



**Government of the Northwest Territories Response to Committee
Report 49-19(2): Report on the 2021-2022 Review of the Official Languages Act**

BACKGROUND

The Standing Committee on Government Operations (SCOGO, or Committee) finalized and released the *Report on the 2021-2022 Review of the Official Languages Act (OLA)* (the Report) on March 27, 2023. The Report and its recommendations were considered and adopted by Committee of the Whole on March 30, 2023.

The report proposes four (4) transformative changes and twelve (12) specific recommendations for the Government of the Northwest Territories' (GNWT) departments and agencies. These recommendations focus on official Indigenous languages, with no recommendations directed toward French.

On March 28, 2023 Bill 63: *An Act to Amend the Official Languages Act* received third reading and Assent to clarify and strengthen the role of the Languages Commissioner, amalgamate the Languages Boards, update language in the Act to enhance protection of the language rights of all communities in the NWT, and emphasize the importance of language protection as a means of implementing the Articles of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)*.

These amendments were drafted, reviewed and passed by the Legislative Assembly before the conclusion of the Standing Committee's review and release of their final report on the 2021-2022 review of the Act. The response below has been developed to obviate the need for legislative action that will only take place after the conclusion of the next statutory review of the *Official Languages Act*.

Transformative Change 1: Implement the right to receive services in your official language of choice

GNWT Response

This Transformative change aligns with NWT Indigenous Languages Action Plan Goal 2: Language Access, which speaks to the need for all people to be able to use and benefit from high-quality public services in all official Indigenous languages.

Recommendation 1: *That Government of the Northwest Territories recognize the right of each resident to receive services in the official language of their choice.*

This right should go beyond the concepts of “significant demand” and “nature of the office,” and follow the principle of substantive equality. As such, the GNWT should consider quantitative and qualitative characteristics when determining service levels to each official language community. This right should also be remedial in nature, designed to counter the gradual decline of Indigenous official language speakers.

GNWT Response

This recommendation aligns in part with Action 2.1 Deliverable 2 of the NWT Indigenous Languages Action Plan:

- Review existing *Official Languages Policy* and *Official Languages Guidelines*, including active offer, designated areas, areas of significant demand and signage.

Work has begun to replace the *Official Languages Guidelines* with updated *Indigenous Languages Communications Guidelines* and *Indigenous Languages Services Standards*.

The *Indigenous Languages Communications Guidelines* seek to promote multilingualism to ensure effective and efficient communication between government and the public, help revitalize the NWT’s official Indigenous languages, and promote their use by incorporating Indigenous languages in government communications in a meaningful and consistent way.

As the concept of substantive equality hinges on the government’s capacity to deliver services, the GNWT will explore how this may be actualized in whole or part within the *Indigenous Languages Services Standards*, which are currently being drafted by ECE and are set to be completed by Summer 2023. To approach service delivery similar to what exists for French-language services would require a dedicated interpreter corps within the government that would field public inquiries on an on-call basis and help residents navigate services. Although it is possible that enhanced support could be provided, for example, by complementing or upgrading the role of existing Government Service Officers, there is substantial work being done to provide training for prospective interpreters and increase the overall level of service in Indigenous languages across the GNWT.

The Departments of Education, Culture and Employment (ECE) and Finance are actively working on developing an Indigenous languages professional training program for GNWT employees who are interested in learning an Indigenous language as part of professional development and/or for the purposes of service delivery, as part of Finance’s Indigenous Recruitment and Retention Action Plan and ECE’s NWT Indigenous Languages Action Plan.

Recommendation 2: *That Government of the Northwest Territories set up a policy and a plan to display more Indigenous-language signs before the 19th Assembly ends.*

The policy should require all new signs at all territorial public bodies and community governments to prominently feature the local Indigenous official language(s). The plan should set targets and offer funding for new Indigenous-language signs.

GNWT Response

The 1997 *Official Language Guidelines*, which are in place until they are replaced by the new *Indigenous Languages Communications Guidelines* and *Indigenous Languages Services Standards*, direct signage to be in Indigenous languages.

The 1997 *Official Languages Guidelines* state the following:

Building Signage

Exterior Signs:

- When an exterior sign is placed on a building or facility which houses a GNWT office, the sign shall be in all the Official Languages of the Designated Area.
- In addition, the sign shall include the official languages of other Designated Area(s) when:
 - an office in the building provides services to the public from other Designated Areas (see Guideline 2, “Designated Offices”); and
 - members of the public are required to obtain these services in person.

