

2026 Business Plan



Ulster-Scots Agency
Boord o Ulstèr-Scotch

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Executive Summary



The Ulster-Scots Agency is entering 2026 in a complex and changing environment. Building on the progress of the 2023-2025 Corporate Plan period - during which the Agency refined its vision and mission, strengthened stakeholder relationships, and delivered a suite of programmes under its three strategic aims: Inspire, Empower, Engage.

This plan will respond to an evolving legal context (including cultural rights), demographic and technological changes, and shifting public expectations of cultural, community and educational bodies. It is shaped by governmental and sponsor department priorities in both Northern Ireland and Ireland, recent commitments around minority rights, education reform, and cultural heritage; and lessons learned from recent delivery, including where more capacity, sustainability, or partnership support is needed.

In the next year we will seek to make the most of opportunities presented by the 250th anniversary of the American Declaration of Independence; the delivery of Fleadh Belfast 2026; and external funding opportunities such as PeacePlus, to attract resources and maintain a sense of forward momentum while working to protect frontline services.

If we are unable to attract additional funds to offset the impact of what will be a large real terms reduction (which will be challenging in the current financial climate), we will be faced with making significant cuts to community funding programmes that have previously been protected.

Our Strategic Objectives for the plan period will be:



More people reaching by activity promoting Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture



More people engaging with learning opportunities in Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture



A more vibrant and better-connected Ulster-Scots sector



Improved attitudes towards Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture

The Ulster-Scots Agency

Who we are

The Ulster-Scots Agency (Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch) is an agency of the North South Language Body established under the British/Irish Agreement Act 1999 and the North/South Co-operation (Implementation Bodies) (NI) Order 1999. Its statutory remit is the “promotion of greater awareness and use of Ullans and Ulster-Scots cultural issues, both within Northern Ireland and throughout the island”. In carrying out its functions, in relation to Ulster-Scots language and cultural issues the Agency may:

- Provide advice for both administrations, public bodies and other groups in the private and voluntary sector;
- Undertake research and promotional campaigns; and
- Support projects and grant aid bodies and groups.

The Agency has a board of eight members (currently 3 vacancies), appointed by the North South Ministerial Council. These members, taken together with the sixteen similarly appointed board members of Foras na Gaeilge, comprise the board of the North South Language Body.

The Agency currently has an approved staff complement of 15.77 FTE (Full Time Equivalent)..

In fulfilling our statutory remit, we are required to give effect to a number of important human rights instruments, including the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, which protects the Ulster-Scots language in the UK; the Framework Convention for National Minorities, under which the Ulster-Scots community is recognised as a national minority of the United Kingdom; and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Our work is also impacted by equality and good relations duties set out in the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which have recently been supplemented by an additional duty in relation to cultural identity: and provisions in respect of Ulster-Scots in the education system and the establishment of a Commissioner for the Ulster-Scots and the Ulster British tradition, all as a result of the Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022.





OUR VISION

The vision of the Ulster-Scots Agency is that the rich, vibrant identity of the Ulster-Scots community should be recognised, respected and embraced at home and abroad.

OUR MISSION

The Ulster-Scots Agency will inspire, educate and empower people and communities in Ulster to embrace their Ulster-Scots identity, build kinship with those outside Ulster who share our identity and friendship with those inside Ulster who do not.

OUR VALUES AND APPROACH



AUTHENTICITY

Our work to promote Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture will be underpinned by sound research which demonstrates its historical and contemporary authenticity and reflects its real contribution to life in these islands and around the world.



EXCELLENCE

We will seek at all times to present Ulster-Scots in the best possible way, so that we do justice to the fantastic richness of our language, heritage and culture: and operate to the highest standards of governance and customer service.



FAIRNESS

We will ensure that our services are delivered in a way that is fair and complies with equality, good relations and human rights requirements in both jurisdictions and work with other public bodies to encourage them to ensure similar compliance for Ulster-Scots.



