

# **EDUCATION COMMITTEE**

Wednesday 8 December 2004

Session 2

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## EDUCATION COMMITTEE

### 26<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2004, Session 2

#### CONVENER

\*Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD)

#### DEPUTY CONVENER

\*Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con)

#### COMMITTEE MEMBERS

\*Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab)  
\*Ms Rosemary Byrne (South of Scotland) (SSP)  
\*Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP)  
\*Mr Adam Ingram (South of Scotland) (SNP)  
\*Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)  
\*Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)  
\*Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab)

#### COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con)  
Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
Rosie Kane (Glasgow) (SSP)  
Michael Matheson (Central Scotland) (SNP)  
Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)

\*attended

#### THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED:

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP)

#### THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Meri Huws (Welsh Language Board)  
Meirion Prys Jones (Welsh Language Board)

#### CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Martin Verity

#### SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Mark Roberts

#### ASSISTANT CLERK

Ian Cowan

#### LOCATION

Committee Room 5



## Scottish Parliament

### Education Committee

*Wednesday 8 December 2004*

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 09:47*]

### Gaelic Language (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

**The Convener (Robert Brown):** Good morning. I welcome you to this meeting of the Education Committee. As we are in public session, I ask everyone to ensure that their mobile telephones and pagers are turned off.

We are continuing to take evidence at stage 1 of the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Bill. We are pleased to welcome Meri Huws and Meirion Prys Jones, the chair and chief executive, respectively, of the Welsh Language Board. They have considerable knowledge to impart to us in this area.

We are grateful to you for your introductory paper, which deals clearly with a lot of the issues that we have been considering in the context of Gaelic. I ask you to say a few words of introduction.

**Meri Huws (Welsh Language Board):** Bore da. My name is Meri Huws. I have been the chair of the Welsh Language Board for the past three months. I was appointed to start on 1 September by the Minister for Culture, Welsh Language and Sport. My colleague, Meirion Prys Jones, has been the chief executive of the board since April, although he has been a member of the staff of the Welsh Language Board since 1994.

We sit here, interestingly, one week after the announcement that the minister of the Welsh Assembly Government will disband the board as it stands and absorb the functions of the Welsh Language Board into the Welsh Assembly Government. I have been the chair of the board for three months, but I was a member of the original board, which was set up in 1993 following the passing of the Welsh Language Act 1993. I am, therefore, in the unique position of having been there at the inception and at the next stage of evolution. I stress the fact that we are talking about a process that has taken 10 years and that is evolutionary, not necessarily revolutionary. Language planning is an evolutionary process.

Why are statute and the board important in Wales? Statute was important in giving a status and prestige to the language. That was also important in winning hearts and minds—a subject

to which we will return when we respond to your questions. Why is the board important in Wales? Over the past 10 years, the existence of the Welsh Language Board has taken the language out of the political arena so that it is no longer a political football. That has been important. We have been able to focus on language planning without the Welsh language being knocked around as a political rugby ball—as it would be in the Welsh context. The board has also given us an opportunity to innovate and experiment and to establish interesting small and large-scale developments, to which we will refer later.

Returning to the issue of status, I believe that the board has given the language a profile throughout Wales. It is important to stress that Wales is not a homogenous country. There are pockets where the Welsh language has traditionally been alive and is still alive, and there are areas in which the Welsh language has not been used for more than a century. We are not talking about a homogenous Welsh nation who are all using the Welsh language. Having a board that can respond to local needs and requirements has been incredibly important.

We congratulate you on the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Bill. The Welsh Language Board has been impressed by the work that has gone into it. We are more than happy to take your questions and discuss issues.

**The Convener:** Thank you. I will kick off by getting into the definitional stuff about secure status, equal status, equal validity and all that kind of thing. The issue has been raised with us by many witnesses, but it is difficult to pin down. You have a lot of experience of working through the implications of those concepts. It strikes me that one of the big differences—even accepting the non-homogenous nature of Welsh—is the fact that 21 per cent of the Welsh population speak Welsh, whereas only 1.16 per cent of the Scottish population speak Gaelic. There is a difference in kind, which imposes a number of constraints on us. Do you have any observations on the difference that that reality on the ground might make?

**Meirion Prys Jones (Welsh Language Board):** Meri Huws touched on how important the concept of status is for a language. It has made a big difference in Wales. People see that we are trying to develop a bilingual nation on the basis of that status. In Wales, it has been stated that both languages should be treated on the basis of equality. The issue of the exact status of the Welsh language is, legally, rather difficult; however, we are agreed on the concept that both languages should be treated equally.

As you say, in Wales, 21 per cent of the population speak Welsh, whereas just over 1 per

cent of the Scottish population speak Gaelic. However, that 21 per cent is not spread equally across Wales; it varies from areas in which 90 per cent of the population speak Welsh to areas in which less than 2 per cent speak Welsh.

We have dealt with that matter by saying that Welsh has the same status as English throughout Wales, but in practical terms, how we interpret that through our language schemes and all our other schemes links with the linguistic nature of the area. For example, the provision of language schemes in an area in which 90 per cent of the population speak Welsh will obviously be much greater than it is in areas in which 2 per cent of people speak Welsh. That reflects the level of service that the public can expect to receive from public bodies in specific linguistic areas. It is a matter of horses for courses in respect of schemes and all the other plans with which we work. The symbolic value of status as a concept is the same throughout Wales, but the practical application of measures differs according to the linguistic nature of the area.

**The Convener:** Does the language's status not translate into rights? Perhaps that is the issue with which we have most difficulty. If Welsh has equal status, I presume that certain rights flow from that status. There is the issue of the availability of Welsh for talking to public officials, for example. What does that mean in areas in which fewer resources are available, never mind any interest or desire to facilitate people speaking Welsh?

**Meri Huws:** At the beginning, I stressed that the process has been evolutionary, and recognising that is important. Rights can drive provision—we have seen that happening in Wales, but not in a revolutionary way. As people have requested services, services have grown at a far greater rate over a period—we are talking about 10 years—in areas of Gwynedd, for example, in which there is a high preponderance of Welsh speakers. Meirion Prys Jones has mentioned that matter.

However, in areas of south-east Wales in which there is not that intensity of Welsh speakers, the process has been very slow. Recognising that people are asking for such services has been a useful driver for those services, which gradually respond. We can point to numerous examples of local authority services in which such awareness did not exist 10 years ago, but does now. Rights can be used to drive service provision and service planning, but things happen slowly. We must stress that developments have been slow even in Wales, where the picture is very different from the picture in Scotland. Statute has been used gently to drive the development of services.

**Meirion Prys Jones:** Our legislation is based not on the concept of rights, but on the concept of providing a service for Welsh speakers. That links

back to the availability of that service and how that availability is structured. If a person walked into an office in Caernarfon, they could expect to receive a service face to face in Welsh, but if they walked into an office in Newport—where the population of Welsh speakers is much smaller—the person in the office would say, “I might not be able to provide that service now, but I can arrange for it to be provided.” That is quite a different situation if we are considering the concept of rights.

