

An Analysis of Conradh na Gaeilge's *Irish Language Act: Discussion document*

The publication of Conradh na Gaeilge's *Irish Language Act: Discussion document* generated a great deal of publicity. There was particular focus on the claim that the Act would cost a mere £2m per year in addition to a one off cost of £9m over 5 years to create the infrastructure to support legislation.

But were Conradh na Gaeilge entirely honest when it came to the costs?

What are the other ramifications of their proposals beyond the cost to the public purse?

What will be the impact on the jobs market, community relations and equality of opportunity if their model is followed?

The Financial Cost

Even when one takes Conradh na Gaeilge's proposals at face value and accepting their costings as reliable it is clear from the document that there is an attempt to hide much of the expense to the public.

The Cost Not Included

Numerous things proposed in the document are simply not included in the cost.

Irish Language Broadcasting on the BBC (10.1)

Conradh na Gaeilge propose the BBC spends "**at least £10m on Irish language services (up from c. £2m as is currently the case)**".

Conradh na Gaeilge ignores the fact that this is money coming from the public purse merely saying: "this is an opportunity, as more money from the BBC would be spent in the North"!

The 'statutory obligation' regarding Irish-Medium Education legally defined (11.1)

Conradh na Gaeilge propose "that an operational plan be put together to facilitate the development and growth of Irish-medium education, from nursery to secondary level, and that the Education Department be responsible for the implementation of this plan."

What will this cost? We aren't given an estimate. Just advised that the costs will come "from the budgets of the Department of Education".

Irish-medium Education to have equality with English-medium Education (11.2)

Conradh na Gaeilge propose "that the state has a duty to deal with, and offer the same appropriate support, for the Irish-medium sector as is available for the English-medium sector, and to carry this out through the Irish language.

"This includes such matters as health services, special needs support, resources. That they be equally available in both languages.

"This can be carried out through an audit of current staff and directing those with the language skills towards this work. Any area in which a gap is identified, this can be filled via recruitment as and when posts emerge. That neither children, parents nor schools are disadvantaged as a result of their

language choice. This will take into account the very significant development that is occurring in this sector year on year.”

What would be the cost of this audit and the recruitment necessary to fill any gaps? Again we don't need to worry because the costs will come from the Department of Education budget.

Irish language in the English medium system (11.3)

Conradh na Gaeilge propose that “Parents should have access, as of right, to the teaching of Irish as a school subject for their children in the English-medium system at all levels (preschool, primary school and post-primary), where there is demand. Education authorities should have a duty placed upon them to develop the teaching of Irish as subject at all three levels, and a duty to ensure the following:

- opportunities for initial teacher education, and in-service training for teachers at each of the three levels;
- an appropriate curriculum for teaching Irish; and
- appropriate resources for the implementation of that curriculum.”

The cost we are advised, again, will come from the budget of the Department of Education.

Irish language youth work to be equal to youth work through English (11.4)

Conradh na Gaeilge says “That the state has a duty to deal with, and offer the same appropriate support, for Irish-medium youth work as is available for the English-medium sector, and to carry this out through the Irish language.”

The cost we are advised, again, will come from the budget of the Department of Education.

As a general point it is noteworthy that Conradh na Gaeilge pay no attention to the fact that Irish medium education already receives preferential treatment in Northern Ireland. For example, while Lisnaskea High School was closed for having “only” 140 pupils an Irish language school was approved on the site of the old school which had just 38 pupils.

Costs Which Conradh na Gaeilge Ignore or Assume Will Not Arise

There are a number of significant areas where cost is ignored or it is assumed it will not arise.

Local Government (5)

Conradh na Gaeilge propose that local government “Provide services through Irish through a direct provision, or through translation where necessary:

- Correspondence The use of Irish in Council Chambers (based on the structure of the assembly and that this will be gradually introduced)
- The use of Irish language names with the councils
- Facilitate Irish Language learning opportunities and organise cultural events through Irish.
- Forms for the public available in Irish
- Wider services available in Irish.”

We are advised that “A one-off or starting cost is not required because this work is being done by some of the councils as it is, and therefore the required infrastructure is already in place, and all that is needed now is for the work to be extended to all the councils”!

Such a blatant ignoring of significant cost cannot be allowed to go unchallenged. It is also noteworthy that the aggressive Irish language policy which has been implemented in some councils has met with significant opposition from Unionists. No council controlled by Unionists has introduced policies such as those in Newry and Mourne for example. Conradh na Gaeilge demands that they be required to and tells us to ignore the costs of so doing even though it will encounter stiff opposition from local ratepayers.

Gaeltacht Areas/ Irish Language Networks (7)

Again the cost is listed as zero because “criteria already exists” in spite of fact that one would assume that under the aggressive promotion of Irish envisaged by Conradh na Gaeilge demand for Gaeltacht areas would increase.

The Impact on the Operation of the Assembly and the Justice System

The Assembly (3)

Conradh na Gaeilge propose that “Any MLA or member of the public should have the right to use Irish when they are engaging in debates in the Assembly, or as part of the work of committees and subcommittees of Stormont.

“Through the provision of simultaneous translation, those who use Irish should not be disadvantaged in any way.”