Ulster-Scots Agency

End of Year Review 2025

Supporting Ulster-Scots Language, Culture and Heritage

10 Festivals
~30,000 Attendees

21 Summer Schools
809 Children

£250,000+
Music & Dance
Tuition Grants

128 School Programmes
595+ Qualifications Issued

240,000+ Views
Tartan Day Livestream

NI Assembly Burns Event with MLAs

60
Leid Week Events Promoted

6,500+
Young People Learning Ulster-Scots

18 Exhibitions Loaned Out

Two Blue Plaques Unveiled

Commemoration
General Richard Montgomery in Convooy, Donegal

Pennsylvania Packet Unveiling

28,600+ Social Media Followers

200K+ Newspaper Readers

#UlsterScots

Key achievements in 2025

In the last year, the Ulster-Scots Agency worked hard to manage heightened expectations and increasing demands from the community, in the face of a budget situation that has not delivered expected increases, while at the same time trying to promote innovation and a sense of forward momentum. This has been achieved by developing opportunities, building partnerships and seeking out additional resources to supplement our stagnant baseline budget.

Demand for Ulster-Scots activity in schools continued to be strong, with the Agency delivering over 50 school workshops, which reached more than 5,000 pupils. We delivered 29 After School Clubs and over 100 music and dance tuition programmes in conjunction with our community partners. During the year, 5 primary schools across Ulster attained their Ulster-Scots Flagship School award. At post primary level, the Agency successfully developed and tested a new Transition Year programme for schools in Ireland; and delivered the first ever Kelvin Prize, in partnership with the Institute of Physics, with awards won by schools in Belfast and Stranorlar.



Interest in Ulster-Scots community festivals and summer schools remained steady, with the Agency supporting 10 festivals and 19 summer schools this year, including a number of condensed two-day programmes as part of a more flexible delivery model. Once again, demand was high for community music and dance tuition grants, where we supported 154 projects. By year end, 595 learners had completed accredited certificates or qualifications in snare drumming, piping, Lambeg drumming and drum major skills..

We continued our collaboration with the Boys Brigade, Girls Brigade, Scouts NI and Girlguiding Ulster, supporting the development of Ulster-Scots activity within their programmes. Interest is particularly strong with the GB, with Agency staff attending the annual leaders conference and engaging with over 700 girls at GB Explorer events.





Key achievements in 2025 continued

Ulster-Scots Language Week has continued to grow and language promotion activity has been enhanced by the filling of vacant posts which has attracted vital linguistic capacity to the organisation. During the year the team delivered 36 talks introducing the Ulster-Scots language to schools and community groups, reaching over 1,000 people; developed a new farm safety resource for children in Ulster-Scots, which was adopted by the Health and Safety Executive; and developed and tested a new Ulster-Scots language learning programme, Dinnae Houl Yer Wheest.



Raising awareness of Ulster-Scots through our significant connections to the USA continued to be a priority as the 250th anniversary of the American Declaration of Independence approaches in July 2026. During the year we hosted high profile events welcoming Minister Lyons, the US Consul General and representatives of the America 250 Commission to the Discover Ulster-Scots Centre and towards the end of the year led the roll out of a £150k America 250 grant programme for the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland.

We have continued to break new ground sharing Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture with new audiences, showcasing at the National Ploughing Championships, attending the Big Refugee Picnic in Belfast and developing a new travelling exhibition on the shared Scottish traditions around St Patrick, which was exhibited at St Mary's University College as part of Feile an Phobail. We are also representing on the organising committee of Fleadh Belfast 2026.



Business Objectives

Business Objectives

To deliver our Strategic Objectives and wider government policy in the coming period, the Ulster-Scots Agency will build its work around three key business objectives of Inspire, Empower, and Engage. These are also underpinned by a shared Organisational Objective: Improve.