**The Convener:** On the measurement of progress, you rightly say that we are talking about a process of around 10 years since the Welsh Language Act 1993 was passed. Can that progress be measured? I am talking not only about the increase in services—which, I presume, is not too difficult to pin down—but about a change in logistics, the numbers of people who speak Welsh, the extent to which people are fluent in Welsh and so on. Have targets been set or achieved that you can tell us about?

**Meri Huws:** We can point to certain indicators, the first of which are the latest census figures. We are starting to see the tail end of a gradual decline moving up. In quantitative terms, the number of young people who go through the Welsh-medium education system and the number of people who are slowly picking up public services through the medium of Welsh can be considered. The qualitative change in attitudes towards the Welsh language that has occurred in Wales can also be considered, although that is far more difficult to do. I referred to the Welsh language having been taken out of the political arena of contention through statute and the board. I speak as someone who was there at the beginning in 1993 and who is still there in 2004-05 when I say that there has been an immeasurable qualitative change throughout Wales.

10:00

**Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP):** What you say is important, because we are concerned that if we provide rights, the demand might escalate all of a sudden from day one. Will you explore that issue further? Will you also speak about the related issue of rights to education? Obviously, the education provision in the two countries is at present disparate, but what might we expect? What happened in the evolution of rights to education in Welsh? Was that process as slow and as evolutionary as progress on the general status of the language was?

**Meirion Prys Jones:** At present, there is no statutory right to Welsh-medium education. We dealt with that situation through the language scheme system, by asking each local education authority, of which we have 22, to agree with us a Welsh education scheme that outlines what the

Welsh-medium provision will be in its area for the next three to five years. We agreed schemes with the 22 authorities about two years ago. Each scheme states that parents have a right to education in Welsh for their child within that local authority. However, the schemes do not specify how far children might be expected to travel, although it must be a reasonable distance. That is the only element of rights that we have in relation to Welsh-medium education. Generally in the 22 schemes, parents have access to Welsh-medium education, although children in some authority areas might have to travel some distance.

**Fiona Hyslop:** Is there anything in your education legislation to support the local authority schemes, or are they voluntary schemes that are agreed with the Welsh Language Board?

**Meirion Prys Jones:** They are not voluntary schemes; they are statutory. The authorities must agree a scheme with us alone. Therefore, although the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning agrees school organisation and authority plans with authorities, the Welsh-medium education schemes are statutory ones that the authorities must agree with us.

**Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab):** We are trying not to introduce a confrontational approach. How much conflict have you had and how many cases have been raised in the past 10 years as a result of individuals pressing for services and using their rights under the Welsh Language Act 1993?

**Meirion Prys Jones:** Throughout the process of agreeing and rolling out language schemes and Welsh education schemes over a period, we have had little resistance or reaction. People realise that the process is evolutionary and that it makes sense that the provision of services should reflect the linguistic nature of the area. People have seen the process as a job that needs to be done and they have done it.

We have been unhappy with the way in which some bodies have dealt with the agreed targets in the schemes and we have had discussions with those bodies. We have inspected three organisations in the past 10 years. The end of the process would be to draw an organisation to the relevant minister's attention, but we have not had to do that with any organisation.

**Mr Adam Ingram (South of Scotland) (SNP):** Your submission suggests that we ought to write into the bill something about the practical implementation of equality. Are you suggesting that the bill is at present not sufficient to carry out the types of measures that you have carried out in Wales? For example, your legislation gives you the statutory authority to discuss with the local

authorities and agree that they should provide rights to Welsh-medium education.

**Meirion Prys Jones:** You should consider writing that into legislation and identifying what you mean by the language's statutory status. It is a good idea, but we have not looked at it too carefully. We have had little reaction to that element from the public. They have accepted the statement that both languages should be treated on a basis of equality, and we have moved on from there. It is a good thing that that statement is in statute and that we have the legislation on language schemes, which is an important driver, but much of the other work that we do has much more impact than the bit that is linked to legislation. Community development work and the work that we do on education are in many ways more important.

**Mr Ingram:** Is that not because it is a given that equality of status is written into the law?

**Meirion Prys Jones:** That phrase is not in our legislation.

**Meri Huws:** Your task is to consider proposed legislation. With my external perspective as chair of the board, I stress that the value of the statute has been in leverage rather than statutory implementation and recourse to statute and case law. Ten years ago, that would have surprised us in Wales, but the impact of the legislation has been the leverage that it has given for shifting opinion over a period rather than in enabling legal challenge.

**Meirion Prys Jones:** Initially, the question that we were asked most often was, "What if somebody doesn't implement a scheme?" We had that question time and again, but nobody asks it any more. We have not got to the point of a legal challenge, so people have seen from our actions, the implementation of schemes and the way in which they have been rolled out sensibly that there is no need to ask that question.

**Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP):** One of the issues with which we are grappling is the distinction between bodies that are devolved to the Scottish Parliament and those that are reserved to Westminster. The BBC is an obvious example, but there are many others. In Wales, what is your relationship with Westminster-based bodies? Do they comply with your requirements or have you not tried to make them comply?

**Meri Huws:** The relationship could be described as interesting.

**Alex Neil:** How would you define that?

**Meirion Prys Jones:** The Welsh Language Act 1993 provides that any body that is based outside Wales but provides services in Wales is required to have a scheme, and many of them do; many of

them respond positively to the scheme. Some are a bit slower than others, but we prompt them and ask them questions. Usually we tell them what the scheme is and what they have agreed, and then they do it.

**Alex Neil:** Are there any major offenders? We want to pinpoint them now.

**Meirion Prys Jones:** We will tell you that in private.

**Meri Huws:** I stress that the process of implementing the language schemes has been evolutionary. It has been a matter of holding hands rather than taking a heavy-handed, statutory approach. There are many public bodies that, even now, 10 years down the road, are still grappling with their first language schemes—there are more than 300 schemes at the moment—but we are using a carrot rather than a stick.

**Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab):** The Welsh Language Act 1993 was passed by the UK Government, which probably makes it rather easier to require compliance. We have been investigating what legislative powers the Parliament has to force organisations that are not devolved, such as the Department for Work and Pensions or the Inland Revenue, to come into line with the bill and we are still seeking advice on that. Two years ago, the National Assembly for Wales brought in its own national plan. How will Westminster-based organisations interact with that? Will the plan have any effect on future development?

**Meirion Prys Jones:** Not as such, because the plan is for the promotion of Wales as a bilingual country. The 1993 act is still in force, so we use the act to pick up the bodies outside Wales. There is obviously a linkage between the two elements, but we still use the act to ensure that the Department for Education and Skills, for example, provides services for us.

**Dr Murray:** So you would be able to ask the Department for Work and Pensions to produce bilingual materials? That is within your power.

**Meri Huws:** In August, the DWP launched the language scheme, which was one of the first events that I attended, if I remember rightly.

**The Convener:** What about what we might describe as private public bodies—bodies that provide services under public-private partnership arrangements, for example? Do you get involved with them or do you get at them at the other end of the scheme, through the local authority?

