



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Scottish Affairs Committee

[Oral evidence: The future of Gaelic broadcasting, HC 463](#)

Wednesday 1 July 2026

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Members present: Patricia Ferguson (Chair); Lillian Jones; Mr Angus MacDonald; Douglas McAllister; Susan Murray; Kirsteen Sullivan.

Questions 1-39

Witnesses

I: Professor Conchúr Ó Giollagáin, Gaelic Research Professor, University of the Highlands and Islands; Dr Ingeborg Birnie, Senior Lecturer, University of Strathclyde.

II: Professor Robert Dunbar, Chair, Bòrd na Gàidhlig; Ealasaid MacDonald, Chief Executive Officer, Bòrd na Gàidhlig.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Conchúr Ó Giollagáin and Dr Ingeborg Birnie.

Chair: Good morning and welcome to this meeting of the Scottish Affairs Committee, at which we will be looking at the future of Gaelic broadcasting. We are very pleased to have two witnesses who can talk to us with real knowledge about the significance of the language and why Gaelic broadcasting is important. I ask the witnesses to introduce themselves.

Dr Birnie: I am Dr Inge Birnie.

Professor Ó Giollagáin: Good morning, everybody. I am Professor Conchúr Ó Giollagáin. I am the Gaelic research professor at the University of the Highlands and Islands.

Q1 **Chair:** Thank you both very much. Why is it important that we support the development of the Gaelic language, and the culture too? Could you also explain how central a role broadcasting plays in that support?

Dr Birnie: Good morning—madainn mhath. The Gaelic language in Scotland has been an integral part of the country for a very long time. The language and the culture are interwoven with who the Scottish people are. Although the language has been in decline for a very long time, there have been many initiatives, especially over the last 40 or 50 years, that have aimed to reposition it as a language of Scotland.

The media plays a very important role for multiple purposes. In the first instance, it gives another way of sharing the language and the culture among the people who speak the language and are familiar with it. Perhaps equally importantly, it also allows us to show the language as being part of Scotland. It allows us to share the language and the culture with the people who are not yet Gaelic speakers, to show that it is an integral part of Scottish society.

Professor Ó Giollagáin: Culture and identity are very important to people. For a healthy, lively society, it is important that different cultures in the society are respected. That is one of the reasons why we are having this discussion this morning. The media is a lens through which we can view cultures that are not our own, and our own culture as well, of course, but it also gives us an opportunity to reflect on the values and the challenges of that culture. Especially in the modern era, a healthy media sector is very important for supporting cultures. As Dr Birnie said, the Gaelic culture in Scotland is under considerable societal stress. It is therefore important that not just the media sector, but all the support sectors address the reality of the speakers at the minute.

Q2 **Susan Murray:** Professor Ó Giollagáin—I hope I have not said that completely wrong—the latest census shows an increase in the number of people with Gaelic language skills. What is the main reason driving that increase?



Professor Ó Giollagáin: It is always good to acknowledge improvement in indicators of how a language group exists in society, but we also have to interpret it. The latest figures from the 2022 census indicate that there is growth in Gaelic ability in certain urban centres. I think that generally reflects the growth of L2, our second-language speakers of Gaelic. However, there is an overall trend of social decline of the native speaking communities, which are found mostly in the Western Isles, the highland area, and Argyll and Bute. If you look at all the figures for those areas, you will see that the amount of vernacular speakers is decreasing.

We are seeing the increase of what we could refer to as symbolic Gaelic—our second-language Gaelic—and the continuing decrease of first-language Gaelic, our vernacular Gaelic. The challenge for politicians, policy officials and officials trying to promote Gaelic is that we need to support both communities. The emphasis since the 2005 Act—and there is now a new languages Act in Scotland—has been on increasing numbers, and they have achieved some success in increasing the number of learners but have had very little success in maintaining the number of native speakers.

If we continue the way we are, without significant strategic change and political support, we will soon, within this generation, have only second-language speakers of Gaelic and no native-speaking communities. If that is what the people want, fair enough, but they have not been asked. I think that, if you visit the native-speaking communities, mainly in the islands, they are not happy with what is happening to them. Nobody wants to see a culture of first-language speakers decline, and that is the reality. Our study “The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community”, published in 2020, indicated that the speaker group is now as small as 11,000 people, and that 11,000 is made up mostly of people aged 50 years-plus. That is why we have titled the book “The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community”.

To put it in a nutshell, with official Gaelic promotion, we have promotion without language protection; we are not protecting the communities of existing Gaelic speakers. There is absolutely no reason why we cannot do both if we can devise a proper strategy to deal with those issues.

Q3 **Susan Murray:** In your opinion, if the second-language speaking community is growing, will that help to promote the vernacular by making sure that the media—you mentioned the media earlier—are still present? Can that larger audience for that media help support the vernacular?

Professor Ó Giollagáin: Not under current circumstances, and not through current systems. Supporting second-language systems is a different sociological or societal challenge from supporting native-speaking groups.

We acquire our languages by two methods: either the more senior generation—our parents—speaks it to us and we acquire it naturally, or we acquire it in schools. You cannot address the vernacular crisis through mechanisms that are just concentrated on learning a language in school. That is basically school or educational policy. The media of course have an



effect on all levels, if the media themselves address the issues seen in society—we can come to that issue down the line.

- Q4 **Kirsteen Sullivan:** We have another ongoing inquiry on connectivity, and one of the issues that comes up time and again when we are looking at the highlands and islands is depopulation. How much of the decline in the vernacular could be reversed if we tackle the issue of declining population and encourage more people to stay in those areas and other people to move to them?

Professor Ó Giollagáin: Yes, maintaining a language group is a demographic challenge. Obviously, in the geography where the speakers exist, if there is demographic decline there will be sociolinguistic decline. These things are interlinked.

Dealing with demographic decline means a very difficult series of social and political challenges. It means addressing society as a whole. To refer back to Susan Murray's point, when it comes to learners, we address their issues through institutions, and when we are dealing with the situation of the vernacular speakers, we need social policy, basically.

You are completely correct that maintaining Gaelic as a spoken language in the vernacular areas means that we need to stabilise the demographic decline in these areas.

- Q5 **Mr Angus MacDonald:** Before I start my proper questions, it was not long ago that my family were all Gaelic speakers. What killed it was when they married somebody from away, and then their children did not continue it. I am passionately interested in this subject and I would say that that was probably the crux of the breakdown of the language. Do you think that there is anything to support that?

Dr Birnie: I think it made a partial contribution. With any language decline it is very difficult and complicated. There is a long-standing issue about language decline and the image of the language—so, where people have traditionally associated the language with poor socioeconomic prospects, that has also contributed, as, if your child speaks English, they have better prospects in wider society.

As you say, when families marry it is very complicated and often that is a trigger to stop intergenerational transmission because they pick the language, typically, that both parents are proficient in. With English being very dominant, it is most often English that prevails, and that means that if children in current generations want to learn the language, parents might choose to send them to receive a Gaelic-medium education. As Professor Ó Giollagáin said, it is not the same mechanism for acquiring language and does not lead to the same outcomes in long-term language use.

- Q6 **Mr Angus MacDonald:** Between 1961 and 1971, there was a statistical move up in the number of people who spoke Gaelic. Is there something that we can learn from that? Do you have any idea why it might have happened, and can it be replicated?



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Professor Ó Giollagáin: Positive movement is to be welcomed, but we think that that is more of a survey issue rather than indicating a shift in society. I believe that there was a slight change in the question that year.