SO1: Inspire:



The Agency will identify, interpret and bring to life Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture through an integrated programme of promotional activities delivered in each year of the Corporate Plan period.

Inspiration is the starting point for interest, participation and pride. By identifying, interpreting, and enlivening Ulster-Scots language, heritage, and culture, we can spark curiosity and motivate individuals and communities to explore and connect with Ulster-Scots. Inspiration drives learning and engagement and encourages people to become part of a cultural community.

SO2: Empower



The Agency will equip individuals and groups with knowledge and skills to engage with Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture through a programme of directly delivered and grant funded learning initiatives delivered in each year of the Corporate Plan period.

Empowerment is about giving people the knowledge, tools and confidence to take part, helping them to become active participants, rather than remain passive observers. This builds resilience, capacity and ownership within the community. Empowered people multiply impact and create a lasting legacy that extends beyond direct interventions. This aligns with best practice in cultural development, which emphasises collaboration and shared leadership.

SO3: Engage



The Agency will support the development of the Ulster-Scots sector so that it is vibrant, effective and connected, internally and externally, through a programme of community support and engagement, delivered in each year of the Corporate Plan period.

Developing a cohesive Ulster-Scots sector that is able to provide effective, holistic support to Ulster-Scots linguistic, heritage and cultural communities in all their diversity; supported by local, national and international relationships and encouraging positive engagement with others demonstrates that the Ulster-Scots community is both inclusive and outward-looking. This is key to enhancing good relations and respect.

SO4: Improve



The Agency will work to continuously improve the systems and processes that underpin our delivery of services and stewardship of public money through the delivery of an annual improvement programme, delivered in each year of the Corporate Plan period.

Building the organisation's resilience, capacity and capability by investing in our workforce and providing them with the tools to do the job in a changing world will equip us to meet the challenges of delivering public services in a difficult operating environment.

Measurable Performance

Measurable Performance Targets

A set of corporate Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) has been identified to capture and reflect the impact of the Ulster-Scots Agency in the coming period. These KPIs are readily measurable and meaningful for our organisation and key stakeholders. Year 1 of the corporate plan period (2026) will be used to establish the baseline against which future progress will be measured.

During the plan period, we will also work to develop our information gathering capability to take account of key metrics in relation to Programmes for Government in both jurisdictions

SO1: Inspire

How will we measure this?

- # of people reached by activities promoting Ulster-Scots language
- # of people reached by activities promoting Ulster-Scots heritage and culture
- # of community organisations supported
- # of volunteers sustained or created
- # of schools supported
- % of service users reporting positive/improved attitude towards Ulster-Scots language
- % of service users reporting positive/improved attitude towards Ulster-Scots heritage/culture
- % of service users reporting positive experience of the Ulster-Scots Agency

SO3: Engage

How will we measure this?

- # of community organisations supported
- # of volunteers sustained or created
- # of schools supported
- % of service users reporting positive/improved attitude towards Ulster-Scots language
- % of service users reporting positive/improved attitude towards Ulster-Scots heritage/culture
- % of service users reporting positive experience of the Ulster-Scots Agency

SO2: Empower

How will we measure this?

- # of people participating in Ulster-Scots language learning programmes
- # of people participating in Ulster-Scots heritage and culture learning programmes
- # of people achieving Ulster-Scots language qualifications, accreditation or certification
- # of people achieving Ulster-Scots heritage and culture qualifications, accreditation or certification
- # of community organisations supported
- # of volunteers sustained or created
- # of schools supported
- % of service users reporting positive/improved attitude towards Ulster-Scots language
- % of service users reporting positive/improved attitude towards Ulster-Scots heritage/culture
- % of service users reporting positive experience of the Ulster-Scots Agency

SO4: Improve

How will we measure this?