Interior Signs:

- The wording on the main directory board signs and directory signs shall be in the same Official Languages as the ones used on the building or facility’s Exterior Sign.

Construction Signs:

- Construction signs on GNWT buildings or public works shall be in the Official Languages of the Designated Area where the construction is taking place.

Park Signage

Main Entrance:

- Parks in the Western Arctic – Signs shall be in the Official Languages of all Designated Areas of the Western Arctic.
- Parks in the Eastern Arctic – Signs shall be in the Official Languages of all Designated Areas of the Eastern Arctic.

Public Highway Signs

- When pictograms are not in use, ice-road and ferry crossing signs shall be in the Official Languages of the Designated Area where the sign is located.

While this Guideline on signage requires updates to remedy reference to the Eastern Arctic (now Nunavut), the intention to ensure signage includes Indigenous languages will remain in the updated guidelines.

The Department of Infrastructure has drafted a Signage Manual that follows these guidelines and is working diligently to incorporate Indigenous languages in all external signage.

Regarding the recommendation directed toward community governments, the *Official Languages Act* does not apply to community governments. Each Indigenous Government is provided with funding for Indigenous language programs and services, which they may use to develop or update signage.

Recommendation 3: *That the Department of Education, Culture and Employment commission a study on the state of Michif in the NWT and options to recognize Michif in the Official Languages Act. The study should be tabled in the House within the first 18 months of the 20th Assembly.*

GNWT Response

As noted in previous communications with Standing Committee, Saunders' (2015) thesis is the most recent academic-based research on the Métis language spoken in the NWT. The research shows that the variety of Michif spoken in the NWT can be classified as a variety of French, in contrast with Michif as it is understood in the Prairies as a mix of French and Cree. This could potentially explain why the Canadian Census has reflected over the past decade that the number of self-identified Michif speakers is no more than ten individuals in the entire NWT.

In terms of status for languages, dialects that are commonly referenced in the NWT (e.g., Wiilìdeh, as a dialect of Tłıchǫ) are not listed as official languages in the legislation. However, there is certainly room in the preamble of the *Official Languages Act* to recognize dialects and minor variants, including Michif.

Given Michif's minimal census presence, ECE does not foresee any change in the status of Michif or the need for further study, unless revitalization efforts see a dramatic increase in the population of speakers as Indigenous to the NWT. Currently, ECE provides funding to the NWT Métis Nation to revitalize Métis languages, including Cree, Chipewyan and Michif, where such revitalization would be the chief locus of this work.

Transformative Change 2: Implement the right to K-12 immersion in your local language

GNWT Response

The *Education Act* speaks to language of instruction and languages taught within Junior Kindergarten to Grade 12 education in the NWT. Section 70 states that the language of instruction of the education program must be an Official Language. Section 71 gives the District Education Authority the authority to determine the language of instruction used in an education district. The DEA is allowed to choose an Official Language as the language of instruction if:

- (a) there is a significant demand for the language in the education district;
- (b) there are a sufficient number of teachers who are fluent in the language available to teach in the language in the education district; and
- (c) there are sufficient and suitable school program materials available in the language.

Under the *Education Act*, the Minister may give directions that establish standards and guidelines for the selection and use of a language of instruction, to assure the maintenance of the highest possible standards of education.

Immersion Indigenous language instruction is therefore currently provided through the *Education Act* and accompanying policies such as the *Indigenous Languages and Education Policy*. As such, this transformative change would be more appropriately explored as part of ongoing efforts to modernize the *Education Act*, as discussed further under Recommendation 4.

Recommendation 4: That the Department of Education, Culture and Employment implement an exercisable right for Northerners to full K-12 immersion in each local Indigenous official language. To achieve this vision, ECE should prioritize Indigenous language revitalization in the ongoing Education Act modernization.

GNWT Response

As noted above, the authority to determine language of instruction is provided to DEAs within the *Education Act*, and ECE supports the planning and implementation of a growing number of immersion programs by DEAs throughout the territory.

