

Words Matter.

Public attitudes to the Irish language and Ulster-Scots

Aisling O’Boyle, Lorna Carson and Paula Devine

More than English is spoken and signed every day in Northern Ireland (NI). Latest Census figures exhibit a well-known and historical fact that Northern Ireland is not a monolingual society; we use many languages (O’Connell, 2022; Rodgers, 2026). From the Irish language sown by the Gaels circa 500BC, to the languages spoken in more recently arrived communities, the languages that we use today, and how we use them, are the stories of how human beings live here. But what do we think about the languages we speak? And what are the relationships to our ideas about identity? This Research Update reports on public attitudes to Irish and Ulster-Scots in Northern Ireland, using data from the 2025 *Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey*.

Uladh says, whit?

Expressing our identities through our different languages and cultures is part of being human. For everyone in Northern Ireland, this basic freedom has been recently legislated through the Identity and Language (NI) Act 2022. Inserted into the Northern Ireland Act 1998, via the New Decade, New Approach (2020) resolve for government, the Identity and Language Act sets out two main principles: everyone is free to choose and affirm their identities and express them in ways considered lawful; and

our public authorities should encourage and promote meaningful dialogue, mutual respect, and understanding between those of different identities. Official recognition of the status of the Irish language in Northern Ireland is provided in this Act, alongside an aim to develop Ulster-Scots language, arts, and literature, and its recognition as a minority language in the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. Also provided for in this legislation is the establishment of the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression, which functions to support and promote the cultural and linguistic heritage of all people living in Northern Ireland.

For children and young people growing up in Northern Ireland the medium of instruction in formal schooling is currently offered as either English or Irish, though questions remain as to the extent to which the Irish-medium sector has been suitably tailored with statutory support to fully meet needs (O’Boyle et al., 2023).

The successful appointments of language and culture commissioners in late 2025 point to renewed action towards significant language planning, language education, and language policy in Northern Ireland.

Enriching lives

1,244 adults living in Northern Ireland completed the NILT survey in 2025. 96 per cent of those responding to the survey reported that their main language was English, with Irish, Lithuanian, Polish, and Spanish among the languages which were also identified as a main language. Among the language-focused items on the survey were questions relating to the value of Irish and Ulster-Scots, their positions in the school curriculum, and their policy support. People were also asked about learning these languages, their visibility in public spaces, and the importance of these particular languages to them.

Table 1 shows that over half (56%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the Irish language adds to the richness and diversity of Northern Ireland. From Table 2, we can see that nearly half of respondents (45%) agreed or strongly agreed that Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture add to the richness and diversity of Northern Ireland. Taken together, these results reveal that there is a robust public appreciation for the diversity and richness that Irish and Ulster-Scots offer.

Table 1: Attitudes to Irish language

	%		
	The Irish language adds to the richness and diversity of Northern Ireland	Learning the Irish language in the school curriculum is beneficial for children at school in Northern Ireland	More should be done by the NI Executive to encourage and promote the Irish language in Northern Ireland
Strongly agree	30	23	25
Agree	26	22	20
Neither agree nor disagree	18	21	21
Disagree	11	17	16
Strongly disagree	12	15	16
Don't know	2	2	2

Table 2: Attitudes to Ulster-Scots

	%		
	Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture add to the richness and diversity of NI	Learning about Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture in the school curriculum is beneficial for children at school in NI	More should be done by the NI Executive to encourage and promote Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture in NI
Strongly agree	12	9	9
Agree	33	22	19
Neither agree nor disagree	31	35	37
Disagree	13	18	19
Strongly disagree	6	9	9
Don't know	6	6	6

In relation to the Irish language, forty-five per cent (45%) of respondents agreed that learning Irish in the school curriculum is beneficial, with the same percentage of respondents agreeing that more should be done by the NI Executive to encourage and promote the Irish language in NI (45%). Less than one in three people disagreed or strongly disagreed with these views on the value of Irish language (23%), its inclusion in the curriculum (32%), and the need for policy interventions (32%).

In relation to Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture, 31 per cent felt that learning about Ulster-Scots in

schools is beneficial, with just 28 per cent thinking that more should be done by the NI Executive to promote it. With 'neither agree nor disagree' identified as the largest response category, public opinion for Ulster-Scots interventions in education and policy appears mostly undecided (35% and 37% respectively). Approximately one in five respondents (19%) disagreed to some extent that Ulster-Scots adds to the richness and diversity of Northern Ireland, although a higher proportion disagreed or strongly disagreed with its inclusion in the curriculum (27%), and the need for policy interventions (28%).