To refer back to our study “The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community”, in the vernacular areas—the Western Isles, parts of Skye and the Isle of Tíre—the general trend has been a 10% decline in the amount of people declaring that they can speak Gaelic from census to census from 1981 onwards. The long-term analysis of the trajectory of decline indicates that, on the point that you are making there, Mr MacDonald, the turning point in the fortunes of the high-density Gaelic speaking areas—mainly in the islands—happened during the ’70s, and the policy since then has not been able to arrest that trajectory of decline. From a political and policy perspective, therefore, the question is what strategic intervention would halt the rate of decline.

We—not just academics, but politicians and policy officials—have to take a decision about whether we are going to put proper strategic measures in place to maintain what we have: the remaining major speaking areas. Our analysis in the Gaelic crisis book is that the status quo and the current apparatus are not sufficient to the task, so we need a new approach to these issues.

We are here mainly to talk about media, and the media have an important role in elucidating all those issues to the public.

Dr Birnie: May I just add something? In 1971, they changed the question from “Do you speak Gaelic?” to “Can you speak Gaelic?” People might have interpreted those two things slightly differently. It is very difficult to go back, but we think that that is possibly the cause of the quite significant increase at the time. It was not a policy measure, more a statistical blip.

Q7 **Chair:** Is the rise in non-native speakers of the language to do with the policy of Gaelic-medium education in places such as Glasgow, which I am very familiar with? Is that the main driver?

Dr Birnie: Yes. Gaelic-medium education started in the 1980s and has been fairly successful. There is both Gaelic learners’ education—with Gaelic as a subject—and Gaelic-medium education, which is where all subjects are taught through the medium of Gaelic. That has been a significant driver of new speakers of the language. It has also been a particularly popular model of language education in Glasgow and Edinburgh—the central belt—those areas where maybe Gaelic was not traditionally spoken. However, obviously there is a significant Gaelic-speaking population due to out-migration from the islands, so there is a significant interest.

One of the complicating factors is that these young people learn the language, their peers in the classroom speak the language, but there is not an opportunity to socialise. I am sure Professor Ó Giollagáin will speak about that. Although increasing activities are made available for young



people to use the language outside of the classroom, their other peers will be English speaking. The children they play football with will be English speaking. Their family and friends will be English speaking, so the socialisation process is limited. But, yes, Gaelic-medium education has been a significant driver of at least stabilising the numbers, as we possibly saw in the last census.

Professor Ó Giollagáin: I will make a quick comment on that. Obviously, yes, having Gaelic-medium education increases the number of speakers, but there are a few other components as well. The previous question was about the demographic challenges in the islands. Gaelic speakers are migrating to urban centres, which increases the number of speakers in urban centres.

There is also a symbolic effect because of the discussion since the enactment of the 2005 language Act. There is now a lot more attention to the issues of linguistic diversity, and how cultural diversity is important for society. People would be answering that question out of some type of moral support for Gaelic. There is also the mediated approach to learning language—they call it the Duolingo effect—with half a million people having signed up to learn Gaelic. You see that similar effect elsewhere. There are a quarter of a million people learning Navajo through Duolingo. Like Scottish Gaelic, Navajo has significant societal challenges. It is an amalgam of different factors, of which Gaelic-medium education is an important one.

Q8 **Kirsteen Sullivan:** Staying on the subject of education, can I ask Dr Birnie how broadcasting is used to support the language, both in Gaelic-medium education and beyond the formal learning framework?

Dr Birnie: The media play quite an important role, so maybe it is not a direct cause and effect. These young people grow up in communities where the language is not spoken daily, so they might not see or hear it. So, it is very important that, through the media, we have another outlet of contemporary as well as historical expressions of identity. It shows them that there are other people out there who speak the language, and that the language is alive and well in Scotland.

There is some expression of cultural aspects in the media. It allows us to create influencers and people to look up to, to show what you can do with your language skills, the places to go and the opportunities out there. It makes the language very visible and also provides opportunities to hear the language on the media, especially television. Although it is not necessarily cause and effect—you probably cannot learn Gaelic just by watching Gaelic television or listening to the radio—listening to different voices and different accents is an important contributor to developing your language skills.

So it is not the solution, but it is part of a package of tools that we have to support people in increasing their fluency, and thus their likelihood of using the language. It is a way of showing that the language is out there, that it belongs to Scotland, and that there are other people out there who



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speak it. It is important for young people—perhaps especially so—to see that; they are very much influenced by the media and social media.

One of the benefits of this is the spin-offs that you get. We have people who produce programmes that have been on the television and are then on social media. That encourages young people to engage with the Gaelic language through social media and thus makes the language more visible in those domains. Again, that feeds back into itself.

Q9 Kirsteen Sullivan: Do you see that as being equally important to Gaelic-speaking communities and new speakers?

Dr Birnie: I think so. I work mostly in Gaelic-medium education, so I see it very much from the perspective of new speakers, but I also see it from—I don't like the term "native speakers", but L1 speakers, perhaps. They can also see the language being shared and used. We might come back to this, but it also provides socioeconomic opportunities. It provides a clear pathway for individuals to get employment—and employment based within the Western Isles. It works on multiple levels: visibility and learning, but also socioeconomic opportunities.

Q10 Kirsteen Sullivan: That is actually my next question. Before I move on to that, Professor Ó Giollagáin, to what extent does broadcasting strengthen active language use over more passive engagement and cultural awareness?

Professor Ó Giollagáin: That is a very good question, because media is a live resource, or a live asset, but it also creates historical content. It is important to acknowledge the enormous contribution that Gaelic broadcasters have made, particularly in the last two generations. As I was saying earlier, the media is a way through which we can reflect on our cultural challenges in society. It is important that the young going through the education system have an opportunity to learn from that—the way we investigate and interrogate our cultural issues.

The support for Gaelic media has supported a very valuable cultural archive. To an extent, the archive, because of the media, has been future-proofed, despite all the societal challenges we have at the minute. The schools, teachers and those involved in curriculum development can draw on that resource to make Gaelic a real cultural issue for the students, especially those attending Gaelic-medium education. Nowadays, education is so mediatised; there are so many telecommunicative elements to it, and there is a challenge for minority language media, not just in Gaelic, to keep up with the way that the sector has been altered because of digital transformation. It is key that a minority language media sector is able to avail itself of the resources to modernise as those challenges develop.

Q11 Kirsteen Sullivan: I think that is a really important point: it is not just about new speakers and growing from in terms of where the media is at just now and the different opportunities; it is also about being able to look back at the cultural archive, and preserving that. That is vital to any culture, I would have thought.



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Staying with you, Professor, how important is Gaelic broadcasting for supporting regional economic development and population retention in the highlands and islands?

Professor Ó Giollagáin: It is a vital sector in minority language policy, simply because of the transformation of society. Young people, especially, spend a lot of time tuning into different media, so if the minority language is not there, present and able to compete like other languages, the sectoral support will fall behind. The simple answer is that it is key, but it is not the only support. We do not want the media to develop into an archive for just the speakers; we want the media to be a medium through which the speakers and those interested in issues of cultural diversity can investigate these issues collectively, and in more depth than was previously facilitated.

Q12 **Kirsteen Sullivan:** I apologise in advance for my pronunciation—I am still working on it—but how important is the international recognition of “An t-Eilean” for raising awareness of Gaelic broadcasting and the Gaelic language?