**Meirion Prys Jones:** The 1993 act stipulates that if public bodies contract out to third parties, those third parties are included within a scheme. In each scheme, there is a part that deals with contracting out.

**The Convener:** Let us move on to education. Ken Macintosh wants to pursue some issues on that.

**Mr Macintosh:** You have answered my first question, in that you have said that there is no statutory right to Welsh-medium education in Wales. However, you say that local education authorities draw up plans on a statutory basis. I am trying to work out the difference between the situation in Wales and what you suggest in your submission that we should adopt here. We are not seeking to establish a right to Gaelic-medium education, but we are suggesting that the plans that are drawn up should help to promote Gaelic-medium education. Why do you think that the present wording is not strong enough? You suggest that local authorities must be expected to do more than just “react positively”. What does the 1993 act provide for that our bill would not provide for? Why would stronger wording make a difference?

**Meirion Prys Jones:** As regards the statutory position, there is no education act that establishes a duty to provide Welsh-medium education. That is why we have linked such provision to a part of the 1993 act that refers to schemes. The scheme is a statutory element, but that is slightly different from having an education act that stipulates a duty to provide Welsh-medium education.

We have not said to local authorities that they should provide something that is reasonable; we have said that they must plan over a period by examining their data and the demand from parents and identifying whether there has been a demographic shift. After taking all those elements into account, they should say, “This is the provision we need,” and then go out to consultation on that, so that the public can see what the plans are. We discuss the final scheme with the authorities. We feel that that has more rigour as a planning process. The public can expect that there will be a scheme that will follow a certain format, ask certain questions and provide a certain number of reasonable and practical targets to which we and the local authority will agree. We think that your wording could mean that the rigour of such a system would be lacking.

**Mr Macintosh:** It is the process of drawing up the statutory plans and having consultation and public involvement that is the most important element.

**Meirion Prys Jones:** Yes.

**Meri Huws:** The statutory requirement to plan is what is important. It has proved to be a real strength in the Welsh system. That goes back to the notion of language planning.

**Mr Macintosh:** You are talking about a statutory requirement to plan as opposed to a statutory



requirement to draw up a plan. The difference is very subtle. I cannot work out the difference between what we intend to do and the existing situation in Wales. The Welsh process is more formal and it involves public consultation, but are we not splitting hairs?

**Meirion Prys Jones:** We may be, but it is our experience that having that framework in place brings an element of consistency and ensures that everyone performs the tasks that they are supposed to and that the public are aware of the process. The process is the same as the language scheme process. Therefore, the public know what is happening and what to expect.

10:15

**Mr Macintosh:** One of our biggest hurdles is the lack of teachers. I suspect that one of the reasons why the Executive has not yet introduced a right to Gaelic-medium education is that it would be difficult to meet the demand in some areas because there are not enough Gaelic-medium teachers. What was your experience? Did you have enough Welsh language teachers? How did you increase the number of pupils and teachers in Welsh-medium education?

**Meirion Prys Jones:** When it comes to language planning, making sure that we have enough teachers is the basic premise for success. In some ways, our situation is different from yours because we are lucky in that we have quite a number of Welsh people who speak Welsh on a daily basis.

Therefore, on the recruitment of teachers—the Welsh have been very good at being teachers and we have produced many teachers in the past century and a half—we were able to ensure that we had a sufficient number of teachers initially, in both the primary and secondary sectors. Increasingly, however, we have started to run into the problem of success, which means that there has been demand for more Welsh-medium education and there are not sufficient teachers. Therefore, we are putting plans in place to ensure that teaching as a profession through the medium of Welsh is marketed as an attractive proposition. However, we are in a slightly different position from yours when it comes to speakers.

**Mr Macintosh:** I see that. Who took the lead in meeting that shortfall of teachers? I assume that there was a shortfall, but perhaps there was not. Did the Welsh Language Board intervene actively or did the UK Government instruct the teaching colleges to increase the output of Welsh-medium teachers?

**Meri Huws:** There was not an initial shortfall, but over the past 10 years, we have seen demand outstrip supply. The forces for change definitely

came from the Welsh Language Board, but initial planning and education provision happened hand in hand with the UK Government. That happens now on a regular basis with the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning in the Welsh Assembly Government.

Discussions are on-going about the funding of places for teacher training, and about support for scholarships for those who wish to continue studying through the Welsh medium so that they can go into further and higher education. So there was a partnership with the UK Government initially, but also with the further and higher education sectors when they saw the need to address the shortfall.

**Mr Macintosh:** Did you draw up a plan for the bodies in Wales that are in charge of teacher training? Did they have a Welsh language plan, into which you had input, part of which stipulated an increase in the supply of Welsh language teachers?

**Meirion Prys Jones:** The Welsh Language Board is a strategic planning body; it does not go into that kind of detail. It is the role of the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning to ensure that there are sufficient numbers of teachers. We have discussions with the minister, then the minister contacts the colleges and stipulates how many teachers she wants to be trained.

We have a language scheme in every FE and HE establishment that refers to their provision. However, making sure that there are sufficient numbers of teachers is a mainstream issue in overall planning and the system ensures that there are enough teachers. Although we have an interest in that area, we do not take responsibility for it in the planning process.

**Mr Macintosh:** It sounds as if teacher supply has not been a problem, so perhaps my questions are irrelevant in your case. It does not sound as if you have had the problem that we are experiencing now, which is that we just do not have enough Gaelic-medium teachers.

**Meri Huws:** You have a different problem. We had an initial threshold, but we did not have an initial problem—that problem has emerged in pockets. Our present problem relates to early-years education because of the huge demand.

**Mr Macintosh:** You made an interesting point about the importance of Gaelic-medium teachers being seen as mainstream and normal, rather than a niche or a backwater. That point was also raised with us when we were in Skye. What is your experience on that point with regard to Welsh-medium education? You obviously have a far greater number of Welsh-medium teachers. Are they all part of the mainstream? Are they all seen simply as teachers—there being no differentiation

between English-medium and Welsh-medium teachers—or is Welsh-medium education seen as a specialist area?

**Meirion Prys Jones:** The situation is different: a quarter of primary schools in Wales teach through the medium of Welsh, so Welsh-medium teachers account for a substantial part of the teaching force. Even so, we must keep on reminding the education system that Welsh-medium education is a part of it. There is a tendency to drift towards dealing only with the English part. Welsh-medium schools have to an increasing extent been integrated into the system. The fact that they form a substantial chunk of the education system in Wales makes a difference.

**Dr Murray:** You said that although you initially had sufficient Welsh-language teachers, demand is now outstripping supply, particularly in the early years. How might that be tackled? Will it be done by encouraging more Welsh speakers to go into teaching, or are you considering training non-Welsh-speaking teachers to speak Welsh? One view that has been raised with us is that people should see having Gaelic as an advantage for their career. Is there now a perception in Wales that speaking Welsh is a career advantage?

