

Mícheál Ó Duibh, Aonach Mhacha, Armagh (aonachmhacha.com)

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Ciamar a tha sibh? Let me introduce myself. My name is Mícheál Ó Duibh. I'm the chairperson of Aonach Mhacha, the cultúrlann located in Armagh City in the county of Armagh. The concept of a cultúrlann is nothing new to the north of Ireland. We are the third city to have such a tremendous facility and resource. The first cultúrlann in the north of Ireland was founded in Belfast City and the second cultúrlann popped up in Derry City. And as I said, we were the third. Now, the concept of a cultúrlann is something that it's hard to define. It's very much what the community wants. So there are similar facilities, even though they may not call them cultúrlanna, but provide the same resources and the same type of events. There's one in the Twinbrook which is outside of Armagh and beside the bunscoil where I sent my own children. And there's another one in Castlewellan. There's also one in Newry City, one in Strabane. They are - that's effectively all over the north of Ireland.

We ourselves looked about establishing our own cultúrlann in the early 2000s. When I say early, around 2006, 2007, 2008, when various people throughout the community of the north of Ireland, and specifically in Armagh, were invited to a meeting to propose the establishment of a cultúrlann for ourselves in Armagh. I was present at that meeting. And over the years, I've always had a great interest in the progress of the cultúrlann in Armagh. And I'm now lucky and fortunate to be in the position that I am chairperson of Aonach Mhacha. The building itself, which is a modern, beautiful looking building located in the centre of Armagh, was originally an old fire brigade station. The fire brigade vacated that building, and it was sitting there in very sad-looking shape for many a year. But we took the initiative to investigate the potential of acquiring that site, for all the many benefits that it had - the way that it was centralised, the way it was, if you like, really bang in the middle of the community of Armagh, and we were lucky enough to acquire it.

The type of funding that we've acquired over the years is for capital funding, around £2.5 million. And that funding came from the Department of Communities, it came from the Northern Ireland Arts Council and also from the Department of Foreign Affairs in the south of Ireland. We've also had other funding sources as well, such as Ultach, and other funding sources, which are all available on our website, of course.

Let me tell you a bit about the building. I'm clearly biased but it's a beautiful building. As you walk in, there are two entrances into the building, and as you walk in you'll see straight away a reception, a café/restaurant, and we also have a lovely shop on the bottom floor of the building. And also a performance area as well, where the likes of music events, plays, lectures, poetry readings, really anything can be facilitated. So it has a facility for potentially, say, 100 to 200 people and could sit comfortably on the bottom floor, enjoying whatever events or whatever is going on on the bottom floor.

So that's the bottom floor. We have in total three floors within the building. On the second floor are office facilities, and also one of the rooms is kitted out as a radio station. Our current tenants all have specific interests in the Irish language. And that's the type of concept that we have, that those who work within the centre are Irish speakers themselves or have an interest in Irish. On the top floor, that's for conferences. People may be interested to use our facilities. But it's not only conference facilities. You can have training days there. We can have art exhibitions, book launches, any of those things that one would expect and that a community centre would provide. We also have on the top floor as well, facilities inside and outside of the building. So you can take your event and actually go outside where there's a beautiful view of Armagh that we're lucky enough to have. You have a beautiful

view of both the cathedrals in Armagh. And when we're in the middle of it, which in itself is itself quite, important to us to show that we are in the middle of bringing communities together. So we have the Church of Ireland Cathedral and also the Catholic Cathedral, and we see ourselves as a middle between those two predominant buildings in the city of Armagh.

So as you know yourself, that's not enough to have a beautiful building. But we also need staff to run that building. The funding that we get to fund our staff at the moment is through the Dormant Accounts Fund [www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/programmes/dormant-accounts-ni] and also through Foras na Gaeilge [<https://www.forasnagaeilge.ie/>], which fund an Irish language officer and also an officer who looks at the funding, if you like, of the digital strategy that we have for Aonach Mhacha. The building itself, we want it open as often as possible, and for as many hours as possible. So we do provide the usual stuff. Anybody off the street can walk into Aonach Mhacha. Everybody's welcome. There's information for tourists. There's information for the people who are from Armagh, who can just walk in, have a cup of coffee, enjoy whatever, look around our shop and decide to purchase if they would like to. There's always a nice sort of an atmosphere around the bottom floor. And this is crucial because we don't want it just to feel like an office building. But it's also good to have people working within the building itself, because it gives us a vibrancy and a life of its own.

We have everything from Irish language classes to music classes to book launches, to conferences, to training days, performances of art and music and and any other such arts.

Our vision in terms of Aonach Mhacha is a very simple one, and I think if I can give any advice is make your vision and your mission as simple as possible. Ours is about creating as many events and opportunities for the people of Armagh to speak Irish, in whatever form that may take.