- # of improvement targets met
- % of improvement targets met
- % of staff reporting positive difference as a result of improvement targets
- % of service users reporting positive difference as a result of improvement targets (where relevant)

Resourcing: 2025 Budget



The budget has been profiled against our key work areas as follows:

Business Plan - Proposed 2026 Budget Allocation									
Reporting Currency £ Sterling									
North South Body	Approved Budget			Proposed Change			Proposed Budget		
	Current	2025 Capital	Total	Current	Capital	Total	Current	Capital	Total
€1 = 0.84 GBP									
Programme									
1. Serving the Community	754,351	-	754,351	-	-	-	754,351	-	754,351
2. Partnership Working	213,560	-	213,560	-	-	-	213,560	-	213,560
3. Marketing	211,918	-	211,918	-	-	-	211,918	-	211,918
4. Education	182,000	-	182,000	-	-	-	182,000	-	182,000
Uliff: Serving the Community	0	-	0	-	-	-	0	-	0
Uliff: Partnership	0	-	0	-	-	-	0	-	0
Total Programme Expenditure	1,361,829		1,361,829				1,361,829		1,361,829
Pay Costs	909,464	-	909,464	-	-	-	909,464	-	909,464
Uliff: Additional Staff Costs	167,801	-	167,801	-	-	-	167,801	-	167,801
Non Pay Administration Costs	315,881	-	315,881	-	-	-	315,881	-	315,881
Total Administration Costs (excl Pensions)	1,393,146		1,393,146				1,393,146		1,393,146
Total Programme & Administration Expenditure, excl Pension Costs	2,754,974		2,754,974	0	-	-	2,754,974		2,754,974
NI share representing 75%	2,066,231	-	2,066,231	-	-	-	2,066,231	-	2,066,231
IRL share representing 25%	688,744	-	688,744	-	-	-	688,744	-	688,744
Pension costs - IRL	12,428	-	12,428	-	-	-	12,428	-	12,428
Pension costs - NI (Addition to NSMC Budget by DfC only)	49,866	-	49,866	1,896	-	1,896	51,762	-	51,762
Overall Total Expenditure	2,817,269		2,817,269	1,896	-	1,896	2,819,165		2,819,165
Total NI share, including pension costs in addition to NSMC Approved Budget	2,116,097	-	2,116,097	1,896	-	1,896	2,117,993	-	2,117,993
Total IRL share, including pension costs	688,744	-	688,744	-	-	-	688,744	-	688,744
Additional IRL Funding	0	-	0	168,000	-	168,000	168,000	-	168,000
Total Budget	2,804,840		2,804,840	169,896	0	169,896	2,974,736		2,974,736
Existing Projected Staff Numbers (FTE)		15.77			0			15.77	
Narrative to support expenditure figures:									
1. Full compliment of staff for the year									
2. No budgetary uliff applied									

Funding and Resources

The Ulster-Scots Agency is funded by DfC in Northern Ireland and DRCDG in Ireland. Funding is provided on the basis of approved Corporate and Business Plans.

The Ulster-Scots Agency expects a stagnant baseline budget in 2026. Key funding decisions will be made to ensure the work moves forward, but without adequate resourcing, the Agency will be unable to deliver to its maximum potential.

The Ulster-Scots Agency has operated with a headcount of 15.77 for over 15 years. Unlike other North South bodies, the Agency has not been able to avail of non-permanent employment status arrangements to meet increasing workloads, which presents challenges in retaining key staff and in turn, skills and knowledge within the organisation. During the same period, the organisation's baseline budget has increased only once, with all other years marked by flat or reduced allocations. For the organisation to achieve its full potential and ensure maximum delivery against this and future plans, funding and staffing limitations, which are a significant constraining factor, will need to be addressed on a sustainable basis. The current projected flat cash position, with the organisation facing a real terms reduction, will result in a significant and unavoidable cut to our community grants budget, which has largely been shielded in previous years, if we are unable to attract additional resources to ameliorate it.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Governance



The delivery of the Business Plan will be monitored by the Board, through monthly reports produced by the Senior Management Team and discussed at regular meetings. These reports will provide an update on progress against the delivery of the annual Business Plan as subsets of the Corporate Plan. Monthly reports also include an update on expenditure and variance against annual budgets.