**Meirion Prys Jones:** There are two issues there. I will start with planning for the required number of teachers, which involves a mixture of trying to persuade more people to go into the teaching profession and of giving linguistic skills to non-Welsh speakers. We are building on a base, increasing the number of people who follow that route. There is an element of planning to ensure that we have a sufficient number of teachers.

On the second issue, there is a growing impression in Wales of the advantage of being bilingual in the workplace. There are now much more data available about the advantages of being bilingual. Recent research has shown that people in the workplace with bilingual skills earn 10 per cent more than people who are monolingual, although that does not apply to individual posts. On the psychology of bilingualism, people are starting to understand that there are advantages in being bilingual. The language scheme system underpins that by giving status—if not necessarily financial status—to posts where people are able to work bilingually. We promote and perceive that development as dealing with bilingualism, not with Welsh. We are talking about people who have skills in two languages.

**Alex Neil:** The evidence of Highland Council, which is by far the most advanced local authority when it comes to existing provision, indicated that for it to be possible to deliver Gaelic-medium education, a minimum of four pupils was required. There would, of course, be exceptions in very small schools. In rural areas, say in mid Wales

and parts of north Wales, has there been difficulty with the level of demand? What level of demand would you regard as reasonable before you insisted on Welsh-medium provision?

I have a further question, on ministerial responsibility. Here, we have a Minister for Education and Young People and a Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport. The Minister for Education and Young People introduced the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Bill. It is arguable that the minister with responsibility for culture should be responsible for it. What are the lines of reporting into the ministerial structure of the Welsh Assembly Government?

**Meri Huws:** I will pick up on the second question, to start with.

**Alex Neil:** Is that the easy one?

**Meri Huws:** Yes—I was just hoping you would forget the first one.

We report directly to the Minister for Culture, Welsh Language and Sport, who is our sponsoring minister. He appointed me, for example, and he appoints the board. During the period of the Welsh Assembly Government, a positive relationship has been established with the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning and, increasingly, with the Minister for Health and Social Services, because another area of concern is that health professionals need language skills. The issue is not to whom the person should report: what is really important is the commitment of the Scottish Executive or the Welsh Assembly Government to the notion of language planning in a bilingual nation.

Through the board and through the role of the chair we have been able to raise awareness and keep discussions going between ministers. The main issue is not to whom matters are reported but that a dialogue is kept going. I keep on using the word so it is becoming boring, but the process is evolutionary: it is about step-by-step incremental change.

**Meirion Prys Jones:** One of the main planks of the Government's policy document on a bilingual Wales is mainstreaming. Therefore, it is an issue for each minister. Every year each minister has to provide a report on how they have dealt with issues that relate to Welsh. The fact that such information is collected enables us to see how matters are moving forward across all the ministries. That link is quite strong.

**Meri Huws:** It is a patchy picture, to be fair.

**Meirion Prys Jones:** We generally do not touch on demand. We ask authorities to ensure that provision is available; how they structure provision in individual schools and for individual pupils is up to them.

**Alex Neil:** But if I am a parent and have the right to demand, in our case, Gaelic-medium education, there must be a balance between my rights to demand and the state's resources to provide it.

**Meirion Prys Jones:** If a parent in Wales wants Welsh-medium education for their child, they can receive it. Of course, in some areas it depends on how far they are willing to send their child on a bus. We certainly do not stipulate any numbers or the sizes of schools or anything. We would be on dangerous ground if we went too far into that.

**The Convener:** That is a significant difference from the position in Scotland. The language is much more geographically concentrated in Scotland, so such provision might be more difficult.

**Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab):** Will you be strengthened by the decision of the Welsh Assembly Government to bring the quango into the Government? Do you see that as an endorsement of more proactive development of the language? A question that has been raised with the committee is whether responsibility lies with the board or with the minister. Who makes the final decision? If individuals move in and out of posts there might not be a consistent approach. That is probably a fairly loaded question, but I am interested to hear the answer.

**The Convener:** You are perhaps intruding on private grief.

**Meri Huws:** No. It is okay.

I will start. We will have two perspectives, as I am speaking as a board member who was there 10 years ago and remains today.

Having a board in Wales has been crucial, as it has enabled the language not to become too much of a political football. A mediating body has been in place that can generate dialogue, keep the ball moving and take innovative steps through small-scale and large-scale schemes to address a specific need. Had the Welsh Language Board not been in existence over those 10 years I think we would not have seen the growth that we now see in the census figures.

There is an element of personal grief, but 10 years down the road it is sensible to start to mainstream that which has been gained into the Welsh Assembly Government. As chair, I have a real concern that the Welsh language could again become a political football. I do not think that we would have made the progress that has been achieved without the board at arm's length from the Government. The change that has occurred in Wales has been achieved in a gentle, rational manner.

**The Convener:** It has given you a space to operate in, which you would not otherwise have had.

**Meri Huws:** Absolutely.

**Meirion Prys Jones:** I find it rather strange that a body that had eight staff members 10 years ago now has nearly 80 spread over three offices. With this process, a pressure group evolves into a language board and then, because elements are mainstreamed, the whole thing becomes important enough to be made a part of the Government.

10:30

**Fiona Hyslop:** I want to return to demand. I have been very interested in the comments that have been made so far. The committee has been asked to consider whether one of the plan's criteria should be the potential for use rather than demand. What has been your experience of areas in which less Welsh is spoken? Is there any merit in making a criterion for driving the plan the potential for use rather than what the demand might be?

You said that, despite the fact that the Welsh Language Act was passed in 1993, the Department for Work and Pensions has only just introduced a Welsh language scheme. What was the timescale within which different bodies or authorities had to introduce schemes?

**Meirion Prys Jones:** I will pick up the second question of how we have dealt with bodies. At the beginning of the process, three members of staff were responsible for dealing with Welsh language schemes. However, given that there are at least 2,000 public bodies in Wales, we were faced with a mammoth task. As a result, we prioritised the bodies and decided that we should deal first with the local authorities, because they have such an interface with the public. I should point out that we have to work with the Assembly, which issues a notice that tells us the bodies that we should ask to introduce schemes. That means that the timetable for introducing Welsh language schemes is also linked to political will.

We have gradually worked our way through what we perceive to be the most important bodies and, as Meri Huws has pointed out, we now have 300 schemes. By now, we have probably hit most of the public bodies that have an influence on the language. I acknowledge that the process has been slow and we have only recently gained additional staff to monitor schemes and to deal with grievance schemes. That has quickened the process. Initially, we felt that it was a good idea to agree some good schemes, get them up and running, find out whether they were practical and had a good public reception and move on from there.

**Meri Huws:** That partly answers the member's first question about the interface between demand and potential for use. That issue is difficult to unpick because, with the introduction of Welsh language schemes and the need for more bilingual teachers, potential for use has created demand, which has then slowly generated more potential for use. It is difficult to divide those aspects in a formulaic way. In one respect, we are talking about an act of faith, in that a demand will lead gently to a greater potential for use.

**Fiona Hyslop:** I take it that the elements of demand and potential for use are addressed in the consultation process for proposed schemes and in the schemes themselves.