Let me tell you a wee bit about Armagh itself. Armagh is a small city with a population around 16,000. The county of Armagh is around 120,000 or so, 130,000 perhaps. Armagh city is not too far from the border, which brings us close to our neighbouring Irish language communities in Monaghan. Armagh itself has two Irish medium preschools. There is an Irish medium primary school and Irish medium post-primary school, catering for the needs of Irish medium education from pre-school to post-primary level. Also within Aonach Mhacha we have a diploma course funded through the University of Ulster, where we provide courses in third level education. The children who attend those schools, pre-school, primary and post-primary, the vision is that they will take each one of those steps in their progression through Irish medium education. But at post-primary level, children also come from neighbouring towns such as Portadown, Lurgan, Newry, Crossmaglen, Dungannon, and all those children then can travel to Coláiste Chaitríona, the Irish medium post-primary provider within Armagh. There used to be a time, even when I was growing up, where you could possibly name all the Irish speakers in Armagh. But that has changed dramatically with the establishment of Irish medium schools. It's impossible to name all the people who can speak Irish in Armagh at the moment. But what we realised very fast is it's not just enough for children to attend Irish medium schools where they will have, what, 3 to 5 hours of education, six hours of education? Six out of 24 hours in every day is not enough if you want to be able to speak Irish. That needs to be supported. We were very strongly of the opinion that even though various things were happening, in order to facilitate meeting that requirement through the likes of Gael-Linn, which are long established in Armagh, and the likes of Cairde Ard Mhacha, where they put on sports events, Halloween events, Christmas events, for those children. We realised that we needed this centre to centralise all of that there. And if you like, for it to be the one stop shop for the Irish language in Armagh, the centre, the place to go. So we were lucky enough to walk that road and to bring Aonach Mhacha where is at the moment. The hundreds of children who speak Irish in Armagh, some

of them will speak Irish at home, the vast majority of them will not. Their parents had to make the decision that they were not able to speak Irish themselves, but this is something that they wanted for their children. So we feel that it is very much our duty to provide those services and to provide as many opportunities for those children to speak the language in which they are educated. That in itself is a simple approach. It's a simple outlook. It's about allowing people or giving people opportunities to speak Irish.

We also have those who are interested in learning Irish that are at the adult stage of their life. So we have Irish language classes for beginners and also for those who have a reasonable grasp of the language to those who have a very high proficiency in Irish and we cater for all of them. But we want to move forward and not only teach Irish, but to provide services through the medium of Irish, and especially for those children and also for adults who are keenly seeking events, opportunities, pastimes through the medium of Irish.

So our centre provides if you like a walk-in facility where you can simply come in, have a coffee and speak Irish, to something that is far more structured, such as learning music through the medium of Irish.

But that all needs to be developed a lot more, and that's the next big step for Aonach Mhacha, to get there. We have our centre, which was opened in 2022, we were fortunate enough as soon as it opened a week later, Covid came, it was not long open until it was closed again. But we didn't let that stop us.

We have great staff within our building, and we also have a very dedicated board of directors, who come from I suppose all aspects of life, with different views and outlooks, and that's crucial and important. But it isn't just about one person's view of where Aonach Mhacha should be, it's about a view of a lot of people of where it should be. And if we have that dynamic, then we can grow and continue going from success to success.

Yes, I have painted a very rosy picture of how Aonach Mhacha started, and how it aims to progress. But challenges do come with all of that, there's no doubt about that. Nothing would be enjoyable or beneficial if it wasn't challenging, and certainly we had our challenges in Aonach Mhacha. And we'll continue to have our challenges, that's a part of the beauty of constantly striving to do the best for the language within the city of Armagh, and for that to be one city amongst many cities throughout Ireland who realise and appreciate the benefits of the Irish language, for themselves, for their children, and for their families, and for their communities.

So that's how we want to take this forward, in a progressive way, a way that's open and welcome to everybody, no matter what ability you have. Whether you can just say one word in Irish, two words in Irish, no words in Irish, or if you're extremely capable in the language, it's a centre for everybody. It's a centre for children, it's a centre for old people, it's a centre for parents, it's a centre for everyone.

So our bigger vision is, as I say, to create as many Irish language speaking opportunities as is possible - whether that's a parent-and-toddler group, whether it's preschool facilities, whether it's having events for children, for adults, for the older generation within Armagh, that's what we're about.

But it's also connecting the language to the people of Armagh, to their cultures, to their traditions, to their history, and showing that the language is central to all of us, which it is. In terms of facilities, we have, as you can see, it's very much a walk-in approach at the bottom floor, with everything that one would expect. We have, again, in terms of a modern building, we have disability access, we have lifts and toilet facilities within the building that cater for all

of that. We have wi-fi throughout the building, which is free. And we have, the way it's laid out, the way we have exhibitions within the centre shows if you like the warm feeling of it. But that's what it's about, it's about making something that people want to walk into, want to visit. We very much welcome those who are just nosy, to those who have a good understanding of what we're about. And that will be our constant vision as we grow Aonach Mhacha going into the future.

Challenges, well it's two levels. Funding, making the case for Aonach Mhacha, why Aonach Mhacha over everywhere else. The second is interest in the Irish language within Armagh, to get people to know what we're about, to get that message out there that we are community centred, we're not about making a profit, anything that's made in Aonach Mhacha goes back into Aonach Mhacha. So there's no self interest in any of it. But that's what we're about.

I wish you all the very best in what you're trying to achieve in Edinburgh. My mother herself was educated in Edinburgh as a teacher. And it's good to make that link. But she came back to Armagh to educate the likes of myself and others.

I wish you all the very best. If there are any questions, queries, anything you want to run by us, we're happy to facilitate. Come over, give us a visit and we'll show you around what we have done. We're not going to pretend we are the best. But we'd like to think we've made a good effort at it. So I hope this has been helpful. Go raibh maith agaibh. Slán.