Dr Birnie: As I started by saying, it is about sharing contemporary, as well as historical, language and culture. The programme “An t-Eilean” was particularly successful—it fit into the Scandi noir detective series type. What is particularly important about that programme is that it was not completely in Gaelic, but in a mixture of Gaelic and English—I think it was 70% and 30%. That reflects the way that Gaelic speakers use the language in the modern day: very often it is not all Gaelic or all English, but a combination of both.

It showcases that Gaelic has a place in modern contemporary society and that we can use it to produce high-quality broadcasts that are attractive. It was a good showcase for the language and it was very successful. It raises the international profile of the language. We know that there is quite a bit of interest in the Gaelic language internationally—we also saw it with “Outlander”, for example—which in turn possibly supports the tourism industry, for example. It attracts people to the language through an interesting event, and those people will come because of what they have seen.

Another factor is that, whereas Gaelic might have been seen as niche, “An t-Eilean” was particularly successful in bringing it very much into the mainstream. That is a very important element. People were speaking about it—not necessarily because it was in Gaelic, but it was a high-quality programme that happened to be in Gaelic, and it was particularly successful because of that.

Q13 **Kirsteen Sullivan:** What can be done to build on the success to ensure that there are long-term benefits for Gaelic-language communities?

Dr Birnie: That is a very complicated question. I would like to say, “Replicate the success,” but it is complicated: you can do one thing and it is successful, but if you do it a second time, it might not be as successful. Those high-quality output dramas that hit the zeitgeist and hit the mark



with the wider audience are very important to the normalisation process and to keep raising the profile. That requires creativity, a bit of knowledge about what is currently in vogue and, obviously, continued investment. “An t-Eilean” was quite an expensive production, but it was a highly successful production. It was high quality and that quality shone through, which is why it was so successful internationally.

- Q14 **Chair:** I presume that, for the same reasons you have outlined why “An t-Eilean” was very popular and important, having a broad spectrum of offerings on Gaelic-medium television, and broadcasting generally, means things like football and so on being commentated on in Gaelic, so that it is normal and not niche, as you said.

Dr Birnie: BBC ALBA has been very successful in broadcasting a range of programmes. Football is particularly good, because you do not need to speak Gaelic to understand what is happening on the pitch. Other very popular programmes tend to be children’s programmes—“Peppa Pig” springs to mind—that adults choose to put on the television or on iPlayer for young people to watch. There have also been cultural events: the Gaelic Mòd has been broadcast, as has the big Belladrum festival, so there is the contemporary as well as the more traditional.

That whole spectrum is very important to showcase the wide range of cultural but also other things. With “An t-Eilean”, for example, you might not immediately associate a detective drama with Gaelic. It happened to be a high-quality programme that was produced through the medium of Gaelic. People watched it not because it was in Gaelic, but because it was a high-quality programme, and they were happy to be exposed to Gaelic in that way.

Chair: It was very good.

Professor Ó Giollagáin: You will forgive me if I introduce a slightly challenging note. Some of the drama outputs on BBC ALBA show the challenge in minority language media development. There is a pressure on them to grow the audience to justify public funding.

One of the methods is to have a linguistic mix in some of the dramas, as has been the case in “An t-Eilean”, for example. It is important to acknowledge the international awards that programme has achieved, but there is a debate among the Gaelic-speaking community about to what extent it is a Gaelic-medium drama. You can understand why BBC ALBA went down that line, but it is also important that minority language media does not lose contact with its core community, which in this case is the speakers of the minority language—the speakers of Scottish Gaelic. You can understand why they do it, but there is a difficulty involved for those who are well-rooted within the speaker community.

- Q15 **Lillian Jones:** Dr Birnie, are there enough career opportunities for Gaelic-speaking creatives? What do the opportunities look like for young people, particularly those living on the islands?



Dr Birnie: At the moment, the three main areas in which Gaelic-speaking young people take the language further tend to be education, the media and creative industries, and Gaelic revitalisation/development—those two overlap. There are opportunities for development. There are specific courses. The Gaelic college on Skye, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, runs a media course. Other areas run courses for Gaelic, creating issues of capacity further down. Young people do these qualifications, but there are not always career opportunities out there. There is a limited number of jobs that can currently be supported and they are quite desirable.

Young people value careers in the media and see that as a very viable pathway. There are opportunities for studying broadcasting, even through the medium of Gaelic. Career opportunities very much depend on BBC ALBA. Sometimes the issue is that these young people speak both Gaelic and English, so they get funnelled down to the English media because there are more opportunities available. It is the same with teachers.

It is very important that BBC ALBA is not just based in Glasgow. It also has a significant base in Inverness and in Stornoway in the Western Isles, so it provides a good opportunity for young people, even if they have studied, to come back to the islands, or to come to the islands if they did not live there. It creates an opportunity to live in a Gaelic-speaking community, which makes it a really important part of the whole picture.

Q16 **Lillian Jones:** Are there enough Gaelic-speaking creatives in Scotland to support the need for a range of genres to be represented in Gaelic broadcasting?

Dr Birnie: That is a very complicated question, because it is about supply and demand. As I work in education, I see the same thing. Gaelic-medium education cannot grow because we do not have the teachers. I think it is possibly the same for broadcasting, although I do not have the figures. I think growth is restrained by the number of speakers. If you do not see a career opportunity, you might not study it. It is difficult to break that cycle at the moment. Greater investment and clearer pathways, and maybe traineeships for young people, would help to cement this as a pathway with a career choice.

Professor Ó Giollagáin: It is a very pertinent question. It demonstrates how the different sectors in life have to work properly to be able to create opportunity for young people. If our social policy targeted on Gaelic communities is not working properly, we will not generate the young speakers; if education does not work properly, we will not have fluent speakers coming out of Gaelic-medium education; and if the media sector does not interact correctly with other sectors, we will not have the proper debate that encourages young people to take up careers in these areas.

Besides that, it is an issue of resource as well. The Olsberg report demonstrated the added value effect of having Gaelic media, especially if there is an operational budget and then a producers budget—there is added value in all those. You will be aware that there is quite a high percentage of repeats on BBC ALBA. That boils down to an issue of



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resource. If there was more resource, there could be more programming. More programming needs more creatives and more producers. We are back into Keynesian economics there: one success leads to another success.

- Q17 **Mr Angus MacDonald:** I am going to take advantage of our having a bit more time and of the Chair not being able to hit me. I want to present the case to you that we have over-tourism in many places in the west highlands in particular: Skye, Lochaber and so on. I am wondering about the authenticity of visitors, encouraging slow tourism and creating a love of the culture and the music—dualchas and all of that. Some 43% of the people in the west highlands work in tourism in one way or another; it is a £1.5 billion industry. Gaelic is an essential part of that, to me. Do you think it should be put forward to politicians and others that that would be more important in promoting remote Scotland than trying to continue something for a small number of people—possibly 11,000?

Professor Ó Giollagáin: It is quite clear that it is a factor in attracting people. That is why, again, it is important that we support both communities of speakers that already exist and those who have an interest. You will hear from my accent that I am not from this parish. The Gaeltacht areas in Ireland basically attract a lot of tourists because people are interested in issues of language, culture and heritage. Part of the difficulty in the Western Isles is capacity to deal with the tourists. Again, you can create or devise policies for one sector, but these are all interrelated, and if we do not get the socioeconomic aspects of it correct, it is more difficult for us to get the benefits.

In my experience, most people respect other cultures, even though they might not speak the language. A lot of Scottish people do not speak any Scottish Gaelic, which is quite obvious, but people are open-minded; they are interested in these areas. They want to travel to these areas where Gaelic is spoken, and therefore it is important that we get the issues correct.

