

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER

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Dear James

Thank you for your email of 26 May 2020 about the future of the British Council.

I acknowledge the positive work undertaken by the British Council in Northern Ireland in its role to provide our children and young people with life skills through its delivery of a range of international educational projects under the International Education Programme (IEP). My Department is proud to work with and provide funding to the Council to secure the delivery of the IEP on an annual basis.

One of the key elements of the IEP is to support English Language Assistants with placements in France and Spain, and to welcome Modern Language Assistants into the post-primary education system here in Northern Ireland. In 2019/20 67 undergraduates from Northern Ireland were supported to work abroad in countries as far afield as Columbia. In the same year 37 Modern Language Assistants were placed at schools in Northern Ireland to motivate pupils studying languages and bring an international dimension to the curriculum

In the wider context I can assure you that the Northern Ireland Executive recognises the valuable work of the British Council NI across the education, arts and culture sectors working with local schools, businesses, universities, colleges and artists. The Executive Office has contributed to the British Council's Five Year Strategy and more recently the 'British Council Tailored Review' commissioned by the Foreign Secretary, with the views of departments and stakeholder forwarded to the FCO for consideration.

Devolved Administrations will be working more closely with the British Council in the future and we will ensure NI objectives are addressed. The British Council NI has ongoing engagement with the NI Bureau in Brussels and the US and there is regular engagement between the British Council China and NIB China.

In an increasingly global, connected society, we must be proactive in promoting Northern Ireland's soft power internationally. This will help us achieve our Programme for Government priorities, and international connections and networks will be very important as we move to the economic recovery stage post COVID.

With regard to the position of languages within the Northern Ireland Curriculum, while languages are not part of the statutory curriculum at primary level, many primary schools currently offer additional language opportunities. The 2019 British Council's Language Trends in Northern Ireland Survey indicated that fifty-five per cent of responding primary schools offer language teaching.

At post-primary level, Modern Languages are compulsory at Key Stage 3 and a qualification choice at Key Stage 4 and post-16. At Key Stage 3 all pupils must study an official language of the European Union (other than English and, in Irish speaking schools, Irish). Post-primary schools may provide additional languages at Key Stages 3 and 4, but this will depend on available teaching resources and the level of pupil demand.

My Department provides funding in the region of £160k in 2020/21 to programmes which support language teaching and learning in schools. Organisations funded include the NI Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research (NICILT – up to £75k), and the Confucius Institute (up to £85k).

I hope this reassures the Council of the ongoing commitment to languages within the Northern Ireland Curriculum, and the support for the work of the British Council from both my Department and also the Executive.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Peter Weir". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'P'.

Peter Weir MLA
Minister of Education