In addition:

- The Ulster-Scots Agency carries out a continuous programme of post project evaluation for its activities.
- The Agency's CEO and Directors take part in quarterly monitoring meetings with senior officials from Sponsor Departments. At these meetings, business plan performance is reviewed by key achievements, areas of key risk are reviewed and audit recommendations are carefully tracked.
- The Agency provides regular progress reports and updates to language sectoral meetings of the North South Ministerial Council.

Governance

As a North-South body, the Ulster-Scots Agency adheres to a very specific governance model. Overall policy direction from Ministers, meeting through the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) informs the development of plans and work programmes. All plans and work programmes are presented to the Ulster-Scots Agency Board for approval and authorisation. Appropriate consultations take place as required with key stakeholders. The Ulster-Scots Agency is committed to the highest standards of governance.

The Agency's robust governance procedures cover:

- financial affairs;
- strategic planning and performance measurement;
- the management of security of information;
- codes of conduct;
- the management and development of staff; and
- the compliance with statutory legislative requirements.

The Ulster-Scots Agency is subject to external audit by the offices of the Comptrollers and Auditors General in Ireland and Northern Ireland. In addition, the Ulster-Scots Agency has an outsourced Internal Audit function that delivers an annual Internal Audit Plan approved by our Audit and Risk Committee. The Ulster-Scots Agency's audited Annual Accounts are published on our website.

Digitalisation and Communication



Digitalisation

The Ulster-Scots Agency is progressing a digitalisation agenda which aims to transform the way we work, streamline and automate our business processes, how we interact with our clients and stakeholders, how we provide information and advice in digital settings and how we utilise data for insights-led decision making.

This will improve the service we provide to the community and will allow us to reach a greater number of stakeholders than we currently do. We will achieve this reach by providing relevant and up to date digital content and knowledge in an accessible manner and by the improvement of our grants management digital platforms.

Equality

The Ulster-Scots Agency is committed to doing business in a manner that provides equal opportunities in line with statutory requirements in both jurisdictions. The Ulster-Scots Agency is committed to the implementation of its approved Equality Scheme and its Equality Action Plan, and to the fulfilment of the obligations contained in both.

Communicating the Plan

The Ulster-Scots Agency will develop a focused and integrated Communications Plan that will underpin our activity and support the operational delivery of this Business Plan. Our strategic approach will utilise a wide range of marketing channels and include proactive, sustained stakeholder engagement. Partnership working has been identified as a strategic enabler and will be a key feature of our communications strategy. Our activity will be supported by strong branding, clear messaging and communications campaigns and public relations activity aligned to delivering our strategic priorities and business outcomes.

Communications will be developed to make our funding clear for community and voluntary groups and will support 'on the ground' delivery of events and programmes across Ireland and Northern Ireland through use of traditional, digital and social media channels. We will deliver specific campaigns and messaging to create awareness of the specific events and programming we offer. Campaigns will have a clear 'call to action' that encourages participation among the community and stakeholders across our sector.

The Business Plan will be published on our website and supported by focused promotional activity and stakeholder engagement throughout the period of the plan. The staff and Board have been involved in the strategic review and planning process and the final plan will be shared at all levels of the organisation. Our mission, vision and values will be displayed prominently within our offices and staff will be supported to clearly understand how their work contributes to the achievement of our objectives and targets.

While our Business Plan will guide our delivery, the Ulster-Scots Agency will keep our approach under review, to ensure we remain agile and responsive to our evolving operating environment and business needs.



Meet Our Board

KEITH GAMBLE

CHAIRPERSON

Keith Gamble is a partner in a Belfast law firm.