Additionally, it is proposed that Bill be simultaneously translated into Irish during every step of their progression.

It is noteworthy that in the run up to the last Assembly election the Irish News surveyed candidates across political parties on their ability to speak Irish. Just five Sinn Fein candidates (less than 15% of the party’s total) said they were fluent in the language while in the SDLP just one candidate described his ability as fluent.

Across the board just 3% of candidates claimed they could speak Irish fluently. No candidate standing for a Unionist party said they had any ability in Irish.

So where is the demand for this provision for Irish in the Assembly? Conradh na Gaeilge tell us that they want to see the installation of £50,000 translation system and a yearly cost of around £2.1m - all to facilitate around half a dozen MLAs!

Even if one assumes that there is demand for such a system to operate in Stormont it is worth remembering that Irish is already permitted in the Assembly chamber.

However, even if one assumes that the use of Irish will become common in the Assembly chamber and in committees one has to consider what impact this will have upon the cut and thrust of debate and the ability of MLAs to engage with each other. So-called “simultaneous translation” will always result in a delay between the words spoken by the member and the translation.

The same issue will arise in committees.

Additionally, often in Assembly and its committees the detail of what is being said is important. Should Irish be used in the fashion proposed MLAs who do not speak the language will be at a disadvantage as the nuance will frequently be lost in a translation.

The Courts (6)

Conradh na Gaeilge propose the immediate repeal of the 1737 Act which prohibits the use of Irish in courts. This is presented as “very straightforward” but let’s look at the practical ramifications.

The administration of justice will be hindered by court hearings being multi-lingual.

Often evidence is judged not just by what is said but how it is said. How much of that will be lost when a translator comes between a witness and those hearing their evidence?

There are sound reasons for insisting that only English is used in our courts and removing that requirement will be a retrograde step.

While Conradh na Gaeilge would have us believe there is an abundance of Irish speakers in Northern Ireland to meet all the requirements for staff laid out in their proposals (something to which we will return) they suggest that judges be “borrowed” from the Republic to hear cases in Irish:

“As it is, a practice exists whereby judges are sometimes ‘borrowed’ from the south to hear cases. All that would be required here would be the widening of that scheme so that it is possible to ‘borrow’ judges with Irish from the south, in the event that Irish speaking judges are not readily available. A practical solution to enable this provision, would be to allow for monthly ‘Irish Days’ in the courts. This would save costs as only one court clerk would be necessary for the day’s procedures.”

The Employment Market Impact

An issue seldom discussed in relation to the ramifications of an Irish Language Act is its impact upon the employment market.

Interestingly, however, there are some hints within Conradh na Gaeilge’s proposals as to what they might be.

For example, they propose that one of the first steps in terms of putting legislation in place would be “to scrutinise public service staff to ascertain their level of Irish, to establish gaps and possibilities. The scrutinising would be done internally, but would be coordinated by the Language Commissioner”.

In the case of local councils Conradh na Gaeilge propose an “investigation of current staff with the allocation of those with language skills” towards the kinds of work needed to implement their proposals.

However, the starkest comments which hint at the impact of an Irish Language Act on the employment market come in proposal 4.7:

Ensure that Irish speakers are progressing in the public sector.

“Public bodies will have a new duty (see 4.3, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6) and Irish speakers will be required, or will be a great asset, in the process of facilitating these duties.

“This should be based on the Welsh approach, where duties must be adhered to, and therefore there is a need for employees who are able to perform these duties. They would be able to perform every other duty, but at the same time, be able to complete extra work involving Irish. 10% of those who are appointed should have both spoken and written Irish in the future. The final percentage, however, for every department/ public body will be decided upon according to the categorisation by the Language Commissioner.”

Conradh na Gaeilge are proposing a system which would positively advantage Irish speakers when it comes to employment in the public sector.

Additionally, it is noteworthy that the 10% figure suggested is more than two and a half times greater than the 3.74% of over 3 year olds who according to the 2011 census can speak, read, write and understand Irish.

Such a proposal would, therefore, gives Irish speakers a huge advantage in the public sector jobs market.

A Serious Equality Issue

Closely related to the above point about employment is the fact that an Irish Language Act along the model proposed by Conradh na Gaeilge would create a serious equality issue.

The Equality Commission has pointed out that the views of the Protestant and Roman Catholic communities on the use and promotion of the Irish language are distinct e.g.

- A significantly higher proportion of Catholics than Protestants were in favour of Irish language usage (66% and 14% respectively);
- Around one out of every two Catholics (52%) said Irish was important to their personal identity compared with one out of every twenty Protestants (5%);
- Almost three-quarters of Catholics (74%) and less than a fifth of Protestants (18%) agreed that the use of Irish should be supported and encouraged throughout Northern Ireland.

The aggressive promotion of Irish which will follow an Irish Language Act will be hugely divisive.

Additionally, Irish speakers are found in much greater numbers in the Roman Catholic community than in the Protestant community. This will mean that if an Irish Language Act is brought forward Protestants will be at a disadvantage within the jobs market.

This is a serious equality issue which has been ignored when it comes to the discussions around this matter.