

Response of Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta

to the

Consultation on the Green Paper on the Review of the BBC's Royal Charter

May 2005

Introduction

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta is a Department of Education-sponsored council responsible for the provision of advice pertaining to the development and provision of Irish-medium education in Northern Ireland.

There are currently 3000 children attending Irish-medium Education provision in the north of Ireland, attending 44 preschools, 32 primary schools and 3 post-primary schools. We estimate that attendance figures will grow to between 8,000 and 10,000 over the next 10 years.

In our role as representative body for the children, staff and schools in the Irish-medium sector and for the wider Irish-medium Education community of families and communities, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta wishes to address a number of issues in relation to the Government Green Paper on the Review of the BBC's Royal Charter.

Ofcom has endorsed the provision of an enhanced service for Irish in the north of Ireland; a fact that we welcome. However, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta is astounded at the deliberate slight delivered to the Irish language and by extension to children in our sector, in the Government's Green Paper on the Review of the BBC's Royal Charter.

Comparison with Welsh and Scottish Gaelic

While the BBC has an important role to play in the safeguarding of the cultural heritage of the UK, a role it has itself acknowledged, it is our opinion that the BBC has had an ambivalent approach to this in the north of Ireland in comparison to its approach in Wales and Scotland. This ambivalence has been both recent and historical. This ambivalence is reflected in the Government Green Paper and starkly underlined by the comparison between the per capita amounts the BBC commits from its licence fee to indigenous-language broadcasting in Scotland and Wales compared to the north of Ireland.

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta is of the opinion that, as BBC licence payers, Irish-speakers and families of children in Irish-medium Education are entitled to the same service as our Welsh-speaking and Scottish Gaelic-speaking counterparts.

Under the section *Future Role – Programming* the Green Paper recognises the importance for the BBC, in its Public Service Broadcasting capacity, to acknowledge and reflect the broad cultural diversity of the UK in its programming. The Green Paper also acknowledges rightly the importance of its regional output and the need to expand this. The acknowledgement in the

Green Paper of the changes required in broadcasting to the regions following devolution is also welcome. Undoubtedly, the Government, in the Green Paper, has overtly recognised and supported the role of the BBC in relation to output in the indigenous languages of the regions. However, inexplicably, this recognition and commitment to support seems to extend only to Welsh and Scottish Gaelic. For some reason the Irish language in the north of Ireland appears not to merit the same treatment as is recommended for its linguistic cousins in Scotland and Wales.

The Green Paper affirms the BBC's commitment to the provision of programming for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. It recognises that this should include provision in "*indigenous minority languages across a range of platforms*" (Page 41) yet it proceeds to address this issue in relation to Scottish Gaelic and Welsh only. The document singularly fails to make any mention of the Irish language in the context of Northern Ireland. This omission would seem to be entirely at odds with the BBC's stated commitment, reiterated throughout the Green Paper to its role of respecting and reflecting cultural diversity and identity in its programming.

Inexplicably, while the BBC would appear to have a "*crucial role to play in safeguarding Gaelic cultural heritage*" (Page 42) in Scotland it would appear not to have a similar role in respect of Irish in Northern Ireland. The Green Paper outlines in detail the importance of BBC support for Welsh and Gaelic and yet singularly fails to even acknowledge the existence of the Irish language.

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, as the representative of parents of Irish-speaking children, can only interpret this omission as a calculated insult to them and to their language by the British Government. The fact that this Green Paper highlights the "*crucial role*" the BBC has in "*safeguarding Gaelic cultural heritage*" in Scotland only serves to highlight the Government's insult.

When the NI direct-rule Minister for Education, Angela Smith, makes her commitments to the educational welfare of the children of Northern Ireland does this not include the Irish-speaking children of Northern Ireland? Is it the intention of the British Government and by extension the BBC, that Irish-speaking children in Northern Ireland should not benefit from "*provision in indigenous minority languages across a range of platforms*" as is recommended for Gaelic- and Welsh-speaking children?

While the Green Paper entirely ignores the existence of the Irish-language it recommends increased provision for the other indigenous languages. It recommends increased provision in Welsh by the BBC through S4C. It also expresses the Government's desire to "*see a better deal for Gaelic – perhaps including a dedicated channel*" and commits the BBC to working to bring about "*a sustainable strategy for Gaelic Television*". Surely the Irish-speaking population of Northern Ireland as citizens of the UK and contributors to the licence fee are entitled to similar provision.