ECE is establishing an Indigenous Language Instructors' Employment Program (ILIEP) to train prospective Indigenous language instructors to potentially teach immersion programs. A pilot ILIEP phase will commence in the upcoming 2023-24 school year in select regions with Indigenous Language Support Assistants and, if successful, will expand to additional regions following the pilot phase. This pilot program responds to the *Action Plan to Improve JK-12 Student Outcomes in the NWT* action item to "develop an employment plan that will outline approaches ECE and education bodies will undertake to address systemic needs for JK-12 Indigenous Language Instructors."

ECE is actively working to modernize the *Education Act* and will be working closely with Indigenous governments and education bodies on potential changes to system structure and governance that support a modern NWT education system. ECE anticipates language and culture to be important aspects of these discussions.

Recommendation 5: *That the Department of Education, Culture and Employment (ECE) help ensure Indigenous-language early childhood education is available in each community. To achieve this vision, ECE should provide additional and sufficient funding to program operators that use Indigenous languages.*

GNWT Response

ECE provides funding to all licensed early learning and child care (ELCC) operators to offset costs associated with educator wages, operational costs, and program materials including cultural resources. Indigenous governments and community organizations that operate licensed early learning and child care programming and are also accessing federal funding under the Indigenous ELCC funding agreements may choose to prioritize that funding in this area, as well.

ECE also provides funding through federal Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) funding agreements to support the provision of the Aurora College Early Learning and Child Care Diploma program. The ELCC diploma program recognizes the importance of Indigenous language and culture and its students have been encouraged to pursue opportunities presented by the Indigenous Language Revitalization Scholarship.

Within the school system (Junior Kindergarten/Kindergarten), the *NWT Junior Kindergarten to Grade 12 Indigenous Languages and Education Policy* builds capacity by ensuring Indigenous language instruction and initiatives are adequately supported and resourced in schools. As well, the *Our Languages Curriculum (OLC)* provides NWT Indigenous language instructors with the curricular outcomes, instructional strategies, and assessment tools to foster language growth in NWT core Indigenous language classrooms.

These have contributed to meeting action 2.6 of our Action Plan to expand and improve Indigenous language programs in NWT schools and early childhood programs.

Transformative Change 3: Double resources to support and revitalize Indigenous languages

Recommendation 6: That the Government of the Northwest Territories double funding for Indigenous-language education, services, and revitalization.

GNWT Response

ECE will continue to advocate for increased federal funding for Indigenous languages through the *Canada-NWT Agreement on Indigenous Languages*. Any larger infusion of GNWT funds will need to be decided during budget discussions of the 20th Legislative Assembly.

The federal government has signaled that its funding contributions will remain set at 2017-2018 levels for the foreseeable future. In the implementation plan for the federal *Indigenous Languages Act*, Canadian Heritage emphasizes direct nation-to-nation funding arrangements with Indigenous Governments going forward, while treating the Canadian-NWT Agreement as legacy funding.

As Indigenous governments tap into these new sources funding, there will be need for further discussion on how to best coordinate language spending within the territory while ensuring the GNWT is able to continue to provide Indigenous language programs and services that reach residents across the territory.

Recommendation 7: That the Government of the Northwest Territories reimburse use of an Indigenous official language as an eligible expense for all programs, grants, and contributions. These funding agreements should be multi-year to reduce the administrative burden and improve sustainability.

GNWT Response

ECE currently administers the Territorial Indigenous Languages Strategic Initiatives program to support NWT organizations with strategic Indigenous language initiatives that reach NWT residents from across the territory.

ECE will work with the Department of Finance to determine the best approach to incorporating Indigenous language expenses into the Contribution Agreement template for the Strategic Initiatives program. ECE will also discuss with other GNWT Departments what Indigenous language expenses are being incurred for language usage, and explore how best to address that in contribution and grant agreements.

Recommendation 8: That the Department of Education, Culture and Employment setup a creative commons for Indigenous-language resource materials.

The creative commons should build on the Our Languages NWT platform and offer an accessible digital space. It should allow creators and users to share and collaborate on educational materials, language-learning apps, curricula, grant applications, and other resources.

GNWT Response

ECE agrees that a creative commons for Indigenous language resource materials would be beneficial to reduce fragmentation in the development of Indigenous language resources. ECE has assembled and developed many of these resources and is currently deciding which hosting platform would allow for full collaborative functionality.

Transformative Change 4: Support of official language speakers in the public service

Recommendation 9: That each department and agency be required to have an annual official languages action plan to improve and revitalize the language skills of its Indigenous employees.