**Meri Huws:** Yes. They go hand in hand and are monitored. Indeed, it is important to point out that over a period of time we gently monitor the schemes and move things along.

**Fiona Hyslop:** But is there any statutory wording about demand and potential for use?

**Meirion Prys Jones:** No. We have simply linked them together.

**The Convener:** I want to get some feel of the pattern of Welsh-language education. In our travels around Scotland and during our evidence-taking sessions, we have had to probe what is meant by Gaelic-medium education. We have learned that in some cases it means that most subjects are taught in Gaelic, whereas in other cases one or two subjects are taught in Gaelic and the rest is taught in English. That has given rise to issues such as what happens to Gaelic learners and to people who come to live in the area but who cannot speak the language. I believe that you said that about 40 per cent of primary schools in Wales are Welsh-medium. I assume that that means that Welsh is used in the same way as English is used in schools in England and in the bulk of schools in Scotland to teach everything. What happens across Wales in that respect?

**Meirion Prys Jones:** About a quarter of primary schools and a fifth of secondary schools are Welsh medium. In primary schools, there are two streams: one is children who come from Welsh-speaking homes, the other is children who arrive and join the immersion education process. The vast majority of those schools will teach 50 per cent or more—some teach 90 per cent—of the curriculum through the medium of Welsh. We do not have a range of options. There is an understanding that schools will have to teach in Welsh—on average it is about 65 per cent plus. People realise that contact time with the language is necessary if the immersion process is to work well.

In Welsh-medium schools, education is Welsh only until the age of seven. Then, between seven

and 11, it is about 65 per cent Welsh-medium education, on average. At secondary school level, there are many more options. Some schools teach everything through the medium of Welsh; others teach some subjects through the medium of Welsh; in some, children have the option of learning either in Welsh or in English; and there are English-medium schools.

**The Convener:** Is that based on parental and individual choice? Are there options to have non-Welsh, purely English streams, or is that something that you discourage and that does not happen? How do you deal with the choice element?

**Meirion Prys Jones:** It generally depends on where people live. In an area where a high percentage of the population speak Welsh, the village schools will be Welsh schools. In areas where there is more of a linguistic balance, there will be more choice.

**The Convener:** Is Welsh the language of the playground, especially in predominantly Welsh-speaking areas? We have heard that, even in Gaelic-speaking areas, English tends to be the language of the playground. There is a difficulty in there not being a Gaelic milieu in which to operate. Do you have that problem, or is Welsh sufficiently vibrant to be the language of the playground in Welsh-speaking areas?

**Meirion Prys Jones:** In the north-west of Wales, Welsh is the language of everyday use among the children as well as the adults. However, you must remember that there are no areas in Wales where there are not people who are non-Welsh speakers. Therefore, in nearly all the schools in Wales, some pupils arrive unable to speak Welsh. There is a linguistic mix.

The status of Welsh as the language of the playground is an issue in Wales, especially in areas where a high percentage of the children in Welsh schools are from non-Welsh-speaking homes. How much can we expect from them? It is a rather difficult issue to deal with. We would encourage the use of Welsh in the playground, but innovation is needed to get children from English-speaking homes who have learned Welsh at school to use Welsh when they are not with the teachers. It is not an easy issue to deal with.

**The Convener:** You said that there is an issue in nursery school and pre-school arrangements. Do you give much support to parents? The evidence that we have received from Gaelic-speaking areas is that it is important to encourage non-Gaelic-speaking parents to learn—or, at least, be supportive of—Gaelic. Do you do much to encourage the surrounding milieu, such as what happens at home, by providing support for parents

and extracurricular activities with a Welsh perspective?

**Meirion Prys Jones:** That touches on something we wanted to talk about—how we can support the infrastructure outside legislation and education. We are concentrating on children aged nought to seven and their parents, as language transmission in the home is a big issue in Wales at the moment. Where both parents speak Welsh, there is an 80-plus per cent chance that their children will speak Welsh; where only one parent speaks Welsh, the likelihood is about 40 per cent. Through a project called Twf, we are providing support and advice for parents about how they can raise their children bilingually, especially in homes where only one parent speaks Welsh. We are starting to provide that advice and guidance before children enter education and even before they are born.

Through our grant-making powers, we support Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin, which is the Welsh-medium pre-school playgroup association. We fund that organisation to the tune of £1 million a year to establish an infrastructure to ensure that there is provision for parents and small children. From the age of six months until the age of two, the children attend its parent-toddler groups; then, from age two to age three and a half, they go to nursery groups. A big investment is made in that pre-school provision. As part of that, we work with the Further Education Funding Council for Wales, to ensure that there is provision for parents who want to learn Welsh with their children. That is a growing element, and there is a realisation that we need to do more of that.

We are trying to put together a package that supports those periods in a child's and an adult's life that are very important in terms of the use of language. That is outside legislation; it is something that the Welsh Language Board, with the full support of the Assembly Government, has recognised is an important area for development.

**Meri Huws:** Meirion Prys Jones has spoken about children aged between nought and seven. The other group that is crucial is the 13-plus group—the potential parents. You talked about changing the milieu, convener. That has occurred in Wales over the past 10 years: it is now cool to speak Welsh. The board has had to be innovative in working with youth organisations and in—to use a horrible phrase—marketing the language and making it attractive. That has been done through various campaigns and it has been targeted through pop music, sport, and so on. We are targeting the potential parents of the future and, in the process, educating the parents of today. The nought-to-seven age group is crucial, but the 13-plus age group is becoming increasingly important for us.

**The Convener:** You mentioned that you have undertaken some projects and pilot schemes. The committee might find it interesting to have some details of them—not just now, but as a follow-up in writing, if we can trouble you in that direction. Would that be possible?

**Meri Huws:** Absolutely. Yes. You might want to get on a plane and come down to look at some of the projects. That might be useful. We can describe them and give you written evidence on them, but seeing some of those projects at work may be interesting for you.

**The Convener:** I feel a trip to Wales coming on.

**Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con):** I would be most grateful if you could answer three questions. The first relates to the operation of the courts. In Scotland, most of the requests to have cases—whether civil or criminal—heard in Gaelic come from the Western Isles or the north-west of Scotland, although there are calls for the provision to be extended. How does it work in Wales? Is Welsh used throughout your courts system? If so, is it a matter for request? What are your recommendations for us?

**Meri Huws:** The pattern would have been similar in Wales 10 years ago. Requests for Welsh-medium court hearings would have been made mainly in the north-west and the south-west. Under the legislation, a person has a right to have their case heard through the medium of Welsh; however, that takes us back to planning. Their case may not be heard the following Monday; it may be necessary to bring in provision. If someone in Cardiff wants their case to be heard through the medium of Welsh, that will be planned into the court timetable for a time when a Welsh-medium judge or jury can be brought together.

The process has been gradual, and the provision has not hit the courts system hard. Prior to the introduction of the legislation, there was real concern that there would be a huge increase in the number of people requesting Welsh-medium hearings; however, there has not been such an increase. It has been a very slow process.