A comparison of the per capita spend of the BBC on indigenous-language programming in the regions of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland illustrates the stark contrast between the Government's treatment of the Irish language and its treatment of Welsh and Gaelic. In 2001-2002 the BBC spent almost £16.5 million of licence fee funds on Welsh-language television, £1.5 million on Scottish-Gaelic television and £200,000 on Irish-language television. This amounts to £53 per Welsh speaker, £64 per Gaelic speaker and a paltry £3 per Irish speaker in Northern Ireland.

Public-Service Broadcasting

The Irish-speaking and Irish-Medium Education communities in the north of Ireland are entirely dependent on the Public Service role of the BBC for broadcasting in Irish. As with the other indigenous languages, the commercial non-profitability of minority-language broadcasting has always resulted in the Irish language being ignored by independent broadcasters. This Green Paper recognises this fact. However, unlike commercial broadcasters, the BBC receives the proceeds of the licence fee to enable it to meet its responsibilities in respect of minorities. The BBC has a monopoly on the licence fee, and as a result, as recognised in this Paper, a near monopoly on Public Service Broadcasting. Consequently, the Irish-language community of NI and the children in Irish-medium schools have been left entirely dependent on the BBC for Irish-language broadcasting.

International Agreements

The UK Government has a duty towards the Irish language enshrined in a number of international agreements. The role of Government in supporting the Irish language is reflected in the Belfast Agreement. The British Government is a signatory to the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages since 2001. It has agreed, in this, to provide a better level of public service television for Irish speakers in NI. It is four years since the UK Government ratified the European Charter and as yet the Government has failed to meet this commitment. In 2004, the International Committee of Experts, appointed by the European Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages, criticised the provision of public service television in Irish and recommended that a significant increase in provision should be made. The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe has also supported this recommendation. The International Committee of Experts, appointed by the European Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages will shortly begin to collect information for its second report and as yet the UK government has failed to respond to its previous criticism.

The Irish-medium Education System

At present, the BBC makes no provision for the Irish-medium education system in its educational broadcasting, despite the fact that Irish-Medium Education has, for several years, being facilitated and supported by the state through the various education authorities; Education and Library Boards, the Department of Education, the Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment and the Education and Training Inspectorate.

The BBC stands alone as a significant state-funded education provider in NI in its failure to acknowledge Irish-medium Education. The fact that the UK Government recognises in its Green Paper the importance of the BBC and of television in the safeguarding of cultural heritage and minority languages make its failure to acknowledge the Irish language as part of this cultural heritage all the more insidious.

Conclusion

The Irish language has been spoken in the north of Ireland as a community language until the middle of the last century. Efforts to maintain an Irish-speaking community have succeeded in spite of state neglect. The numbers of children currently in Irish-medium Education and the increase in the number of Irish-medium Education schools are evidence of the demand for the Irish language in the north. The BBC potentially could play a significant role in supporting this revival of the Irish language as it does in Wales and in Scotland. The fact that it has chosen not

to is at best a dereliction of its duty as a Public-Service Broadcaster and at worst discrimination against Irish speakers in the UK.

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta recommends that BBC Northern Ireland meet its obligations to the young Irish speakers in our community who have become Irish speakers through the Irish-medium Education system and the traditional schooling system. To do this the BBC should, at a minimum, produce regular Irish-language television programming every week. This will only be achieved effectively if it is supported by a specific allocated Irish-medium Education budget, funded by the licence fee, as is the case for Scotland and Wales.

For whatever reason the Government, in its Green Paper, has chosen to disregard the Irish language in Northern Ireland in complete contrast to its treatment of the indigenous languages of the other regions. There is no doubt that the failure to include Irish in the Green Paper is deliberate, given that Northern Ireland is mentioned in the context of “*provision in indigenous minority languages*” in the “*devolved nations*” on Page 41 of the Paper, and ignored in the following section.

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta asks that this be remedied in the next stages of this review. On behalf of the Irish-medium education sector and the families of children in our sector Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta asks the Government to ensure that explicit reference is made to the Irish language in the next stages of the Review. In addition Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta calls on the UK Government and the BBC to:

- Recognise the BBC’s duty as a Public Service Broadcaster to the Irish language;
- To treat the Irish-speaking population as licence-fee payers with equity;
- To recognise the BBC’s duty to Irish as one of the indigenous languages of the UK;
- To acknowledge the BBC’s role in safeguarding cultural heritage in respect of the Irish language;
- To make adequate provision in the BBC’s educational broadcasting to children in Irish-medium education.