

Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and
Gaelic

Leas Phrìomh Mhinistear agus Rùnaire a' Chaibineit airson
Eaconamaidh agus Gàidhlig

Kate Forbes MSP

Ceit Fhoirbheis BPA

Ms Sue Webber
Convenor
ECYP Committee

By e-mail: - ecyp.committee@parliament.scot

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Dear Convenor,

Scottish Languages Bill

The many comments on the Scottish Languages Bill have been very welcome and helpful. My hope is that these exchanges will result in a strengthened Bill that will continue to have broad support and will be a Bill that will address the needs of Gaelic and Scots speakers and learners wherever they are. In response to comments received and discussions we have had I would like to offer some reflections.

Impact

It has always been the clear policy intention of this Bill that it will make a difference. I am aware there have been concerns raised about the extent to which this Bill will have an impact on fragile areas of low population where there is still an important proportion of Gaelic speakers. I would like to reassure you that this has been our intention and priority from the outset. In shaping the Bill, the intention has always been that the combination of Areas of Linguistic Significance, Gaelic Strategy and Gaelic Standards would provide measures or activities that Gaelic speakers could expect in these areas and that these would make a difference. The Strategy and Standards will be drawn up for corporate life and workplace but also for education and community life.

Symbolic

The Scottish Government's policy ambitions for Gaelic is to put in place practical measures that make a clear difference to the learning, speaking and using of the language and not to support priorities that could be described as symbolic. A quick survey of policy priorities over the last 25 years would clearly show the focus of Gaelic activity has been on practical measures. This was the case with the 2005 Gaelic Act and it is also the aim of this Bill. The policy priorities of recent years have included measures such as, a high-quality Gaelic medium education sector, well supported teachers of Gaelic, increasing opportunities for young Gaelic speakers to use their skills in post-school education and in the arts and employment and a range of Scottish public authorities making a difference by including Gaelic commitments in

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their social, cultural and economic functions. Recent policy priorities have also included support for cultural and community activities that support intergenerational Gaelic activities and out of school Gaelic activities. These are the policy priorities that have been pursued over recent years, are still being built on and added to and will feature prominently in the provisions of this Bill. Symbolism is not a priority for Gaelic development nor for this Bill.

Gaelic medium education

The Scottish Government's policy aim is that this Bill has an impact on culture, communities, workplace, public life as well as education. The provisions of Strategy and Standards will enable this to be achieved as the intention is that they will cover many areas of public and community life and we would like to ensure that the Strategy and Standards are understood in this wider context and not viewed narrowly as containing predominantly education measures. In shaping the Bill, the intention has always been that the Gaelic Standards would provide measures or activities that Gaelic speakers could expect in these areas of linguistic significance. I understand there is a concern of how this Bill will make a difference at a community level and I am very clear that this must be a priority. Although this Bill will not be a narrow education Bill, it will contain provisions that will also enable progress with Gaelic education and will also focus on these areas where concerns have been raised by parents and Gaelic interests. These include examples such as, access to GME provisions and GME continuity, GME secondary provision, GME teacher recruitment and support, GME early years provision, out of school activity, a focus on fluency, provisions for Gaelic stand-alone schools and more. I would like to see reference to these measures in the Strategy and Standards.

Areas of Linguistic Significance

I would like to reassure you that it has been the Scottish Government intention from the outset that this Bill will have an impact on fragile areas of low population where there are important percentages of Gaelic speakers. The original commitment was to 'explore the creation of a Gàidhealtachd' and this has always been a key objective of this Bill. Indeed we consulted on this and there were many comments that favoured support for Gaelic in areas of low population but did not want to only see a Gàidhealtachd line drawn on the map. For this reason we opted for the device of areas of linguistic significance as we recognise that areas in central and urban Scotland are also important for Gaelic and indeed Gaelic speakers and learners should be supported wherever they are. Along with the local authority a number of public bodies operate in areas that could be designated as areas of linguistic significance and these bodies, applying standards, will have practical, concrete measures on the ground. We are confident that the provisions in the Bill, Strategy and Standards, will enable a strong focus on a broad range of measures that will make a difference.