Importantly, this NILT survey shows that there is public support for both Irish language and Ulster-Scots as enriching life in Northern Ireland. Where there is divergence in public opinion between Irish and Ulster-Scots, it lies in the areas of proposed educational implementation and policy activities. As the next section shows, attitudes towards Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture using these survey measures are generally mixed, with support tending to be moderately rather than strongly polarised. Public opinion for the Irish language is differentiated, and more strongly in favour of school curriculum developments and policy actions.

Language and identities

For the Irish language and Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture, gender differences in responses were consistent. Women were somewhat more supportive than men of including Irish and Ulster-Scots in school curricula (Irish: 48% versus 42%; Ulster-Scots: 34% versus 30%) and of greater NI Executive promotion (Ulster-Scots: 30% versus 27%; Irish: 48% versus 42%). Age differences were statistically significant, with respondents aged 25-44 generally the most supportive of Ulster-Scots, and those aged 18-44 generally the most supportive of Irish. While support declined among those aged 55-64, support for Ulster-Scots rises modestly again among the over-65s.

Religion and political identity were among the strongest predictors of attitudes towards Irish and Ulster-Scots. Respondents identifying as Protestants consistently expressed higher levels of support than those identifying as Catholics across most measures for Ulster-Scots. However, differences are often narrower than might be expected (see Hutchinson, 2022). For example, 46 per cent of Protestants and 40 per cent of Catholics agreed that Ulster-Scots enriches society. Respondents identifying as Catholics consistently expressed higher levels of support than those identifying as Protestant across most measures for Irish.

In terms of political identities, positive responses relating to the Irish language aligned predominantly with Nationalists. Unionists similarly expressed stronger attachment and support than Nationalists to Ulster-Scots. Once more, these findings suggest that languages and culture continue to function as important cultural markers for people in Northern Ireland and are indicative of the continuing historic association between particular languages, heritage, cultures and religious and political identities. Nevertheless, attitudes towards Ulster-Scots were somewhat more evenly distributed across political affiliations than for Irish.

Speaking, learning, and living in Irish

One in five NILT respondents (22%) reported that they speak Irish very well or to some extent, with the highest proportion among 18-24 year olds (31%). Of considerable note is the finding that two out of five people (41%) said that they were very or somewhat interested in learning or improving their Irish language skills. Survey respondents identified a number of ways in which they would prefer to learn Irish. The five most favoured ways of learning Irish are: informal language learning (e.g. community classes, language cafes); online language courses; language learning apps; visits to Gaeltacht areas (where Irish is the main language spoken); and through TV and radio. These methods signal a preference for more community-driven, communicative, and flexible approaches to language learning.

The strong public intention to learn and engage in Irish is mirrored to some extent in responses to questions about economic, cultural, and social activity. 20 per cent of all respondents said that they purchased Irish language literature, music, media, and other products in the last year, and 13 per cent of respondents reported paying into Irish language events. Speaking, learning, and living in the Irish language is linked to identity, with 78 per cent of respondents who speak Irish very well or to some extent saying that Irish language is very or fairly important to their identity.

Ulster-Scots language, heritage, and culture

38 per cent of respondents said they knew about Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture very well or to some extent, while 58 per cent said they did not know about it. Reported knowledge levels varied significantly across demographic and community backgrounds. For example, men, older respondents, Protestants, and Unionists were all more likely to report familiarity with Ulster-Scots.

Knowledge and identity appear closely connected, but not identical. 80 per cent of those who said Ulster-Scots heritage was important to their identity also reported some knowledge of the culture, while awareness was lower among those who did not consider it important to their identity. At the same time, only around one-third (33%) of those with some knowledge described Ulster-Scots as important to their identity.

In relation to future learning of Ulster-Scots, one in five respondents (23%) said they were very or somewhat interested in learning more about Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture, with a larger proportion (70%) expressing little or no interest. The data indicate how existing familiarity strongly shapes attitudes towards future learning. Two out of five (41%) of those who already knew about Ulster-Scots culture expressed interest in learning more, compared with only 13 per cent among those with no knowledge.