**Lord James Douglas-Hamilton:** Would it be fair to say that there has been a gradual extension of the use of Welsh in the courts, that it has not been a particularly contentious issue and that it has happened on an evolutionary basis?

**Meri Huws:** Absolutely.

**Lord James Douglas-Hamilton:** And it is now an enshrined right in legislation.

**Meri Huws:** Yes.

**Lord James Douglas-Hamilton:** My second question relates to technology, distance learning and videoconferencing. Has there been any

demand for the use of information technology in the teaching of the Welsh language—for example in outlying parts such as Anglesey and the north-west? Or are those areas covered, so that it is not a problem for you at all?

**Meri Huws:** We have evidence from post-16 education, in which the use of technology is being explored. Meirion Prys Jones described the face-to-face provision in the primary school sector, but we are starting to experiment in the more specialised subjects, certainly in post-16 education. Various institutions are getting together to use videoconferencing and other technologies and to develop bilingual distance-learning materials. The fact that the materials are not Welsh-medium only, but bilingual, is important. That is 10 years down the road from statute. Incremental change, rather than huge step changes, has occurred.

10:45

**Meirion Prys Jones:** We are committed to using technology, because we can see that if a minority language is to be promoted, technology plays an important part in its status. Last week, we were pleased to launch with Microsoft the first Welsh interface, so that everything that is seen on a computer screen can be in Welsh. Welsh is the first European language for which Microsoft has created such an interface. Investing money and expertise in information technology has been one of our priorities.

**Meri Huws:** That is very much about status. The one audience that has become very excited by the Microsoft development is the primary education sector.

**Lord James Douglas-Hamilton:** Do you expect a gradual and steady process of using technology more?

**Meri Huws:** Yes.

**Lord James Douglas-Hamilton:** Is it your function or that of the minister to give guidance on good practice? Is guidance given throughout Wales? If so, does it work well?

**Meirion Prys Jones:** We see providing guidance as an integral part of our role. As we deal with language schemes and the use of Welsh by public organisations, giving guidance is part of the process. When we discuss a scheme with a public body, we explore what other bodies have done in similar circumstances. We use that element of developmental work to lead a body to its final scheme. Guidance is an integral part of the process.

**Lord James Douglas-Hamilton:** Is the minister involved? Does he supplement that?

**Meirion Prys Jones:** The minister will say in general terms, "This is a good thing and these are good examples," but the practical level is down to us.

**Lord James Douglas-Hamilton:** In the main, the minister leaves guidance to you.

**Meirion Prys Jones:** Yes.

**The Convener:** You touched on resources. One issue in Scotland is limited Gaelic resources, especially for teaching subjects such as physics and maths. Is that a problem with Welsh, or are the number of speakers and other resources sufficient to make that not a difficulty?

**Meirion Prys Jones:** It is not easy, especially for some specialised subjects in the secondary sector. We have about 60 secondary schools that teach through the medium of Welsh, which means that X number of teachers must be planned for each area in each year. We do not hit all targets in all subjects. For example, about two years ago only one maths teacher was being trained for the Welsh-medium sector. It can be problematic but, in general, schools tend to be resourceful and to find people who can do the job.

**The Convener:** I meant not so much teacher resources as written materials.

**Meirion Prys Jones:** They are a problem. Year-on-year investment is made through the Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales, which has a budget of £2.5 million a year to provide resources for the school education sector.

The problem is that there is no chance that those resources will ever be as good in the Welsh-medium sector as they are in the English-medium sector, so we must be systematic and ensure that each subject has provision. Some provision is excellent. Reading books, novels and the provision for small children are extensive and good, but it becomes more difficult as we go up the age range.

**Mr McAveety:** Another issue that the committee has explored is the potential cost of the initial development of language plans. We have had fairly contested submissions about the relative costs. Your paper identifies standard approaches that can be encouraged, such as templates. I wonder about notional costs to local authorities. Can you give us an idea of the cost of reasonable implementation in what we have termed areas of high and low usage of Gaelic? That would be helpful in our deliberations.

**Meirion Prys Jones:** Cost was debated prior to the passing of the Welsh Language Act 1993. We and the Government came to the conclusion that no estimated cost should be attached to the production of language schemes in Wales,

because that is a mainstream issue that should be subsumed within each local authority's budget. Therefore, we have not gone through the process of identifying costs. Obviously, the cost varies from local authority to local authority, depending on the level of provision. However, it is accepted generally that, in the process of democracy, more provision needs to be made in areas with more Welsh speaking. Councils in areas with more Welsh speaking are happy to provide that extra resource and provision. We cannot help you to identify a cost figure. The provision is seen as part of the normal process of governing the country.

**Mr McAveety:** Our evidence is that people are worried about the cost and that that might be used as an argument not to respond positively. Has cost been a problem? I accept that most local authorities subsume the costs in their normal budgets and that the sums are not massive. However, there are different views about the cost, because some local authorities have different views on how to consult and engage with their communities. Did people come to you for advice on how to develop schemes? What advice did you give to reassure them?

**Meirion Prys Jones:** Initially, there was a discussion about the cost, but we overcame that by having a reasonable discussion with each authority. They came to us and said, "Do we need to translate all our documentation when only 2 per cent of our population speak Welsh?" We said, "No, you have to be totally reasonable about this. You have to assess, in your context, how much use will be made of the documents, and what kind of response you will get from the public." If 90 per cent of the population speak Welsh, the population will expect everything to be in English as well as Welsh, so you can turn it round both ways. The discussion is reasonable and on-going. We still have discussions about how much material local authorities and public bodies should produce bilingually, and we are totally reasonable about it in terms of the impact that that has on the use of Welsh.

In relation to advice and guidance, we have had 10 years of experience of dealing with public bodies, and we take a hands-on approach by saying, "How do we help you?" We take templates, we give them good examples, and we discuss what the level should be before we get to the final scheme. Often, we discuss three, four or five different drafts before anything comes to the public arena.

We are in the process of reviewing how we undertake that process, and we are thinking of simplifying it. If there is anything that we can do to assist you, we would be happy to do it. We are interested in making the process as electronically based as possible. The ideal is that someone gets

the program on their computer, they have as many options as we think are reasonable, and they click on one and it is there. They go through all the parts of the scheme and at the end they print it out. That is the ideal, and we are working our way towards it.

**The Convener:** I am not sure what size these documents are, but it might be useful to see one of the schemes, particularly if it is in English.

**Meirion Prys Jones:** They are always bilingual.

**The Convener:** It might be useful to see one from a middle-range area that is not heavily Welsh speaking, so that we can see the implications of schemes for areas in which English is predominantly spoken.

**Mr McAveety:** Another aspect is the development of the language. The challenge of wider developments such as television and global communications, particularly in relation to the post-13s, has been mentioned. How beneficial has your relationship with broadcasting been in sustaining and developing Welsh? Are there any lessons from that for Scotland?

