



**Northern Ireland  
Assembly**

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**COMMITTEE FOR  
REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

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**OFFICIAL REPORT  
(Hansard)**

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**Draft Policy for the Provision of Bilingual  
Traffic Signs**

10 November 2010

**NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY**

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REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

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**Draft Policy for the Provision of Bilingual Traffic Signs**

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10 November 2010

**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Fred Cobain (Chairperson)

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Cathal Boylan

Mr Allan Bresland

Mr Billy Leonard

Mr Trevor Lunn

Mr Fra McCann

Mr Ian McCrea

Mr Conall McDevitt

Mr George Robinson

**Witnesses:**

Mr Conor Murphy            )            The Minister for Regional Development

**The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy):**

Officials are here to answer any technical questions that members might have. The issue has been brought to the Department over a considerable period, right back to the previous period of devolved Administration. Under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, the Department considered it to be a policy area that required to be addressed. However, it was not advanced at the time that it was initially brought to the Department, because legal advice said that there was a doubt around the vires of using powers contained in the Road Traffic Regulation Order 1997 to introduce an additional language to traffic signs. As a consequence, it was

considered that it might be necessary to attach additional powers to that Act. That was interrupted because the development of the policy was subsumed by the review of public administration (RPA) work that fell to the Department. All legislative resources were directed towards what was required under the RPA.

Following advice that has been received, there is now a sense that the issue would not necessarily require legislation but is something that can be advanced as a policy. The previous advice was that it would require Executive approval to go out to consultation. Under guidance from the Departmental Solicitor's Office (DSO), that advice has now changed. It is not necessary to seek Executive consent to go out to consultation, but it will be necessary to seek Executive consent to adopt a new policy.

Essentially, that is it. It is a limited experiment, if you like, and it is not one that has any significant financial implication for the Department. It is something that has been the subject of a number of requests and, in many areas, is already in existence, although perhaps not with the necessary proper approval. Council signage in various towns and villages is already bilingual. Under the European Charter for the protection of minority languages, the Department should be involved in trying to provide the service more widely.

**Miss McIlveen:**

I suppose that it goes without saying that I oppose the proposal. Given the debate earlier in the week on an issue that is linked to the proposal, this is blatant electioneering on behalf of the Minister. I am really very disappointed that we have got to the stage at which we are politicising road signs. Despite the advice given by DSO about not going to the Executive in advance of putting the proposal out for consultation, surely, given that this is a novel and contentious issue, it would have been advisable to have gone to the Executive in advance?

**The Minister for Regional Development:**

I am operating on the basis of legal advice that we were not required to go to the Executive to issue a consultation paper. Obviously, when a consultation paper goes out, everybody, including you, will have an opportunity to comment on it. On the basis of those comments, we will go back to the Executive with a policy paper, at which stage the Executive will have an opportunity to have their say.

I reject your assertion that this is electioneering. I first went to the Department for Regional Development about the matter in 2002. I think that Peter Robinson was the Minister at that time. I did that on the back of a request from a local organisation attached to the council, which had funding to provide the signs as part of a tourism promotion initiative. Had it been agreed to go ahead with it at that time, it would have contributed to the Department's resources. However, it was denied, because people felt that it was not an area that they wanted to get into.

We have obligations under the European Charter for the protection of minority languages that apply not just to the Irish language but to Ulster Scots, if there is a demand for it, which means that Departments cannot pick and chose to deny requests. There is no resource implication, it should not be contentious, and it does not politicise language. Language is politicised by those who oppose it, not by those who wish to promote it.

**Miss McIlveen:**

I refute that. There is very little to say on this, other than, given the lengthy discussion that we had on the problems surrounding Northern Ireland Water and the issues around your budget, I think that time and money for consultation would be better spent on matters other than this one. I will leave my comments at that.

**Mr I McCrea:**

I have had this debate in my own council and with other councils that have some type of policy for street names and whatnot. Obviously, there are issues in relation to that. I do not want to go into what Michelle referred to as the contentious aspect. Most likely, we would disagree, Minister. Nonetheless, following the outcome of the consultation, the policy will have to go back to the Executive to get approval.

The Department received legal advice that it was not necessary to consult the Executive. Does that apply to this policy only, or are you confident that it applies to all future policies?