This is his second term as Chairman of the Ulster-Scots Agency, having previously served from 2016 to 2021.

He has had a lifelong involvement in the pipe band scene, playing as a snare drummer, most recently with Gilnahirk Pipe Band.

He has previously served on the board of the Ulster-Scots Community Network and the Ulster-Scots Academy Implementation Group. .

LAVINIA TILSON

VICE-CHAIRPERSON

Native from Granard, Co. Longford, Lavinia has lived in Co. Cavan for the last twenty-seven years.

Prior to graduating from Trinity College in 1992 with a B. Ed. degree, she received her secondary education in Ard Scoil Phadraig in Granard followed by completing her Leaving Certificate through the medium of Irish in Coláiste Moibhí. Ms. Tilson commenced her teaching profession in Raphoe, Co. Donegal and is currently a primary teaching principal in Ballyconnell Co. Cavan, a position she has held for over twenty years.

KARYN DEVENNEY

Karyn grew up in the Laggan Valley in East Donegal, where she experienced the traditions and the language of the Ulster-Scots community on a daily basis.

Her father's passion for the Ulster-Scots community has inspired her to develop a deeper appreciation of her background.

Her first teaching position was in St Louise's College on the Falls Road, Belfast, as a Drama and English teacher. This teaching opportunity influenced and shaped her greatly in her profession. She spent 2 years in The Rathgael Centre in Bangor, Co Down working with Young Offenders and Children in Care.

At present, she is the Deputy Principal of a Primary School in Manorcunningham, Co Donegal.

TREVOR WILSON

Trevor Wilson has served the people of Cookstown as an Ulster Unionist Councillor since 1989.

He is a past Council Chairman and past Chairman of the Council's Audit committee, Chairman of Cookstown Enterprise Centre, Chairman of Mid Ulster Pipe Band Section and a member of Friends of Killymoon Castle.

Trevor has a lot of experience of serving on Voluntary boards and is a founder member of Fairhill and District Credit Union. He is an avid Northern Ireland football fan and a member of Killymoon Golf club.

Meet Our Board

IAIN CARLISLE

Iain is the Chief Executive of the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland. Previously he held the post of Operations Director at the Ulster-Scots Community Network for 9 years, and during this time developed a close working relationship with many voluntary and community groups from the Ulster-Scots community. He is a keen traditional musician and has performed widely as a soloist and as part of a number of groups and marching bands - including Brunswick Accordion Band where he has tutored many young players for almost 30 years.

Iain is married with two daughters and to relax enjoys travelling, military history and country sports.

ALAN MILLAR

Alan Millar is originally from east Donegal but is now working as a journalist based in Ballymoney, Co Antrim. Alan is a writer and poet in Ulster-Scots and English. In 2021, Alan was the winner of Hugh MacDiarmid Tassie for Scots poetry and the inaugural Linen Hall Library Ulster-Scots short story competition. He was the 2023 winner of Linen Hall Library Ulster-Scots poetry competition. His first collection of poetry 'Echas frae tha Big Swilly Swally' was published in May 2023 and he was nominated for Scots Writer of the Year, 2023 Scots Language Awards.

Alan is currently completing an ACNI assisted second poetry collection, Frae Erris tae Wrath. He commenced a Doctorate with Ulster University in September 2024 on the United Irish newspaper, Northern Star. Most recently, Alan is working as a joint editor of the Flann O'Brien trilingual schools' creative writing collection 'Abhainn Burn River'

IAN PARSLEY

Ian is married and lives just outside Belfast, though he hails originally from Groomsport at the top of the Ards Peninsula.

A speaker of several Western European languages, Ian is a linguist by academic background, compiling ground-breaking research on language change in Germanic languages as his dissertation at Newcastle University. Ian continues to write and commentate on linguistic issues, including on effective language learning methods and minority language development.