**Meri Huws:** The post-13 culture and environment is multifaceted. We acknowledge that broadcasting is a component of that, but it sits alongside sport, pop music and youth organisations. We must address all those sectors and work hand in hand with the providers. Broadcasting is important, but other parts of the youth experience, particularly sport and music, are as important. At present, we are sponsoring a pop music tour, with the aim of raising awareness that Welsh is cool. We work with young farmers clubs, which is proving to be an important relationship. We take a multifaceted approach that raises awareness across the board to make Welsh acceptable.

**Meirion Prys Jones:** The status that a broadcasting system gives to a language is vital. Without it, language promotion would be poor. Obviously, resources are an issue. We have one channel that broadcasts mainly in Welsh, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to hit all the target audiences with one channel. The evidence is that young people seem to watch less television and to use the computer and websites more. We continually monitor patterns of usage and try to hit all the targets. Broadcasting plays an important part.

**Lord James Douglas-Hamilton:** The evidence that we received from Highland Council suggests that Bòrd na Gàidhlig should have 12 members, with half of them directly elected from Gaelic communities and representing interests from education, community development, broadcasting, the voluntary sector, business, arts and culture, learners and so on. Is there a demand for

elections to the Welsh Language Board? What range of expertise is expected on the board and what are the numbers on it? What would you think if elections to the board were to become a serious proposition in Scotland?

**Meri Huws:** You will probably get different perspectives on that from us. Initially, the Welsh Language Board had 12 members, which was a large board. At present, the board has eight members, which is a useful number. We reached that balance organically, through the ministerial appointments process. Surprisingly, there is demand among people from a broad range of interests to become members of the Welsh Language Board. We have board members who have learnt Welsh and some from ethnic communities in Wales who applied to be members. I would not worry too much about social engineering; the important point is that the people who are on the board wish to be there. However, I advise you not to have too large a board.

**Lord James Douglas-Hamilton:** Is the issue of elections to your board under consideration?

**Meri Huws:** That issue has been superseded by the decision of the Minister for Culture, Welsh Language and Sport to bring us into the fold.

**Meirion Prys Jones:** Elections to the board have never been a major issue and they do not take place for any other board.

**Lord James Douglas-Hamilton:** So it has not been a major political or party-political issue.

**Meirion Prys Jones:** No.

11:00

**Dr Murray:** It is clear that the pattern of Welsh speaking is quite different from the pattern of Gaelic speaking. I do not know which area of Wales has the lowest density of Welsh speakers or what that density is, but in many parts of Scotland—including the area that I represent—well under 1 per cent of the population speak Gaelic. Concern has been expressed by Dumfries and Galloway Council and others that if we allocate resources to encourage people to speak Gaelic, that will take resources away from other functions such as the promotion of Scots, which is much more widely spoken in that area. What do you think the minimum requirement of a language plan should be in an area that has a low density of Welsh speakers?

**Meirion Prys Jones:** We have many areas with a low density of Welsh speakers. The best thing would be for us to send you a copy of the scheme so that you can see in detail what is expected. In such areas, the process involves our ensuring that there is basic provision so that we know we can provide the service if somebody wants it. It is a

question of working that through to ensure that the facility is available.

**Dr Murray:** If you could send us a copy of the scheme, that would be helpful.

I do not know what your annual budget is, but you mentioned an increase of £16 million over three years and you said that you have 80 staff in three offices. Bòrd na Gàidhlig will be a much smaller organisation, with a budget of £4 million to £5 million. How effective do you think it can be in helping to develop language plans?

**Meirion Prys Jones:** The Welsh Language Board had 27 to 30 staff for most of its life and it was very effective during that period. In the past two years, we have been lucky enough to get additional funding to increase the size of the board but, of course, we have an increased range of tasks to undertake. We have moved much further into community development. The board's budget is £13.5 million, but for most of its life we had a budget of about £6 million.

**Mr Macintosh:** You mentioned your role in influencing the UK bodies that operate in Wales. Do you have any contact with non-public bodies such as national voluntary organisations or private companies? Do you go to them with advice on implementing Welsh language schemes or do they come to you?

**Meirion Prys Jones:** The legislation does not encompass the private or voluntary sectors.

**Mr Macintosh:** It does not, but I imagine that you have a role and could advise companies and, in particular, voluntary sector organisations. I am trying to find out the extent to which that happens.

**Meri Huws:** It happens extensively—again, that has developed during the past 10 years. The convener talked about creating the milieu, and the voluntary sector and—increasingly—the private sector are approaching us. We have worked with bmibaby, Ikea and the supermarket chains. The relationship is interesting. Companies approach us, but often they do so because the public have asked them to respond as a result of the increased level of awareness. In a way, it is a push-me-pull-you relationship. As soon as one or two large private sector bodies respond and put up signs, it is surprising how much demand that creates on other private sector bodies. We are seeing that in the supermarket sector and, slowly, in the voluntary sector, which recognises that it wants to offer service users a service that is appropriate to Wales. That is happening not through statute, but through gentle pressure.

**Mr Macintosh:** There has been no resistance, as far as I can see, in the experience that you have described this morning. Whatever the fears at the beginning, 10 years ago, there has been no



resistance to your plans to develop Welsh. Public and private bodies have worked with you co-operatively and your most important role has been in implementing the schemes. There has been little conflict. You have not described any situation in which there was reluctance to work with you in partnership to reach a satisfactory conclusion. Am I right?

**Meirion Prys Jones:** That has been the case in the public sector. We have had some hiccups in terms of monitoring some schemes, but in general people see the process as an evolutionary one. Looking back over the history of Wales, it can be seen that, over the past 10 to 15 years, there has been a huge change in people's attitudes towards the language. For example, in research that we conducted recently, 88 per cent of people were supportive of the language and 66 per cent wanted more to be done. People view the language as part of their heritage and their emotional make-up and they want to be much more supportive of it than they have been. That view is supported by the Assembly Government, which has published a document that says that it wants to create a bilingual Wales. That is the context within which the public bodies are operating.

A number of public and private sector bodies are coming to us for guidance, but I would not say that there is an absolute deluge coming through the door. Organisations are afraid of the cost and of what they might be told to do. Over a period of time, however, some of the market leaders have begun to say that they want to operate in a way that is based on local economies and they are using the language to do that. Ikea has signs in three languages in its store in Cardiff and we are working with Boots, which wants to have bilingual signs in all its shops in Wales.

There has been a shift in what the public want. Right across Europe—the board has many European links—there has been a shift in attitudes in favour of minority languages. People are starting to say that, in this world of globalisation and the dominance of English, we want to have our own identity so that we can identify ourselves and other people can identify us. A language is a marker. That permeates through many of the elements that we deal with.

**The Convener:** The question of sound language planning principles is touched on in your advice to the Bòrd na Gàidhlig. Could you elaborate on what you mean by that?

**Meirion Prys Jones:** We understand much more than we did, say, 30 years ago about the building bricks that are needed to ensure that minority languages survive. In terms of language planning, we have identified what those are.

What is important is the process. I talked about language transmission in the home, which we know is an important element. We know that the education system and dealing with young people are important, as is the link between language and the economy. We know about the importance of those factors, but the issue is about having the resources that we require to enable us to deal with those elements that have an impact on people's daily lives.

