium education)
 - Education and Training Inspectorate
 - Early Intervention Professional Development Knowledge and Skills Framework



7. Altram has also been represented on the previous advisory groups:

- Early Years (0-6) Strategy - Regional Reference Groups
- Early Years (0-6) Strategy- Stakeholder Advisory Group
- PlayBoard YESIP Project

8. Altram regularly contributes on behalf of the Irish-medium early years sector to relevant statutory consultation exercises and provided input to the DHSSPS standards document “*Childminding and Day Care for Children under the age of 12.*”

Characteristics of the Irish-medium early years care and education sector

9. Parental choice and involvement

There has been a tremendous growth of Irish language projects over the last period reflecting parental choice and the high regard for Irish in local communities. Projects were set up by local parents where no early years facilities through Irish existed and parental participation in Irish-medium projects is generally high. Parents have been involved in managing and supporting projects and many parents who are women returners have undertaken training and worked in the sector.

10. Social Inclusion and children in need

Projects were set up in areas of high social and economic deprivation which are still experiencing the legacy of the conflict. (Department of Education figures for Free School Meals show that Irish-medium schools have a higher level of dependence on Free School Meals than other sectors.) This underlines the added value to children of receiving high quality play experiences through a second language at an early age and the importance of parental and community involvement in these projects.

11. High quality early years provision through a second language

Irish-medium early years projects combine high quality play experiences with immersion in a second language in a unique and innovative way which offers added value to young children. This integration of play and language cannot take place successfully without a large degree of planning and organisation. Staff in Irish-medium projects must have a high level of childcare, language and Irish immersion methodology skills to develop quality services. There is also a shortage of relevant materials and staff must often develop their own resources to support the immersion programme.



12. Challenges facing Altram and the early years Irish-medium sector

- Lack of adequate long-term core funding in recognition of the specialised training, support and developmental services Altram provides to Irish-speaking children, families and Irish-medium providers in the early years' statutory and voluntary sectors;
- Need for greater Irish-medium early years sector involvement in programmes such as *SureStart*, including the *Programme for Two Year Olds*;
- Obtaining official recognition of the linguistic need for a two-year period of pre-school Irish immersion care and education with related funding;
- The development of Irish-medium Children's Centres;
- Providing support services, including childcare, to families with children in early years Irish immersion settings;
- Lack of a Quality Assurance Scheme targeted at and tailored to specific characteristics of the early years Irish immersion sector
- Recruiting and retaining staff with both Irish language and childcare qualifications.
- Supporting development and delivery of quality, accredited immersion training
- Limited infrastructural funding



Appendix 2

Policy context

UK Government Commitments

- **United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Article 2 and Article 29**

Art. 2: - States parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.

Art. 29: - States parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to:..... (c) The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values....

- **European Charter for Regional & Minority Languages (Ratified 2001) - Articles 7 and 8 as they relate to pre-school education**

Art. 7: - Objectives and principles

1. In respect of regional or minority languages, within the territories in which such languages are used and according to the situation of each language, the Parties shall base their policies, legislation and practice on the following objectives and principles:

- a. the recognition of the regional or minority languages as an expression of cultural wealth;
- c. the need for resolute action to promote regional or minority languages in order to safeguard them;
- d. the facilitation and/or encouragement of the use of regional or minority languages, in speech and writing, in public and private life;
- f. the provision of appropriate forms and means for the teaching and study of regional or minority languages at all appropriate stages;
- g. the provision of facilities enabling non-speakers of a regional or minority language living in an area where it is used to learn it if they so desire;

4. In determining their policy with regard to regional or minority languages, the Parties shall take into consideration the needs and wishes expressed by the groups which use such languages.



Art. 8: - Education

With regard to education, the Parties undertake, within the territory in which such languages are used, according to the situation of each of these languages, and without prejudice to the teaching of the official language(s) of the State:

- i. to make available pre-school education in the relevant regional or minority languages; or
 - ii. to make available a substantial part of pre-school education in the relevant regional or minority languages; or
 - iii. to apply one of the measures provided for under i and ii above at least to those pupils whose families so request and whose number is considered sufficient;
(UK Commitment)
- g. to make arrangements to ensure the teaching of the history and the culture which is reflected by the regional or minority language;
- h. to provide the basic and further training of the teachers required to implement those of paragraphs a. to g. accepted by the Party;

- **Good Friday Agreement – 1998 – Strand 3: Paragraph 3 and Paragraph 4**

Para. 3 - 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.

Para. 4 - In the context of active consideration currently being given to the UK signing the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, the British Government will in particular in relation to the Irish language, where appropriate and where people so desire it:

- take resolute action to promote the language;
- facilitate and encourage the use of the language in speech and writing in public and private life where there is appropriate demand;
- seek to remove, where possible, restrictions which would discourage or work against the maintenance or development of the language;
- make provision for liaising with the Irish language community, representing their views to public authorities and investigating complaints;
- place a statutory duty on the Department of Education to encourage and facilitate Irish-medium education in line with current provision for integrated education;

- **St Andrew's Agreement and St Andrew's Agreement Act – 2006**

'The Government will introduce an Irish Language Act reflecting on the experience of Wales and Ireland and work with the incoming Executive to enhance and protect the development of the Irish language'.



- **European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights (adopted 2000),**

The Charter, which was made legally binding by Treaty of Lisbon, does the following

- Art 21 – Prohibits discrimination on grounds of language.
- Art 22 – Places an obligation on the Union to respect linguistic diversity.

- **EU Objectives**

Multilingualism, in the EU's view, is a critical element of ensuring Europe's future competitiveness.

- Within the framework of education and vocational training policy, the EU's objective is for every citizen to master two other languages in addition to his/her mother tongue - the "1+2" policy
- In order to achieve this objective, children are to be taught two additional languages in school from an early age.

Northern Ireland Executive commitments

- **Programme for Government 2011-2015**

- Makes development of an Irish Language Strategy a key building block of Priority 4 - 'Building a Strong and Shared Community'. (This was not delivered. The current draft PfG 2016-2021 contains no reference to Acht na Gaeilge/Irish Language Act).

- **Draft Irish Language Strategy 2012 -**

- The draft Strategy issued by DCAL for consultation in 2012 identifies family transmission as the first of six key areas for action where real progress can be made to protect, enhance and develop the Irish language.
- In relation to the Irish-immersion pre-school sector the draft strategy states:
 - The Irish-medium sector has been growing steadily in recent years and this growth looks set to continue.
 - Increased demand should be met.
 - In 2011/12 70 schools/units were providing Irish-medium education to over 4,000 children at pre-school, primary and post-primary levels
 - DE should continue to support the development of Irish-medium education at pre-school level through the provision of PEAGS.
 - Criteria for the enrolment of bilingual/Irish-medium pre-schools should be reviewed.
 - Capacity in English medium pre-schooling in a particular area should not deter the opening/development/financing of IME pre-schools.