Dr Birnie: I think many people travel to the Western Isles—like Professor Ó Giollagáin, I am not from here—with the expectation of a sense of authenticity. Of course, there has been anglicisation, like in other parts of Scotland. Promoting the Western Isles or Gaelic-speaking Scotland as an authentic part of Scotland is attractive to tourists. They want to see something that they cannot find somewhere else. The language and the culture, if it is done well and supported in an authentic way, can be part of that attraction to the islands. I know that people will travel to the islands expecting to hear Gaelic spoken on every corner and may sometimes be disappointed, but tourists are interested. They see the Gaelic road signs as something different that they cannot get anywhere else. I think it is an important contribution.

- Q18 **Mr Angus MacDonald:** What would you like to come out of the upcoming BBC charter renewal to help Gaelic-language broadcasting?



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Dr Birnie: I am sitting here with multiple hats on. One of my hats is as a member of the Council of Europe advisory committee on the framework convention for the protection of national minorities, to which the UK is a signatory. In its last opinion making recommendations to the Council of Europe, the advisory committee asked that any future BBC charter and future framework agreement include provision for support and promotion of minority language media—it said “especially Cornish and Scots”, but it also included Gaelic. It described the need to “actively engage with media outlets and social media platforms to take steps to combat negative stereotyping and to ensure a balanced portrayal of persons belonging to national minorities”.

These are the elements that I would really like to see: greater support for the Gaelic language as part of Scotland, the broadcasting or inclusion of Gaelic on mainstream television, and just greater general acknowledgement of the needs and wishes of the Gaelic-speaking community in preparing these programmes to ensure that they meet their needs and interests.

Professor Ó Giollagáin: I know that the focus at the minute is on increasing the resources for BBC ALBA and MG ALBA so that they can produce more content. One way of doing that is to solidify their constitutional or organisational arrangements. If that is the mechanism, that is what we should try, probably.

Again, forgive me for introducing a challenging note, but the issues for BBC ALBA are not just constitutional but editorial: how they discuss or investigate the issues that the Gaelic speakers are dealing with in different parts of Scotland. Again, BBC ALBA will say, “That is an issue of resource,” and that brings us back to the constitutional structure that we have for funding mechanisms.

However, I will give you a few examples of the editorial challenges. We started this morning with a discussion of the community of speakers; the Gaelic-speaking communities are basically in social crisis. We could ask ourselves, “Have these issues been investigated sufficiently through the Gaelic media?” Basically, the news coverage was superb when the Gaelic crisis study came out. However, because of the lack of budget, the emphasis on documentary-style programming is not sufficient. There is a very, very small budget for investigative journalism. When things do not work out, when things go wrong or when there are practices that are not acceptable, they are not investigated properly by BBC ALBA.

As a case in point, forgive me for referring to our study, but the Gaelic crisis study is the most detailed sociolinguistic survey ever conducted on Scottish Gaelic. In my opinion and the opinion of the authors, the findings and the recommendations of that book have not received a fair hearing among official Gaelic bodies. That is an issue for the media. Why was that issue not investigated? What were the impediments to offering and affording the authors a fair hearing on the findings and the recommendations of that book?



We could add other issues. In the Scottish Languages Act 2025, the main item dealing with the Scottish Gaelic issue is this new policy of establishing areas of linguistic significance, which you will all have heard of. As far as I remember, and I have been following this debate for decades, there was no call by either academics or society for a strategy that would be based on that. However, that is the cornerstone of the Act. I believe that it came from discussions between civil servants in Edinburgh and civil servants in Cardiff.

In other words, there was a cut-and-paste approach to Gaelic language policy. If you go out into the communities and ask them what it means to them, they cannot tell you. It is not rooted in the challenge that the speakers have. I think it is generally viewed as a gimmick: it is a policy gimmick that has been cut and pasted from another context. As we all know, the speaker community in Wales is a multiple of the Gaelic speaker community.

What is key in sociolinguistic policy is having different horses for different courses. Borrowing without investigating the evidence from other cultures is not going to lead to successful social or sociolinguistic policy.

Chair: Professor Ó Giollagáin and Dr Birnie, thank you very much for your evidence. It has been extremely helpful, and I think ultimately you will see your comments reflected in our report. Thank you for your time.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Robert Dunbar and Ealasaid MacDonald.

Q19 **Chair:** Good morning and welcome to the second panel of the Committee's inquiry into Gaelic-medium broadcasting and its funding. Could I ask this question of both our witnesses, but start with Mr Dunbar? I think that only some 2.5% of the national population speaks Gaelic. Do you believe that protection and promotion of the Gaelic language is important?

Professor Dunbar: Thank you very much for the opportunity to meet you today and for facilitating this for me. Yes, it absolutely is: 2.5% have some Gaelic skills, while a slightly lower percentage—about 1.3%—recorded in the census that they can speak Gaelic, but it is absolutely important. You will detect from my accent that I am not Scottish by birth; I am Canadian, although I am a fully fluent Gaelic speaker.

The language is of great importance to the nation. We have some evidence of this from the Scottish social attitudes survey, which is conducted every year. Questions were asked in both 2012 and 2021 on attitudes among respondents—this is taken from a representative sample from across Scotland—about the importance of Gaelic in terms of Scottish identity. A tiny percentage of respondents would have been Gaelic speakers or people with Gaelic abilities, but a large majority said that



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Gaelic was either important or very important for Scottish identity, so it is relevant.

It is relevant to the diaspora as well. Large numbers of people outside Scotland—not only in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, but in places like Canada—have an interest in the language through historical links, family connections and so forth. And then there is, as the first panel indicated, a wider interest in language maintenance and revitalisation in the 21st century. We can, I am sure, talk more about that as we go along.

Q20 Chair: Do you believe that broadcasting plays a role in supporting the language, Mr Dunbar?

Professor Dunbar: Absolutely. Broadcasting and media more generally have an important role to play. First, that allows a community of speakers to speak to itself. It also gives them a window on the wider world, through which they can talk about issues, not only of local but of national and international importance, in their own language. It allows us to demonstrate the richness and variety of Gaelic culture—not only the historical legacy, but the vitality of the language and culture today. It has played no small part in what I have perceived. I have lived in Scotland for about 30 years and I see much-changed attitudes to the language and an awareness that the Gaelic community is as diverse and as rich, in terms of culture and diversity of the culture, as any other linguistic community.

Finally, as was mentioned in the earlier part of the session, the media plays a fundamental role in supporting other initiatives, particularly education. It creates jobs—good, well-paid and interesting jobs that are attractive to young people.

All these things are very important. Also, we live in a world in which media is around us all the time, and having a significant presence in the media and particularly in broadcasting is of real importance.

Q21 Chair: Do we have any evidence that broadcasting supports the language? You mentioned the diaspora; I wonder whether the diaspora connects to Gaelic broadcasting in any way.

Professor Dunbar: It does through radio. One issue that needs attention is the availability of Gaelic television outside Scotland. This is a problem that we find in other jurisdictions as well. Like Dr Birnie, I am a member of a Council of Europe body; the other major treaty of relevance is the European charter for regional or minority languages, and I am a member of the body that oversees its implementation.

We see in other jurisdictions that geo-blocking is a problem. People in the diaspora include people in other parts of the UK, of course, where they can access Gaelic television, but only radio is accessible overseas. Even with radio, you have to be listening live, as it were: even though radio is digital, the availability of Gaelic radio, which is also an extremely important resource, is in some ways limited. That is an issue that

deserves attention, and it is certainly an issue for this Committee and for the Westminster Parliament.