You mentioned that you intend to have a plan for the Gaelic language. That is an extremely important element. We put together our first plan in 1996 and our second plan in 1999, and the Government produced a plan in 2001. You can see the emphasis that we have placed on language planning and on ensuring that all those elements are taken into account.

I mentioned the European context. We chair the network of European language boards. The process of planning is becoming obvious across Europe. All the minority language boards are starting to identify what areas we need to work on and in which areas we need to co-operate.

Work that has been undertaken by Bòrd na Gàidhlig can be shared across languages. You have tried one thing, the Catalans have done something else, the Basques have done something else again and the Finns have done something different; we can all benefit from everyone's experience. We are in a much better position now to support minority languages than we were 30 years ago.

**The Convener:** The issue of context is interesting.

**Fiona Hyslop:** Do you have to do anything as a result of the committee of experts' report on the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, or did you get a clean bill of health?

**Meirion Prys Jones:** I do not want to sound smug, so I had better be careful, but it was found that we were more or less doing everything that we were expected to do. The committee wanted us to re-examine certain things, such as services in hospitals, but we got a reasonable number of boxes ticked.

**The Convener:** Thank you. The session has been useful in pinning down some of the issues involved. If, on reflection, you want to come back to us on anything, apart from the homework that we have given you to take away, that would be useful. Thank you for your attendance.

## School Transport Guidelines

11:10

**The Convener:** The next agenda item relates to school transport and should be brief. The committee previously took evidence on and discussed school transport policy. Rhona Brankin was appointed as reporter and worked on that issue with the clerks. However, Rhona is now the Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care. The committee needs to discuss how and to what extent we want to take the matter forward. There is a paper before us.

**Fiona Hyslop:** In case I have missed it, what did Rhona Brankin produce? What action was taken as a result of her reporting?

**The Convener:** I think that she did not produce anything formally, but worked with Mark Roberts.

**Martin Verity (Clerk):** She worked with the clerks, but no specific paper has come out of that. The question is whether the committee wants to appoint another reporter. In view of the time that has elapsed, it might be more effective to ask the clerks to circulate local authorities, ask what their experience has been and report back to the committee.

**Fiona Hyslop:** Given our past experience, appointing a reporter might not be the appropriate way forward. There are outstanding issues and we should consider the wider context of transport. I can see the point about the possible next steps, but we need to link more closely the school run with the transport and environment issue. We should bear it in mind that one of the arguments for the Edinburgh tolls is to get congestion down to the level it is at during the school holidays. That begs the question, is the school run the problem? As well as contacting education authorities we should ask local authority transport departments, which also deal with environment policies, what initiatives they are taking to tackle the school run issue.

We considered the petition in which one of my constituents raised concerns about the three-mile or two-mile issue. Perhaps we need to find out whether school boards or parent-teacher associations have outstanding concerns about that. We should pursue the matter, but more broadly than just by asking education authorities how they are implementing guidance. Our concern was that the guidance was too narrowly focused. We should keep a watching brief on the matter.

**The Convener:** I seek guidance on that, because we seem to be straying into the remit of the Local Government and Transport Committee. It is valid for us to take a broad approach, but the

issues that you are concentrating on are within the remit of another committee.

**Fiona Hyslop:** Rhona Brankin was going to speak to the Local Government and Transport Committee about the issues.

**Martin Verity:** In essence, the committee's remit is concerned with education, children and young people. There is no difficulty with the committee considering that and, consequently, other relevant issues that arise. I would be happy to discuss that with the clerk to the Local Government and Transport Committee. I do not foresee any difficulty.

**Fiona Hyslop:** There is also the issue whether local authorities are implementing anything like the American yellow school bus. The minister said that the Executive was considering pilots, of which it should have the results by now.

**The Convener:** I had a vague idea that the Local Government and Transport Committee planned to do something in this realm. Perhaps that is a figment of my imagination.

**Fiona Hyslop:** There is the wider public transport issue and the perspective of parents, particularly in rural areas. Elaine Murray will know of issues in her constituency such as people walking on roads that used to be quiet but which are not any longer. There are safety issues, on which we will best elicit information from parents organisations. The transport issue is more to do with local authorities.

11:15

**Lord James Douglas-Hamilton:** I support what Fiona Hyslop has said. The issue of congestion charges is particularly relevant to the Lothians, but safety is relevant throughout Scotland. It would be a great help if, through the clerk, that could be followed up in discussions. Martin Verity has outlined the possible next steps extremely well, and an admirable way forward has been suggested. We would be missing an opportunity if we did not adopt it.

**Dr Murray:** It is more than a year since we last considered this matter. I recall that the issue of two or three miles did not involve a requirement on authorities to provide education; rather, I think that it was about parents not needing to send their children to a school that was more than two or three miles away unless transport was provided. A number of issues arose with regard to whether that was the best basis for the provision of transport to school. I do not know how much we can delve into that issue. That is an education matter, because it is about a requirement for people to send their children to school.

**Fiona Hyslop:** Especially when rural schools are being closed.

**Mr Macintosh:** The finance that the Executive gave to local authorities last year has made a huge difference in my area. An enormous amount of work has been going on over the past year, including drawing up school transport policies and improving safe routes to school. I will not mention the walking bus yet again, but it is no coincidence that—

**Fiona Hyslop:** We need to get a handle on it.

**Mr Macintosh:** Exactly. I just wanted to say that the situation is noticeably different now, and we should comment on that. Conducting a survey among local authorities would be a good idea. I suspect that some of the issues about which we have been concerned have now moved on. I would be interested to hear how.

**The Convener:** That is probably right. We could ask the Executive for its take on the matter. I am happy to write to the Minister for Education and Young People on the subject. There are also the points that have been raised in Martin Verity's paper, including the question of contacting local authorities. How practical is the proposal involving parent-teacher associations? There are many such organisations, but I do not know whether a central register of information is kept.

**Martin Verity:** There is the Scottish Parent Teacher Council.

**The Convener:** We could deal with the central body, but would that give us the information that Fiona Hyslop wants, as opposed to more local information?

**Fiona Hyslop:** You could ask the SPTC about that and say that we are keen to find out whether parents have any concerns about the current implementation of transport policies for schools. If they have no such concerns, that will give us a steer; if they do, that will give us another steer.

**Dr Murray:** There is also the Scottish School Board Association.

**The Convener:** We can proceed on that basis. The proposals seem to be manageable and practical.

**Fiona Hyslop:** I presume that it is highlighted on our website that we are looking into school transport, and that people who have views on the issue can let us know. We should do that under our participative role as part of the wider Scottish democratic process.

**The Convener:** It is unquestionably desirable for us to get a handle on the question of transport to school and how it is delivered. There are safety issues; there is the issue of overlap; and there is the coherence of the guidance, which is one of the issues that was raised initially and which we need to take on board. If that can be got right, it has a lot of other implications.

*Meeting closed at 11:18.*



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