Targets and Monitoring

The comments received on targets and monitoring or compliance have been welcome. I agree that targets should be included and would like to suggest that the Scottish Government's Strategy would be the most suitable location for these. At present a number of bodies and authorities have their own targets and performance indicators for Gaelic and we would be happy to include this as a general expectation in the Standards when they are drawn up. In terms of compliance and monitoring, there are a range of duties for Bòrd na Gàidhlig which include approving Gaelic plans, reporting on Scottish Ministers' progress with meeting objectives in the Gaelic Strategy, reporting on Scottish Public Authority compliance and on any failures to implement Gaelic Language Plan commitments.

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Scots and Regional Forms

From my discussions I am persuaded that there is a general acceptance that Scots is an inclusive term and that recognition should also be given to regional forms of Scots where appropriate. In this Scots is no different from any other language. A number of representatives from Scots speaking communities have indicated their support for the term Scots to be the overall accepted term. In particular we have consulted with the Doric Board on this matter and its representatives are content with the term Scots and think it would be unwise to depart from this now. I would, however, be happy to continue alternative approaches on this question.

Amendments

In response to debate and discussions I would like to indicate a number of areas where I have asked my officials to take forward amendments which could strengthen the Bill. At the same time I would be happy to continue discussions with both the Committee and MSPs on other issues of particular interest. In no particular order, I have asked officials to work up proposals for the following:

- amendments that introduce a level of community input to the designation of Areas of Linguistic Significance.
- listing, in amendment, the broad categories of activity that Gaelic speakers and learners can expect to see in Areas of Linguistic Significance.
- an amendment which lists the broad categories that will be included in the Gaelic Standards and Strategy and which Scottish public authorities will be required to consider.
- how we can strengthen the support and focus the activities of Gaelic development officers. As we know, there are a number of Gaelic community officers already in place, mostly in areas of low population.
- If in relation to targets, it may be possible to change the wording of the Bill in relation to the Gaelic Strategy and to requiring targets and items of measurement to be included in order to monitor progress.
- ensure that among their functions Bòrd na Gàidhlig and public authorities have a requirement to assist a range of community development activities including community Gaelic plans, that further strengthens the current role they have in in community support.
- to consider the request that the Bill be amended to extend the principle of equal request to other sections of the Bill.
- an amendment that will support the parental wish for stand-alone Gaelic medium schools in their communities.
- amendment to address concerns about using the term Scots and giving recognition to regional forms and variations.

Radical Change

Let me offer some comments on the suggestions that radical change is needed. A number of comments on radical change, or similar, have featured in debate and discussions. With our aim of reversing the fortunes of Gaelic it is useful to reflect on some of the goals that could be attached to this Bill. This Bill could be described as an opportunity to see Gaelic used more often in home and community and workplace. The Bill could also be described as an opportunity to promote more community activities and to ensure that Gaelic learning for young people and adults has a strong appeal and young and old have good quality access to learning opportunities. With language revitalisation the pace of change is more likely to be incremental rather than an overnight transformation. In line with this, our focus has been on interventions we believe will make a difference, building on, reviewing and improving what is in place. I am confident this Bill will enable us to do this and to deliver radical change and tangible results.

In concluding, let me add that this Bill should be seen in the context of the progress of the last twenty years. By means of the combined and mutually supportive provisions of Strategy, Standards and Areas of Linguistic Significance, this Bill will make a difference by building on and strengthening earlier interventions. The Bill will operate on a broad range of relevant issues and provide an opportunity for local authorities, public bodies and community groups to work together. Finally, I would always welcome the opportunity for further discussion on these and any other matters relating to stage 2 of the Scottish Languages Bill. I am copying this letter to Gaelic and Scots Party Spokespersons.

KATE FORBES