Q22 **Chair:** Ms MacDonald, would you like to add to any of those points?

Ealasaid MacDonald: Yes. On your first question, isn't it wonderful that we have an indigenous language in Scotland that we can celebrate, that is spoken and understood by a wide range of people and that is supported by an ever wider range of people? I encounter people every day in my job, as you would expect, but actually every day as a Gael you meet people who say, "It's wonderful that you speak Gaelic; I wish I did," or, "I can speak a few words," and they want you translate what they have to say. That a fantastic thing, and it is something to be celebrated when you have things like that as a country—as a nation, all together.

People say, "It's wonderful to see how Welsh is celebrated down in Wales." I wish we had their budgets, I really do. I am sure that MG ALBA and others will give you the comparators, but it is many, many times over. It is important to see that if you invest in and support the various pillars that are required for a language to grow, you will get a return.

The census figures are to be welcomed—there is growth there, and you can see the elements that come together to support the language, which include Gaelic-medium education in particular but also other community initiatives—but the census only counts people in Scotland. I bet that the majority of you in this room know someone who speaks Gaelic and who lives in England or Wales. There are an awful lot of Gaelic speakers in England, and we do not count them. This Parliament should account for that, because their needs are just as great as the needs of those of us who live in Scotland. It is very important that we acknowledge that the figures that we are using are just for Scotland. The wide diaspora that we have is just as rich and as valuable to the language, its history and its future. These are very important things that we must be aware of when we talk about the subject.

Talking about Gaelic media, if you ask me what the soundtrack to my life would be, it would be Radio nan Gàidheal. As a child, I would wake up to the morning news programme, "Aithris na Maidne", and throughout the day it would be on in the background. Various news broadcasts like "Aithris an Fheasgair" would come on, and then in the evening there were big highlights like the "Na Dùrachdan" programme, the request show on a Friday night. Those are still key moments for people to tune into and listen to together, as a collective. That is what Gaelic media gives you.

What we did not have when I was growing up was a wide range of television programmes. We had piecemeal television, put it that way. We thought it was great: we could get to stay up till 10.30 or 11 o'clock at night, depending on which graveyard slot the programme was on. Parents at the time wanted their children to be exposed to it through the media. The media even then, with just three or four channels, was starting to consume people's lives, and yet there was nothing on it.



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The night that BBC ALBA went live was one of these moments in life when we all remember where we were. It sounds ridiculous, but we do: we remember where we were the night BBC ALBA went live, because it was such a change in our circumstances. We were being acknowledged and seen, and the value we give was being acknowledged and seen as well. That is exceptionally important. I talk a lot about Gaelic being a social, economic and cultural asset for the whole country and for everybody, and it is, but sometimes the return is not that seen. You do not feel it in your everyday life, but you know it is there. It is really important that that message gets across.

Having a media service that is fit for purpose—that is very important; it has to be fit for purpose—with the BBC ALBA channel at its heart, sitting alongside Radio nan Gàidheal, is necessary to take the language forward. For people who speak the language at whatever level, whether they say a few words in the morning with Duolingo and use the media to support them on their language journey, or whether they are like me and want to find out what is going on in the news at 8 in the evening on BBC ALBA, it is important that that service is there for them and that they can hook into it.

Q23 Lillian Jones: It is interesting to hear how important that is to you and the community of Gaelic speakers. Your point about the fact that Gaelic speakers in England are not accounted for was an interesting one. What have been the key achievements of Bòrd na Gàidhlig in supporting Gaelic language and culture since it was established?

Ealasaid MacDonald: I came in as the chief executive of Bòrd na Gàidhlig just over two and a half years ago, but Bòrd na Gàidhlig and its creation have been part of my life and my awareness because I am a Gael. I am from South Uist in the Western Isles originally and I live in Lewis, so this is my world we are talking about. It is not a piece of my world that sits on the side; it is a big part of my life. I do not give much thought to it as I go through my daily life, although I probably do so more now that I am the chief executive of Bòrd na Gàidhlig—I am just a Gael. We were aware of the fight—and it was a fight—to get the 2005 Act pulled together. You should direct your question more to Rob, because he was involved in all the work that went into that. Bòrd na Gàidhlig came out of that.

Having an organisation that is there for the promotion and development of the Gaelic language is exceptionally important. We are currently at 19 staff, so we are small but mighty, as I said in evidence to a previous inquiry in the Scottish Parliament. We do an awful lot. We are multi-skilled. I pay tribute to my staff, who undertake whatever is asked of them. It is very wide and varied. Bòrd na Gàidhlig is there to ensure that development happens and that the voice of Gaelic is heard. The role of advising the Minister and making sure people are aware of the Gaelic perspective is exceptionally important.

There have been massive changes since Bòrd na Gàidhlig came in, particularly with the advancement that has been going on in Gaelic-medium education. Our role is in supporting the standards set there and



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supporting the statutory guidance for Gaelic language plans. Gaelic language plans are essential right across the public sector to ensure that public bodies understand and can be active in promoting Gaelic across their communities.

Bòrd na Gàidhlig is a key tenet of all the work and all the achievements, but it does not achieve anything on its own. That is really important: when I talk about us as a small body, it is because we have to work in partnership. Our strategic partners are wide and varied. Local authorities are very important to us. I would class MG ALBA as a very close working partnership. We work exceptionally closely together. We support their work and they support ours. We view the media as a core part of engaging in some of our objectives through the national Gaelic language plan.

Rob, do you want to come in on Bòrd na Gàidhlig from 2005 onwards?

Q24 **Lillian Jones:** Funnily enough, that was my next question, so that is perfect timing.

Professor Dunbar: Thank you very much, and thanks for that, Ealasaid. I am now honoured to be board chair, but I was on the board when it was created in 2006, until 2012. There is a long way to go. The board is, as Ealasaid said, a vital component in the strategy for preservation. It is a small organisation, but we have to keep perspective. I have been in Scotland since 1995. In 2005, when the Act was passed, there was only one public body that had any sort of detailed policy to support Gaelic. That was Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, which was also a policy that had been prepared by the Highland council.

Now, well over 60 public authorities in Scotland have Gaelic language plans. Some are stronger than others. We can have a discussion about whether some of those plans could be stronger still. That is part of the reason for the policy instruments created under the Scottish Languages Act 2025. There has been a great increase in the visibility of the language, thanks to the work of Bòrd na Gàidhlig and the 2005 Act. There has been a significant increase in employment in the Gaelic sector. There are now a range of language officers working in many of those public authorities that have Gaelic language plans.

The board has done important work at the community level in collaboration with other organisations. It is important to remember that there are other important organisations such as Comunn na Gàidhlig, which has worked with youth and young people. A large number of officers at Comunn na Gàidhlig, sponsored by Bòrd na Gàidhlig, are working in a variety of communities, but particularly in the Western Isles and many parts of the highlands.

There is an increase in visibility in other places. I am a professor in the department of Celtic and Scottish studies at Edinburgh University. When I got to Scotland, certainly in Edinburgh but in many other parts of the country too, Gaelic was a hidden language. It is no longer a hidden language. That is thanks, in large part, to the 2005 Act and the changes



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that have taken place as a result of that. There is a way to go. There are certainly all sorts of issues to be addressed still, but we have to acknowledge that tremendous progress has been made since the 2005 Act and the formation of the board in early 2006.

Q25 Lillian Jones: That was a helpful contribution. I will go back to Ms MacDonald. Has the board encountered any challenges in adapting to its strength and position under the Act? If so, how have you adapted to those challenges?