GNWT Response

Action 2.2 of the GNWT's Indigenous Recruitment and Retention Action Plan commits to developing an Indigenous language professional development program. Under this action item, the Department of Finance commits to collaborating with ECE to support the delivery of professional development programs in Indigenous languages, and to celebrating and recognizing GNWT employees who use Indigenous languages at work through a bilingual designation employee recognition campaign.

As departmental Indigenous Employment Plans developed to support the GNWT Indigenous Recruitment and Retention Framework continue to be reviewed and refined, there may be opportunities to include goals specific to Indigenous language revitalization goals in the future.

The following NWT Indigenous Languages Action Plan commitments also relate to language learning services for all departments and contribute to GNWT-wide improvement of Indigenous language skills for Indigenous employees:

- *Action 2.5, deliverable 2:* develop a professional development program that allows for GNWT employees to access Indigenous language classes.
- *Action 2.2:* educate GNWT employees on their role in providing Indigenous languages services as laid out in the Official Languages Guidelines.

Departments do not have funded full-time Indigenous languages coordinators, like those that exist for French. However, departmental representatives do come together to support planning and implementation of government communications and services in Indigenous languages through the

interdepartmental Indigenous Languages Committee. This Committee is guided by the NWT Indigenous Languages Action Plan, which was recently extended to 2025. ECE plans to engage Indigenous governments, stakeholders and the public in the development of a new Action Plan during the life of the 20th Legislative Assembly.

Recommendation 10: *That each department and agency be required to create an individual language training account for each person. The account should guarantee each Indigenous employee a minimum number of hours of language training, in any Indigenous official language, as a first or second language.*

GNWT Response

ECE's NWT Indigenous Languages Action Plan and Finance's Indigenous Recruitment and Retention Action Plan both have action items to develop a language learning program that GNWT employees can access and have been working in collaboration towards fulfilling:

- *NWT Indigenous Languages Action Plan item 2.5, deliverable 2:* develop a professional development program that allows for GNWT employees to access Indigenous language classes.
- *Finance's Indigenous Recruitment and Retention Action Plan item 2.2:* develop an Indigenous language professional development program.

ECE is currently taking the lead in the project planning phase for the development of this program and will collaborate with Finance further as the program develops. ECE expects to have developed an implementation plan by the end of 2023.

Further consideration is needed regarding the eligibility criteria for such a program, such as whether it would only be available to Indigenous employees or include non-Indigenous employees who wish to learn an Indigenous language for the purposes of service delivery. Other tasks include coordinating partnerships and researching available opportunities for Indigenous language learning.

Recommendation 11: *That the Department of Finance set up an Indigenous languages revitalization fund to support Indigenous employees in the effort to reclaim, revitalize, maintain and strengthen their languages.*

GNWT Response

ECE endeavors to use the funds that are available in the most effective manner to provide Indigenous-language revitalization opportunities, such as the Mentor-Apprentice Program, to all NWT residents.

Due to the limited funding available in the NWT for language revitalization, the creation of a funding pot specifically for the GNWT would likely need to be decided during budget discussions of the 20th Legislative Assembly.

ECE will work with the Department of Finance to determine the feasibility of this recommendation and considerations around program eligibility and how the proposed funding would be coordinated. Indigenous employees currently have access to employee development funding through the Indigenous Development Training Program (IDTP), which could support Indigenous language development.

Recommendation 12: *That the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) restore Indigenous language terms and spellings to refer to languages and communities. The GNWT should update all legislation, regulations, policies, guidelines, standards, and communications within the life of the 20th Assembly. The GNWT should also consult Indigenous communities on the changes.*

GNWT Response

In practice, ECE has already begun using well-established endonyms for the official Indigenous languages and will make a renewed effort to develop a consensus between Indigenous governments, institutions, and communities to officially establish the appropriate nomenclature within legislation.

The Cultural Places Program of ECE leads the process for geographical and community name changes in the NWT. They coordinate with the Geographical Names Board of Canada to ensure that new names are officially adopted at the national and international levels. Requests for name changes are generally proposed by the Indigenous language communities, and affected Indigenous governments are consulted on the proposed change. This process is ongoing and requires funding support to commission research projects. As soon as names are officially registered, they are implemented through all publications and print materials. ECE will work to ensure that this is noted in the *Indigenous Languages Communications Guidelines*.