**The Minister for Regional Development:**

We asked for legal advice on this issue only. However, there is an attempt to ensure that Executive business does not get clogged up. Some would question the value of the Executive taking the time to discuss and to form a view on a paper that is going out for consultation and, once everybody else has expressed a view, may come back to them in an amended form.

Essentially, they would be having two debates on something that may be altered by the time that it comes to the second debate.

There is a general view that consultation papers may not need to go to the Executive for approval, and that view was informed by the Attorney General. We asked for specific advice on this issue only, but that advice may be consistent with that for many other papers. It has to be questioned whether it is valuable use of Executive time to consider consultation papers and whether that is required before a Department issues a paper for consultation. If policy approval is needed, it goes to the Executive. An issue such as this is cross-cutting — it also involves DETI, DFP and DCAL, which has general responsibility for languages — and, therefore, it will go to the Executive. The question is whether the Executive need to have two debates on the same issue. Therefore, there is a broader view on the principle of papers requiring approval to go out to consultation when they will come back to the Executive anyway.

People will have their views on this issue. I would be disappointed rather than surprised, given how old and cynical I am, if people were opposed on the basis that it was connected with the Irish language. The policy has no cost implication; it was requested by people; and it will enhance the area. I notice that the Deputy Chairperson is screwing up her face, but for someone who is called McIlveen to be in denial of the Irish heritage of this place is to deny —

**Miss McIlveen:**

I have Ulster-Scots roots.

**The Minister for Regional Development:**

Ulster Scots is included in this. I am not a linguist, an historian or an anthropologist, but I would suggest that McIlveen is more of an Irish name than an Ulster Scots one.

**The Chairperson:**

I am glad that I have a French Huguenot name. *[Laughter.]* I am happy where I am.

**The Minister for Regional Development:**

Councils and those who are involved in tourism provision have requested the proposition. To deny them the opportunity to enhance the product that this broad area has to offer is to cut off our noses to spite our faces.

**Mr I McCrea:**

You referred to the point that this is policy and not legislation. How do you distinguish between the two?

**The Minister for Regional Development:**

Originally, the Department considered that legislative change may be required because there were not the vires to give approval to allow a second language on a sign. The Department now considers that legislation is not required. The legal advice is that the Department has the vires to authorise and that it is a matter of changing policy. However, as it is cross-cutting, the policy has to go to the Executive for approval.

**Mr I McCrea:**

Is it possible for the Committee to get a copy of that advice?

**The Minister for Regional Development:**

If that was requested, I am sure that the officials could get that to the Committee.

**The Chairperson:**

Mr Boylan, where are you from?

**Mr Boylan:**

If he looks at my name, I am sure that the Minister will understand.

**The Minister for Regional Development:**

Boylan might be Ulster Scots. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Boylan:**

There are 700 years of history in my name. Given what some Members said, I may have to borrow £2.50 from the Minister for a bowl of soup if the prices go up next week.

I welcome the consultation. As a former councillor in Armagh City and District Council, I had many representations to get bilingual signage for different things. What is the demand for those signs among the public and the councils?

**The Minister for Regional Development:**

We have received a number of enquiries from councils, individuals and tourism providers about whether it is possible to have the signs.

As I said, my initial dealings with that were in relation to the Ring of Gullion in south Armagh, where grant aid was available to provide signage. The providers would have been a contributor to the Department through Roads Service, but, at that stage, the Department considered that it was beyond its legislative competence to allow that to happen. The proposition could have earned some resource for Roads Service.

Whatever people's views of Irish language and culture, and without getting bogged down in all of that, the reality is that people who want to promote this are doing so primarily for the tourism market, and they consider that it would enhance the tourism product. If it enhances the tourism product, it enhances economic activity and the economy generally. As I said, people could get bogged down in a debate on the Irish language, but, in doing that, they would be cutting of their nose to spite their face.

**Mr Boylan:**

I have one other question, and I will leave the French man out of it. Can you clarify the time that you envisage for the policy to take place? Obviously, it has to go back to the Executive.

**The Minister for Regional Development:**

It is possible for it to be done in this mandate, if it gets a fair wind at the Executive. I anticipate that, with my enlightened colleagues at the Executive table, it will get a fair wind.

