

Response of Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta to

Consultation on Ofcom's Public Service Broadcasting Review Phase 2: Preparing for the Digital Future

December 2008

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 over 4300 children attending Irish-medium Education provision in the north of Ireland, attending 46 preschools, 31 primary schools and 4 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 Ofcom's Public Service Broadcasting Review Phase 2: Preparing for the Digital Future

While Ofcom has endorsed the provision of an enhanced service for Irish in the north of Ireland; a fact that we welcome, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, has in previous consultations in relation to Broadcasting in the north of Ireland, criticised the variance in the manner in which the BBC continues to treat its indigenous languages (Irish and Scottish Gaelic and Welsh). We have, in the past, informed Ofcom of our astonishment at what appears to Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta as a deliberate decision by the BBC to treat Irish as a lesser language than Welsh and Scottish Gaelic, particularly in the Government's Green Paper on the Review of the BBC's Royal Charter.

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta is therefore, particularly concerned that Ofcom has now taken a similar stance to that of the BBC in its tacit acceptance of the invidious distinctions made by the BBC between its provision for Irish and for other indigenous languages. There is a clear lack of equity of treatment for Irish which is not being recognised by Ofcom.

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta believes that there is a duty on Ofcom, arising out of its commitments to fairness and public service, to clearly state its support for the right of the community in NI to have access to Irish-language programming, and to equitable treatment for Irish.

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The BBC, through its Public Service remit, has an important role to play in the safeguarding of the cultural heritage of the UK, a role it has itself acknowledged. In the past the BBC has had an ambivalent approach to its duties with regard to Irish in the north of Ireland, in comparison to its approach in Wales and Scotland. This ambivalence was reflected in the Government Green Paper, and continues to be 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 Irish in the north of Ireland.

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta strongly believes that Ofcom has a duty to highlight this distinction, and demand increased support for Irish to bring it into line with provision for Welsh and Scottish Gaelic.

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta believes that Ofcom should clearly state its concern at the lack of fair and equal treatment for Irish in comparison to the indigenous languages in other regions.

In the section on Indigenous Language Broadcasting in the Ofcom consultation Document, there is a clear recognition of the importance of indigenous languages and to the specific commitments in respect of Irish arising for the European Charter on Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML) and the Belfast Agreement. The consultation document acknowledges the clear lack of equity in treatment of Irish, it highlights the variations, but yet in its conclusion Ofcom refers to a *“perceived concern at the lack of consistency”*.

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta believes that this report should state clearly that Ofcom, itself is concerned at a clear lack of consistency and equity, which is supported by evidence. The lack of consistency and equity is not perceived, it is clearly outlined in the consultation document; there is clear evidence to support the claim the BBC has not been consistent or equitable in its treatment of Irish in the past. There is clear factual information, cited by Ofcom, that the current treatment of Irish is neither equitable nor consistent with its treatment of other indigenous languages. There is, therefore, a duty on Ofcom to express unequivocally its concern at this lack of consistency and equity. Ofcom has, in addition, a responsibility to call for fair treatment for Irish.

Ofcom has, as yet, failed to address the issue of the invidious way in which Irish has been, and is currently being treated by the BBC. There is an onus on Ofcom to pronounce clearly on this issue, to move from its position of equivocation and to challenge the treatment of Irish in the BBC. There is a need for a clear statement from Ofcom on this issue.

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta also believes that Ofcom should make clear recommendations in relation to provision for Irish, with a view to bringing provision for Irish into line with current provision for Welsh and Scottish Gaelic.

Recommendations

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta believes that Ofcom has a duty to make clear proposals in relation to how BBC should give effect to its Public Service duties in respect of the Irish language to ensure consistency and equity of treatment. Those recommendations should include:

- The funding of Irish-language television;

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It is unacceptable that residents in a region of the UK should be required to depend on a channel in another state for its indigenous TV broadcasting. As part of its public Service remit BBC has a duty to provide Irish-language television. Ofcom needs to recommend this.

- The making permanent of the Irish-language Broadcasting Fund as the most effective way of assisting the development of programmes in Irish;

The position of the ILBF is uncertain. Funding currently available is inadequate to bring Irish-language programming to the position of programming in Welsh or Scottish Gaelic. Ofcom should recommend an increase in the size of the fund and that it be placed on a permanent footing. The UK Government has a binding duty in this respect arising from the Belfast Agreement, a binding international agreement between two sovereign states.

The UK Government also has an obligation in this respect arising out of its commitments specifically to Irish in the ECRML. If the fund is allowed to be terminated, the UK Government will be in clear breach of its commitments under the ECRML.

- The need for the BBC take proactive measures to compensate for previous neglect in order to bring provision in NI into line with that already in place in other regions.

Even the most rudimentary comparison of the provision made for Irish with that made for Welsh and Scottish Gaelic provides clear evidence of historical neglect by the BBC of Irish. Ofcom has, itself, cited evidence in support of this fact. Therefore, Ofcom should recommend that BBC seeks to remedy this situation by taking a proactive approach to Irish until provision is on a par with Welsh and Scottish Gaelic.

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, which speaks on behalf of Irish-medium children and parents, 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. The Irish language in this part of the UK is as much part of our British heritage as the indigenous languages of Scotland and Wales.

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 and Irish-language broadcasting in particular 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. While Ofcom has recognised this, it is important that its makes recommendation to reflect the UK Government is bound by the Belfast Agreement and the ECRML to fund Irish-language television.

The Irish-medium Education System

At present, the BBC makes little 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 NI 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.

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The BBC stands alone as a significant state-funded education provider in NI in its failure to make equitable provision for Irish-medium Education. Ofcom has not acknowledged the existence of a state-funded Irish-language education system in NI. Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta believes that Ofcom should acknowledge this and make recommendations consistent with such an acknowledgement.

Conclusion

The Irish language has been spoken in the north of Ireland as a community language until the middle of the last century. 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. Ofcom should recommend that the BBC seek to improve its provision for Irish in acknowledgement of this, and, at a minimum, produce regular Irish-language television programming every week, to progressively reach 100 hours over the next six years. 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. Ofcom should unequivocally support this recommendation.