Ealasaid MacDonald: Do you mean the new Act that has come in?

Lillian Jones: Yes.

Ealasaid MacDonald: Well, most of it has not been commenced yet for us, but we are adapting. We have new powers in terms of monitoring and compliance. It is up to us to report to the Parliament and Scottish Ministers on compliance with Gaelic language plans. That will include the strategy. Currently, you have the national Gaelic language plan, which is drafted in partnership—that is the best way to put it—between ourselves and the Scottish Government. The strategy will be taken forward by the Scottish Government, and then Bòrd na Gàidhlig will be monitoring progress against that strategy.

We will have to change the way that we are thinking. We are strengthening our regulatory team. We are a small team and we have a small budget. We were going to get there eventually, weren't we? The budget that we run off is £6.325 million, which is small for the work that we have to do. We do not have massive scope for increasing the team, but we are upskilling. We are changing the dynamics of what we are looking at, but we are very conscious of our role in the new Act as well and the new requirements for organisations to consult us, in terms of areas of linguistic significance and in other elements. At the heart of a lot of it is a responsibility to advise the Minister as well, as they go through the process.

Everybody has to have faith in us that we will look at everything on a case-by-case basis and that we are fair in adhering to the law. Yes, we are making changes and, yes, we are adapting, but we welcome the change. In particular, we welcome the monitoring and compliance elements that we will be able to take forward. Most of these things can be worked out in advance of getting to the end of that process, I would think, but I am sure that we will give it all a lot of testing over the next few years to see how it works.

Q26 Chair: Can you just remind me which Ministry you most closely align with?

Ealasaid MacDonald: Education now—we are back in with Education. When Kate Forbes was the Cabinet Secretary, although we were sitting in Education, the Minister had the economy portfolio, so the DFM. But we are sitting with Education, so our Minister is the Cabinet Secretary for Education.



Q27 **Chair:** Where you started?

Ealasaid MacDonald: Yes.

Q28 **Douglas McAllister:** Can I ask you both what the overriding strategy is? Is it just to increase visibility and exposure of the language, because you called it the hidden language? Or is it to get the population talking Gaelic again and being fluent in it? What is your main priority?

Let's be realistic—only 11,000 people in the population can now speak Gaelic. Should the strategy not be to increase that figure? I can understand why your spending millions of pounds on a drama to expose people to the language is of some benefit to stop it being hidden. However, most people watching that drama cannot speak Gaelic and they will follow it via the subtitles.

You make a comparison with Wales and the level of funding they get, but over half a million people in Wales can speak Welsh. There is a difference between someone saying that they have some form of skill in Gaelic and actually being able to speak Gaelic. I look at my authority in West Dunbartonshire and the plan in relation to the Gaelic plan. Simply insisting that local authorities cannot put up a road sign unless it is in both English and Gaelic will not help the population learn how to speak Gaelic.

Surely this has to be about more than just increasing the visibility; it has to be about education. Fewer than 150 pupils in Scotland sat the Gaelic higher. Should that not be the priority? We tinker at education; we introduce our children to Gaelic in primary school and then it drops. I would imagine that the 150 people who sat the Gaelic higher are people who can speak Gaelic in the first place. I think there is a higher in being introduced to Gaelic, and about a dozen people in Scotland sat that. Should the priority not be to drive Gaelic through our secondary schools? We teach modern languages in our secondary schools—French, German, Spanish. We are not teaching Gaelic. Should that not be the priority?

Chair: There are those who would argue that French, German and Spanish are being neglected, too. I think there is a bigger problem, potentially. But did you address that question to anyone in particular?

Douglas McAllister: It is for both.

Professor Dunbar: First of all, if I've created the impression that signage is the only thing we do, that is far from the case. Statutorily and in terms of our strategy, we are obliged to concentrate on two things: increasing the number of people who can speak the language; and the ability to use the language. Education plays a very important role in that. The board has played a very important role in the expansion of Gaelic-medium education.

The Act also requires us to expand opportunities to use the language. This is an element of the statutory plans I referred to and many of the other activities of Bòrd na Gàidhlig are focused on increasing public service provision through the medium of Gaelic, and encouraging wider use of the language in serving the Gaelic-speaking public by private and voluntary



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bodies. We do not have statutory powers to require private and voluntary sector bodies to do so, but we certainly work with a range of private and voluntary sector bodies on things that they can do to increase the daily use of the language. We also work with communities. We have worked closely with the communities in the Western Isles—two communities—to create community language plans. There is a third under way on the Isle of Skye. So we do a wide range of things that focus on substantive, important elements of the strategy to increase both the number of speakers and the users of the language.

I should also say that the 11,000 figure that was quoted was the number of speakers in the Western Isles. In Scotland as a whole, almost 70,000 people recorded themselves as being able to speak the language, and a further 60,000 or so had some ability in the Gaelic language. A large number of those people claim to be able to understand but not necessarily speak or read the language. We do not know enough about who those speakers are, but there are a lot of people who are semi-speakers—that is, people who are raised with the language and have a passive understanding of it and some communicative ability but perhaps not enough to mark on the census form that they can actually speak it. Many of those people can actually communicate in Gaelic. A matter of strategic importance is to increase the number of those speakers.

With regard to education, certainly flow-through from primary to secondary is a very big challenge right now. There are many more children in Gaelic-medium education to the end of primary school. There are much more limited opportunities to carry on with Gaelic-medium education at secondary level. The figure that was quoted were people sitting the higher for fluent speakers, but some of those will be children who have gone through Gaelic-medium education and may not have had it as their first language. Increasing Gaelic primary education and addressing the flow-through to secondary education is a very important issue that we are very well aware of and have been trying to address in collaboration with councils and the Scottish Government for some time.

Ealasaid MacDonald: I do not want to repeat anything that Rob said, but my son has just sat his national 5s and did not sit national 5 Gaelic. My son is a native Gaelic speaker. For some young people where I come from, it is not a school subject. For some people, it is a subject that they do. For my son, it was because the timetabling did not work out, because he is more science-focused. I believe there is a similar problem being faced with French and other languages in other schools, and it is an issue. He did, however, sit Nuadh-eòlas, which is modern studies through the medium of Gaelic. That is not recorded in the same way. When we are looking at figures like the 11,000, we have to be careful about our interpretation and look at the wider picture.

There are many issues that we face in Gaelic and driving things forward; I understand the communities. With Gaelic language plans, the Scottish Government are in the midst of developing—and we have a role in this—the standards that will provide the baseline for each area, as you go up to



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the areas of linguistic significance; in Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, all its electoral wards are over the 20% threshold. There will be a clear emphasis for local authorities and other public bodies as to what the expectation is in terms of implementation.

One of the successes for Bòrd na Gàidhlig when it comes to Gaelic language plans has been the way it has worked with local authorities—and we continue to do so—in terms of appropriateness, working out what is important to each area and working alongside public bodies and public authorities to take forward Gaelic in the most appropriate way to their areas. Gaelic language plans allow local authorities like West Dunbartonshire—it is not long since I saw their Gaelic language plan—to have targets that they put upon themselves to take forward in their area. We will continue to work closely with bodies to ensure that that model is taken forward.

- Q29 **Lillian Jones:** To build on the points that my colleague Douglas raised, my constituency is in the lowlands. For centuries, the lowlands never spoke Gaelic, but we are in an age now where it is on offer through our education system. I am not against that. There is a primary school that is a Gaelic school. My question to you is, when parents decide to place their children into a Gaelic teaching school but they themselves do not speak the language, how does that help the children? That is ultimately what is happening, and it is a bit strange. I am trying to piece those two things together. When there are difficulties with the child's development, the parents do not seem to recognise or identify that before it becomes a bigger issue. I say that with authority because I get emails in my inbox about that.