**Mr F McCann:**

Like some other Committee members, I remember this debate raising its head about 20 years ago. Chairman, you were on Belfast City Council at that time, when the issue of recognising Irish street names was raised. I remember the arguments that we were electioneering, being contentious and ramming the Irish language down people's throats. It was proposed only that Irish street names be recognised in areas where it was not contentious and where people accepted it readily. We now see it throughout Belfast. Does the change go far enough to comply with DRD's obligations under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages?

**The Minister for Regional Development:**

It does. It is interesting that some people are arguing that it is not necessary because of the resource implication. There is no resource implication. Previously, people argued that it was a road safety issue, which it is not. In any case, the proposition is limited to certain types of signs. It would comply with our obligations. All Departments have obligations, and, presumably, the Executive as a corporate body should have an obligation under the European Charter. I hope that people will approach the issue in that fashion.

**The Chairperson:**

Whether it was contentious or not, I do not see many Irish street names in areas that we normally think of as unionist.

**Mr F McCann:**

At that time, it was to apply to nationalist areas of Belfast. The point is that it was refused.

**The Chairperson:**

I do not want to get into this argument on City Hall politics.

**Mr F McCann:**

Fred and I had the same argument 20 years ago.

**Mr McDevitt:**

I think that I am the only person at the table who has a proper Ulster name. You are from the midlands, he is a Munster man, and I do not know where the name “Boylan” comes from.

**The Minister for Regional Development:**

*[Interruption.]*

**Mr McDevitt:**

I apologise. I welcome this important debate, and we should be seeking to reflect our cultural heritage on all sides. I notice that your proposed consultation makes provision for English and Irish or English and Ulster Scots, but is there a possibility for trilingual signage if district councils choose to make that request?



**The Minister for Regional Development:**

Part of this is a recognition of the sensitivities of certain signs in certain areas, and councils have already been erecting bilingual, and, perhaps in some cases, trilingual signs. There is a strong emphasis on dealing with local government authorities because they have a better sense of what might be contentious or not contentious in different areas. This is about being permissive in allowing these things to happen — the current policy is not permissive — and I would expect reasonable arguments on a trilingual approach to be considered.

**Mr McDevitt:**

Will you make provision in the consultation for the option of a trilingual approach?

**The Minister for Regional Development:**

The consultation document has gone out. If the consultation were to come back with that type of demand, I am sure that the final policy document to the Executive would reflect that.

**Mr G Robinson:**

Who will the consultation document be targeted at?

**The Minister for Regional Development:**

The usual suspects, I suppose, that all policy consultation documents go out to. It will go out to district councils, be made available on the website and be advertised so that individuals can look at it. Ulster-Scots and Irish language bodies will have an interest and will probably respond. It will go out to the normal consultee list, and, as ever, be advertised on the website so that any member of the public can respond.

**Mr G Robinson:**

In tandem with my two party colleagues, I am totally opposed to the proposal.

**Mr Leonard:**

I have two comments. Trilingualism has been raised, and I want to go back to that. One council was going to try to impose trilingualism as a compensatory factor. That is overcooking the goose. What was not requested was going to be imposed and that council was playing a game. That is not a good approach to take. It is not the case that all aspects of trilingualism are, therefore, bad.

However, that example is from experience.

We hear the usual arguments against the proposal. However, we have to put across the indigenous nature of place and place names. I must admit that I have a great deal of sympathy for those who fear that, but I wish that they could get over their fears. From many conversations with visitors, I know that Coleraine got a bit of a boost when it was signposted as Cúil Raithin. Rather than the politicisation of language, whatever approach we take, we could and should stress the indigenous nature of place and place names.

**The Minister for Regional Development:**

That is important, because to understand how the places that we live in got their names, there has to be an understanding of what the names mean. That allows people to have a deeper knowledge. Let us bear in mind that we are all only passing through here. We do not have a monopoly on language or culture or tradition. In another couple of hundred years, somebody else will have a different view. Through this proposal, if we can do anything to enhance people's understanding of where we have come from, I think that that is all the better.

**The Chairperson:**

Will we have a bit of French on signs then? *[Laughter.]*

**The Minister for Regional Development:**

You can respond to the consultation document. *[Laughter.]*

**The Chairperson:**

Thank you very much.