Among those interested in learning more, respondents favoured methods such as: television and radio programmes; informal language learning (e.g. community classes, language cafes); visits to hairtrains areas (where Ulster-Scots has particular significance/provenance); music and arts events; and online courses. Engagement with Ulster-Scots cultural activities appears low overall. Only five per cent of respondents had purchased Ulster-Scots-related literature, music, media or products in the previous year, while just four per cent had paid to attend an Ulster-Scots-related event. This indicates that although symbolic or attitudinal support exists, active participation in Ulster-Scots cultural life remains limited.

Visibility

The NILT 2025 survey asked respondents if they would like to see or hear more or less of Irish and Ulster-Scots being used in Northern Ireland, such as in public, official documents, street signs, TV/radio. Results reveal that attitudes to public visibility of Irish and Ulster-Scots are somewhat cautious and mixed. In relation to Irish, 40 per cent of respondents said they would like a lot or a little more visibility, 29 per cent would like less, 21 per cent would like the same amount, and 10 per cent said they did not know. Those who would like more visibility for Irish in public settings are more likely to be women aged 18-34 who speak Irish well/ to some extent.

In relation to Ulster-Scots in public spaces, 21 per cent wanted to see or hear more, 25 per cent preferred less,

35 per cent wanted current levels maintained, and 19 per cent said they did not know. This relatively large “don’t know” category may suggest limited engagement with Ulster-Scots among the wider population.

Support for greater visibility was highest among younger respondents in relation to both Irish and Ulster-Scots, suggesting that younger age groups tend to express somewhat greater openness towards making different languages discernible in public spaces.

Conclusion

Across all indicators, support for Irish language promotion was higher overall than support for Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture. However, attitudes towards Ulster-Scots were somewhat more evenly distributed across political

affiliations than for Irish. This suggests that as Ulster-Scots and Irish fulfil very different functions, roles, and spaces within contemporary Northern Ireland society, education and policy interventions will require bespoke approaches. What this timely survey reveals is robust public support for both Irish language and Ulster-Scots as enriching life in Northern Ireland. For learning and knowing about two of Northern Ireland’s languages, heritage and cultures, adult language learners favour accessible, community-based, and experiential forms of linguistic and cultural engagement rather than formal or institutional learning models.

Key Points:

- There is public support for both Irish language and Ulster-Scots in Northern Ireland (NI): 56% of respondents think that Irish language adds to the richness and diversity of NI. 45% feel this in relation to Ulster-Scots.
- Divergence in public opinion lies in the areas of proposed educational and policy activities. 45% of respondents feel that learning Irish is beneficial for children at school, while 31% feel this in relation to Ulster-Scots.
- 45% of respondents think that more should be done by the NI Executive to encourage and promote the Irish language, with 28% thinking this for Ulster-Scots.
- The top five preferred ways of learning more about Ulster-Scots and Irish are: visiting hairtains and Gaeltacht areas; TV and radio; online courses; apps; informal education.

References

- Hutchinson, W. (2024)** Ulster-Scots: A Brief History of Dialogue. *Revue française de civilisation britannique*, 29(2).
- O’Boyle, A. et al. (2023)** *Fair? Shared? Supported?: Examining expectations and realities for Irish-medium practitioners*. Research report by the Centre for Language Education Research, Queen’s University Belfast. Belfast: Queen’s University Belfast.
- O’Connell, N. (2022)** A Sociolinguistic History of British Sign Language in Northern Ireland. *Sign Language Studies*, 22(2), pp. 233–62.
- Rodgers, A. (2026)** *Combined 2021 NISRA and 2022 CSO Census Map for main languages other than Irish or English*. <https://antoinerodgers.shinyapps.io/lifelangs/>

Authors

Aisling O’Boyle is Reader and Director of the Centre for Language Education Research at Queen’s University Belfast.

Lorna Carson is Professor in Applied Linguistics in the School of Linguistic, Speech and Communication Sciences at Trinity College Dublin.

Paula Devine is Co-director of ARK, and director of the Northern Ireland Life and Times survey.

The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2025, 1,244 people aged 18 years or over took part. NILT is a joint project of Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University and provides an independent source of information on what the public thinks. For more information, visit the survey website at www.ark.ac.uk/nilt.

The questions on languages were funded by the Department for Communities.

This Research Update was supported by the ESRC Impact Acceleration Account at Queen's University Belfast.



In collaboration with Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University

School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences
Ulster University
York Street, Belfast, BT15 1ED

Tel: 028 9536 5611 Email: info@ark.ac.uk

School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work
Queen's University Belfast
20 College Green, Belfast, BT7 1LN

Tel: 028 9097 3034 Email: info@ark.ac.uk