And I would be grateful for your response to another issue. I know someone who contacted the school by email in Gaelic and the response was in English. If it's Gaelic, it's Gaelic.

Ealasaid MacDonald: I cannot talk about individual issues with individual schools, but I would be very happy to come back to you on these points. In terms of children going through Gaelic-medium education, Gaelic-medium education is taking some young people from absolutely no language skills to be fully fluent at the end of it. It is also producing children at various levels of fluency. We all—Rob and myself—are aware of children who go through the system and fly; other children do not. I am well aware of people who go through the English system and fly, and other children who do not. It is maybe not a Gaelic issue.

We have got to have the mechanisms and support structures around schools, whether it is Gaelic or English, for children to move forward as best they can. It is a parents' right in Scotland to request. They go through that and we will help support that process where we can. I am very happy to come back to you on the other points that you raised.

Lillian Jones: I appreciate that.

- Q30 **Mr Angus MacDonald:** Ms MacDonald, can you explain briefly what the national Gaelic language plan is trying to achieve? I am also interested in



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knowing how closely we are working with, say, Cape Breton, which has Gaelic colleges and a substantial number of speakers.

Chair: That is perhaps one for Mr Dunbar.

Mr Angus MacDonald: I wondered whether you were from Cape Breton originally.

Professor Dunbar: I am from Toronto, but my grandmother is from Cape Breton and my grandfather from Pictou County in Nova Scotia. Gaelic was spoken in my family down to my dad's generation, although he did not have the language. There are important links to Nova Scotia. Thanks to technology and the ease of travel, movement back and forth is greater.

There are a number of initiatives in place in Nova Scotia. The language there is in much more threatened circumstances. There are very small numbers of native speakers, most of whom are very elderly, but a significant number of young people are learning the language. Not an insignificant number have come to fluency in the language. There is now a primary school in one village in Cape Breton, in Mabou. The language is taught at three universities. The links are greater all the time.

Statutorily, the board is required to develop the language in Scotland. Certainly, developing links with Nova Scotia, places in Canada and further afield is very important. Of course, there is personal movement. I have come to and now live in Scotland. I know a few Gaelic-medium teachers, including one on the Isle of Tiree who is from Nova Scotia—Cape Breton Island—originally. Those links are very important. The first part of your question was with regard to the strategy.

Ealasaid MacDonald: The national Gaelic language plan covers a five-year period and sets out the priorities that the Government, Bòrd na Gàidhlig and other organisations are to work towards. That is where we get our corporate plan and the key activity that will go on. It is quite wide and varied in what it looks at. It is set out in eight different sections and ranges from activity in the home to Gaelic-medium education, activity in communities, and the expectations that are set against Bòrd na Gàidhlig as well as other bodies.

Gaelic media is a thread that runs through it. Reading the plan, you will be able to identify areas where media is appropriate, even if it is not written down, and that is exceptionally important. You can see the role that Gaelic media will play in an education system. You can see where we talk about having things to do out of school and the socialisation aspect there. You see how important it is in the community. That is what the national Gaelic language plan is there to do.

Q31 Mr Angus MacDonald: Mr Dunbar, my family are from Cape Breton as well—Mabou—so we have that link. Do you think Bòrd na Gàidhlig is working with its partners to help BBC ALBA deliver the objectives on the national Gaelic plan? Do you liaise with BBC ALBA a lot on that?



Professor Dunbar: Yes, we do. We are in close contact with both MG ALBA and the BBC ALBA channel. We have always had close links. In the early years of the Gaelic Media Service, there was representation from Bòrd na Gàidhlig on the board of MG ALBA. We have a role to play in terms of strategy. We partner on some of the learning initiatives that BBC ALBA is directly involved in, such as the FilmG initiative, which supports young people in producing Gaelic content. That is a fantastic initiative we are involved in. We work very closely.

Q32 **Kirsteen Sullivan:** Continuing on the theme of work with BBC ALBA, MG ALBA has reduced its programming hours by 28% over the past decade due to funding constraints. What do you think the impact has been on the overall use of the Gaelic language and engagement with Gaelic culture?

Professor Dunbar: It is difficult to determine the impact on the overall use of the language of any particular initiative, including Bòrd na Gàidhlig, because a number of interventions, from different sources, will have an impact on actual language use and the vitality of the language. However, the impact of funding pressure on the ability to create new programming is significant, and that is a significant problem that needs to be addressed. It has an impact, for example, not only on MG ALBA and the BBC, but on the very healthy independent television production sector. An understanding that there is a steady and, most importantly, protected funding stream is very important in creating some certainty about forward planning in the sector.

The range of programming is also very important. There are some important genres that we know could be increased with more funding. We have to remember that the interests of the Gaelic viewing public are as diverse as those of the wider population. The range of programming is extremely important. The repeat programming has already been mentioned.

I think there is great loyalty to BBC ALBA. The research that has been done on the channel shows a great sense of loyalty to it, but it is very important that the range and amount of programming be protected and indeed expanded.

Q33 **Kirsteen Sullivan:** What are the risks to BBC ALBA and the wider landscape of Gaelic use if the funding remains static?

Professor Dunbar: The ability to create more—and more varied and interesting—programming will be limited. We have to be able to serve the needs of a very diverse community as well as possible. The unpredictability of funding—despite the jobs in Gaelic media certainly being attractive jobs to Gaelic speakers, particularly young people—or the uncertainties about the security of funding acts, I think, as a weight on the ability to continue to attract people into the media sector. That is something that is true of course of other areas of Gaelic development, but it will ultimately have an impact on the variety and amount of programming available.



The service is an excellent one at present but, as we mentioned before, a properly funded service could do many other things, and might be expected to be doing them. In the media sector, the concept of a wide range of programming is extremely important in making the media offer attractive to people. In Gaelic radio, which is much more developed in terms of the hours of broadcasting and so forth, we have that greater range of programming available; we need it in television as well.

- Q34 **Kirsteen Sullivan:** I want to go back—very briefly, because I am mindful of time—to a point that a couple of colleagues made, and get an understanding of what the objective of the Gaelic language plans is where the language has not been traditionally spoken. Sometimes, when plans have come before councils, particularly given the cost pressures that councils are under, local people can fail to understand why new signage and so on might be required when Gaelic has not been a language spoken in the area. I wonder what the objective is—being mindful of the comments made in the first panel, that there is a decline in first-language speakers and a rise in new speakers, if you like. Where should the focus be and what is the objective?

Professor Dunbar: First of all, we have to remember that Gaelic has been spoken widely in many parts of the country, and that Gaelic speakers today are present in many parts of the country. About 62% of all Gaelic speakers live outside traditional territories, so 11,000 people who recorded themselves as Gaelic speakers live in the Western Isles, but there are about 70,000 Gaelic speakers, and significant numbers live in not only Edinburgh and Glasgow, but other communities.

Signage is a relatively small part of Gaelic language plans. It is probably most obvious to non-speakers of the language, because they see the language in the landscape for the first time. It brings home, however, that Gaelic place names can be found in almost all parts of Scotland and brings home the sense that it is part of the heritage. Again, the Scottish social attitudes survey shows that there is general support for things like bilingual signage not only in the Highlands and Western Isles, but in other parts of the country.