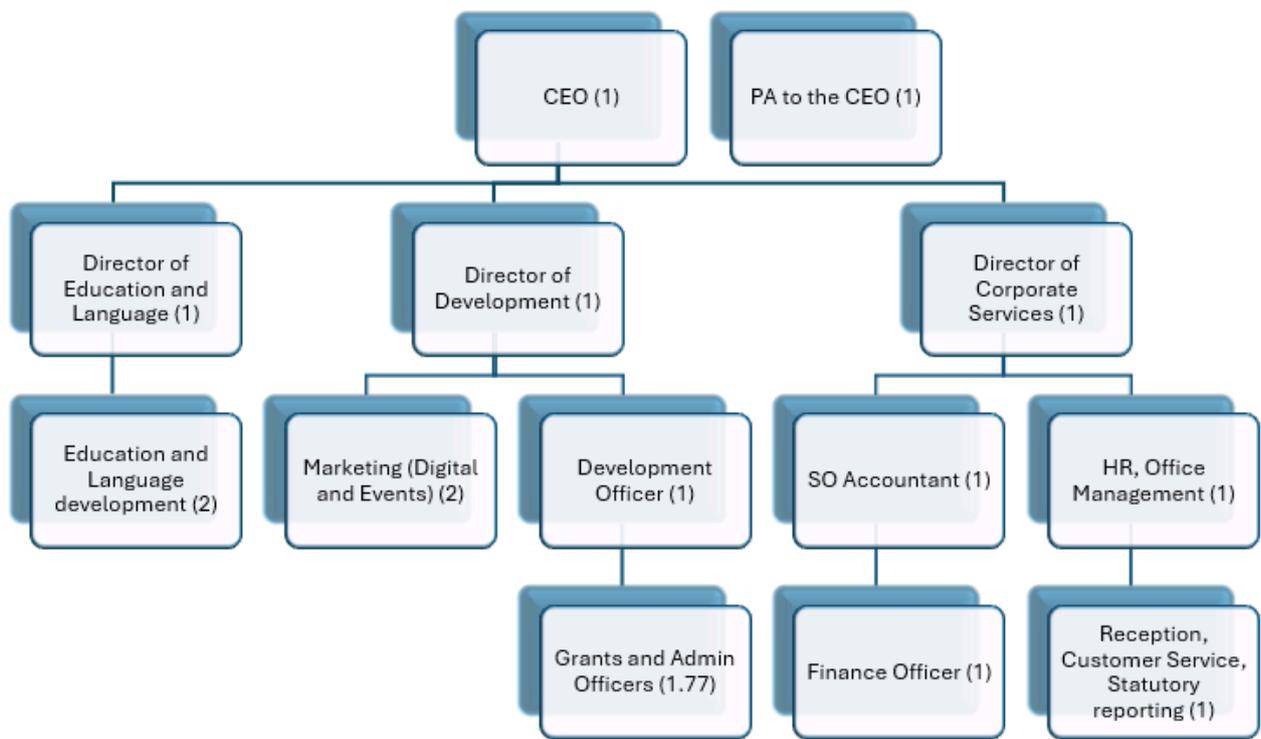
A past local councillor, Ian is also involved in hockey umpiring and public policy analysis and research (particularly in the fields of health and the economy).

Ian has previously served as the Chair of the Ulster-Scots Broadcasting Fund from 2012 to 2019.

LESLIE MCKEAGUE

Leslie is a retired building contractor and lives in Bailieborough, Co. Cavan. He has been involved in Ulster-Scots projects in Cavan and Monaghan for many years. At present he is a committee member of the Presbyterian Historical Society and the Ulster History Circle. Leslie is also a former chairperson of Breifne Historical Society and Bailieborough Historical Society. He previously served on the boards of Bailieborough Community School and Bailieborough Development Association and is currently a board member of Bailieborough Model School.

Our Organisational Structure



Our offices

The Agency is headquartered in Belfast, with a regional office in Raphoe, Donegal.

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