More significantly, the language plans have an element that deals with education. In areas where numbers of Gaelic speakers have been low in recent decades there is none the less a demand for Gaelic-medium education. A very important element to any strategy for Gaelic, in places such as the Western Isles but also in urban and other parts of Scotland, is to create spaces and opportunities for Gaelic speakers to meet and to use the language. An element in many of the Gaelic language plans focuses on those sorts of issues.

Those elements of the language plans and the work we do will be less obvious to the wider public because they do not see them in the same way that they see the signage, but in practical terms they are much more significant elements of Gaelic language plans than things such as public signage, important as signage is.



Q35 **Chair:** MG ALBA has indicated that it would like to have a statutory footing and a funding model more akin to that of S4C. What difference would putting it on a statutory footing make in practice?

Ealasaid MacDonald: On the question that Kirsteen Sullivan asked earlier, about funding, MG ALBA has been doing a great job on comparatively very little funding. The obvious comparison to make is with the Welsh because that is funded through the systems that we have. There is a £100 million funding gap there. There is a level of proportionality and equity required—I think the word is parity. We talk about developing the language and providing opportunities. If we do not fund those things, it is unfair to make comparisons with another language where there are other speakers, where they have had the foundations and invested in the foundations that have allowed to get them to the levels that they are at.

We talk about “An t-Eilean”—it is marvellous; I recommend that everybody go and look at it. That took up MG ALBA’s whole drama budget for a year. It is great, but it is one set of programmes. We look forward to the next instalment coming through and we are glad that MG ALBA is willing to make the investments and take the risks, because it is about much more than just a television programme. If you see it as just a television programme for Gaelic speakers, you are not looking at it properly. It hits a wide range of social, economic and cultural pins.

If we do not fund MG ALBA and Gaelic media appropriately—we link in with the charter here as well—we could be managing decline on a service that is already so underfunded that it will not be able to meet the basics that it is meeting at the moment. It produces wonderful television when it is given the opportunity. I can recommend some of its documentaries, such as the recent one about care in the Western Isles. I would recommend everybody to go and look at that. It is the way they tell their stories and the way they reflect their lives; that is what the BBC channels are supposed to do. We are supposed to be able to put them on and have our lives reflected back at us. MG ALBA does that exceptionally well. It just does not have the budget to do it very often.

MG ALBA provides opportunities. I am a parent. Putting on BBC ALBA for your children is exceptionally important, but it does not have the money to provide the programmes—I tell you what, my kids could spot a repeat a mile off back in the day, and that is the problem it has: high levels of repeat content. Sometimes it is excellent repeat content, but it is repeat content. MG ALBA deserves the opportunity to push forward and take the risks that it is going to have to take to work in the environment just now. Media is changing at a pace that none of us can comprehend. MG ALBA has the anchor of the channel, which is very important for the language and the product that it puts out, but stable funding and statutory footing would mean it is secure. Security will allow it to develop to its full potential.

On the funding mechanism, if you do not fund things properly you will not get the required outcomes. If you do not add any funding on now, we will



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all be going backwards. Many organisations, including my own, made those points clearly when the Scottish Languages Act came out about stagnation of funding, inflation and so on. MG ALBA is in a similar position, and it warrants the stability that a statutory framework would provide.

Q36 Chair: Is the funding more important than having some kind of statutory underpinning?

Ealasaid MacDonald: Both are equally important, because a funding model can be taken away from you—that is the thing. When you are waiting every year to hear what your budget is, that does not allow for forward planning. It does not allow MG ALBA and its partners to engage in the long-term conversations that are needed to take a programme from an idea or concept to the end. You would have to ask them how long it took “An t-Eilean” to come to fruition, but it was a long time. You enter negotiations in good faith, but you have to have that statutory basis on which to take them forward, alongside the financial model that goes with that.

Q37 Lillian Jones: Mr Dunbar, what influence does the European charter for regional or minority languages have on the overall approach to Gaelic language policy? How important is the charter in shaping the UK Government’s obligations to support Gaelic broadcasting?

Professor Dunbar: It is very important, in that it creates a framework for policy interventions. There are detailed obligations in the European charter with regard to education, the media, public service, the legal system and the justice system, as well as the language used in the community and cross-border or international links. In the Gaelic context, there is certainly a link that could be developed with Canada and other jurisdictions where the language is spoken.

The charter has played an important role in broadcasting in particular. When the UK ratified it in 2001, it committed to working towards the creation of a Gaelic television and radio service. That played a role in the discussions that subsequently took place between 2003 and 2006-07 that led to the creation of BBC ALBA.

The charter is also a means of monitoring progress, because the UK has to go back to the Council of Europe every five years and report on how things have developed in education, the media and so forth. That allows the Council of Europe to highlight areas that need further work and where there have been problems, but also to commend good progress. That has been a useful source of good practice, because the charter has now been ratified by 25 Council of Europe member states. It is part of the framework for the development of the language, and it promotes an ongoing conversation between levels of government.

I should note, of course, that it is an international obligation—an obligation on the UK as a whole—so ultimately, the Council of Europe looks to the UK not only for information about what is taking place, but to fulfil the obligations that have been undertaken. In areas of policy such as broadcasting where Westminster has sole legislative authority, the role of

the UK Government and the Westminster Parliament in implementing the charter and making sure that the commitments are being met is quite significant.

Q38 Lillian Jones: What progress needs to be made to better fulfil our obligations under the charter?

Professor Dunbar: Broadcasting is an area of particular importance, because it is not a devolved matter. The sort of thing that Ealasaid said—and indeed Dr Birnie, who provided perspective from the other major Council of Europe treaty—is very important. We now have a television channel, but the sustainability and funding of the channel is of great importance. It goes back to the point that Ealasaid raised earlier about inflation. We have no protection from the effects of inflation on the budget, and that limits what can be done. A proper statutory basis could provide for inflation protection, as it does for Welsh.

Increasingly the committee of experts, which is the body that oversees the implementation of the chartered body that I am a member of, looks to questions such as the diversity of programming that is available. The degree to which the channel is forced to make very difficult decisions was mentioned in Ealasaid's testimony. "An t-Eilean" is a great programme, but making it exhausted essentially all the budget for that sort of programming.

The management of the channel has to make very difficult decisions about what sort of programming is going to be made. It makes very difficult compromises between different genres and different sorts of viewership. What is needed is both appropriate funding and a statutory basis that allows the channel to perform what it needs to perform in terms of serving its viewership and playing a role in the revitalisation of the language itself.

There must be high-quality programming. I think the quality of the programming, which is produced on a very limited budget for broadcasting, is most impressive. The overall package and providing the channel with the ability to forward plan in the way that was discussed earlier would be priorities from the perspective of the European charter.

Q39 Chair: We have talked about funding and about having a statutory footing. Is there anything else you would want to see included in the charter renewal, or are those the main two?

Ealasaid MacDonald: Those are the main things. My worry is that we get distracted by other things. I could give you a long list of things about minority languages for the charter renewal. It is very important that the word "Gaelic" be used in the charter—I cannot stress that enough. The phrase "minority languages" is used quite often as a cover, and they say they will come back to us. Promises have been made. In various discussions over the last few years, it has been said, "It'll be dealt with when we get to the charter." Well, the charter is here, and there are expectations that need to be met.



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Those are the two areas: the funding mechanism sitting alongside the statutory footing. If we get distracted by other parts, we might end up with those other parts, and we might not get the things that are actually going to make substantive value, secure what we have got and take it forward.

Chair: That is extremely helpful. Thank you both very much: it has been really interesting and I have really enjoyed hearing from you both.