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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

Thursday 7 March 2013

Session 4

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EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE
5th Meeting 2013, Session 4

CONVENER

*Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP)
*Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP)
*Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
*Helen Eadie (Cowdenbeath) (Lab)
Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Sarah Breslin (Scotland's National Centre for Languages)
Hugh Donnelly (Educational Institute of Scotland)
Linda Gray (National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers)
Jim McDonald (Scottish Qualifications Authority)
Fiona Pate (Education Scotland)
Gillian Purves (Association of Headteachers and Deputes Scotland)
Robert Quinn (Scottish Qualifications Authority)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Ian Duncan

LOCATION

Committee Room 6

Scottish Parliament

European and External Relations Committee

Thursday 7 March 2013

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 09:02*]

Foreign Language Learning in Primary Schools Inquiry

The Convener (Christina McKelvie): Good morning and welcome to the fifth meeting in 2013 of the European and External Relations Committee. I make my usual request that all electronic devices and mobile phones are switched off because they interfere with broadcasting. Before we kick off, I extend Jamie McGrigor's apologies. He is unwell and will not be joining us.

Item 1 is our foreign language learning in primary schools inquiry. We will take evidence from a panel of experts who represent the teaching unions. We have Hugh Donnelly, a member of the education committee of the Educational Institute of Scotland, Gillian Purves, a national executive member of the Association of Headteachers and Deputes Scotland, and Linda Gray, a national executive member of the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers. Welcome, and thank you for coming along.

Members will see that we have a late submission from the EIS. No doubt we will have a quick scan through that and, I hope, come up with some questions on it. We will move straight to questions.

Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP): My first question is about the funding that the Scottish Government has proposed for the one-plus-two model. The pilot has £120,000, and it is suggested that the model will cost £4 million to implement fully. Have the witnesses done any work to estimate the possible costs? Is that a sufficient amount of money to implement the model throughout Scotland?

Hugh Donnelly (Educational Institute of Scotland): We have not done any work of that kind of detail. We have not audited what would be necessary, as that would take more consideration and comparison with previous investment in similar programmes. However, given the ambition and the challenge of the recommendations, it would appear that £4 million might not be enough to advance the ambitions that are inherent in the project. More auditing work would have to be done and there would have to be more discussions with local authorities and trade unions.

Linda Gray (National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers): I agree with that whole-heartedly. The funding proposals need to be based on a plan of action and implementation. If we intend to implement the model, we need to know how we intend to do it, using which staff and with what appropriate training. I do not think that a funding model can be based on how much money is available. The proposals must be fully and properly funded and resourced, and the proposed £4 million might be just a shade on the short side.

Gillian Purves (Association of Headteachers and Deputes Scotland): We agree with that. It would be a big job for our organisation to work out the funding. One of our concerns is that pilots are often funded, but the roll-out that follows is not funded to the same extent. With ever-decreasing budgets, implementing the model will be a challenge.

Hugh Donnelly: It is not just the amount of money that is important, but how it is channelled. I understand that ring fencing is not terribly fashionable, but it might have to be considered at some point. If we do not consider ring fencing, we would need a model that incentivised local authorities to target the money at the project. That issue is not easy to resolve, but a project of such a nature, scale and ambition needs a funding model that incentivises or obliges local authorities to spend the money on promoting languages.

In the present round of cuts, there have been instances whereby money that is allocated for certain purposes has been anticipated, shelved and offset against cuts. In the context of the project, any such arrangement would be an opportunity that should not be missed.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): It is a fairly gloomy and doomy morning outside and we have started off with a gloomy approach. I want to ask the witnesses to help the committee a wee bit. Ultimately, we will have to make recommendations to the Scottish Government about the initiative. Various witnesses have said that the money is not enough. You are the professionals at the coalface and we depend on your advice. Can you give us any help with how much would be required to kick-start and properly implement the project?

We do not want to have to say to the Scottish Government simply that we do not think that the proposed funding is enough. You have the professional view and can bring professional advice to the table, so it would be great if you could offer the committee additional assistance, although I will say that no one else has done so.

You have the opportunity to let the committee and, through the committee, the Scottish Government know what you think we require to get this really exciting initiative for Scotland and Scotland's schoolchildren up and running.

Linda Gray: Perhaps the reason why no one has been happy to offer advice is that the issue has not been intensively investigated by the associations. We have certainly not investigated the funding angle, although we appreciate that the proposed funding will probably not be adequate to meet the need. However, we will not know that until the way in which it is proposed to implement the project is identified. For example, if the intention is to release secondary school staff into primary schools to deliver on a peripatetic basis, or to have fully-funded modern foreign language primary teachers, that will dictate the cost. The fully-funded MFL teacher route will involve day release for teachers for 40 weeks to do it properly. If that is the chosen route, that cost will have to be considered. Presumably, if we want absolute equity of provision across Scotland, we will need one teacher in every school who is trained in one language, and we might even need two teachers in every school. There are far bigger issues than the cost.

Willie Coffey: That is fairly detailed, Ms Gray. Is there a price tag attached, from your perspective?

Linda Gray: From our perspective, I have no idea. Personally, I know that when I did the MFL training, in German, I was released for a day a week from school over 40 weeks to achieve a level of German that I and the school were happy and comfortable with.

Willie Coffey: Someone else could hear what you are saying and work out what that might cost.

Linda Gray: They could work out what a day release for a teacher costs. At the moment, the biggest issue is getting supply. We cannot find supply with any great ease, particularly in the primary sector. Until that situation is resolved, that will have a knock-on effect and impact elsewhere.

Willie Coffey: Can Ms Purves or Mr Donnelly give us any additional help?

Gillian Purves: I totally agree on what has been said about supply. As a headteacher of a reasonably big primary school, I regularly cover classes at the moment. Some of my colleagues have done so for three weeks constantly. Supply is a big challenge that needs to be overcome for covering basic sickness in schools, never mind releasing anyone for training.

Teachers have the methodologies for delivering the language, but an audit by my authority that tried to ascertain the current staff's language skills showed that not many teachers have a higher in one language, let alone two. I imagine that, if that audit was replicated across Scotland, a similar picture would be revealed. When I recently advertised for a teacher to cover French, which in Falkirk is done by a specialist, I got only three applicants, of whom one was not registered with the General Teaching Council for Scotland and two did not give enough information to be given an interview. There is a real issue about language skills.

Primary teachers have the skills to deliver the curriculum for excellence. We tried something with secondary, but many secondary teachers were not comfortable using a different type of methodology. I think that many secondary teachers would need training to be comfortable with the delivery. However, there is a big issue with having the basic language skills to start with.

Willie Coffey: We will come to that, but first I want to put some more flesh on the initial investment in the pilot and the £4 million for the implementation phase.

Gillian Purves: Like Linda Gray, I did the MFL training, although it was in French, and I was then a classroom practitioner. A lot of research shows that there are benefits from immersion. When children do daily routines learning a language, they are far more confident in using their language skills than those who get just an hour a week with a drop-in teacher.

The other problem with training one teacher in each school across Scotland is that teachers move. A school might quickly be left without a trained teacher when a teacher moves on. The cost is probably very large. I would not like even to put a figure on it, but your £4 million is a drop in the ocean.

Hugh Donnelly: There are lessons to be learned from the successes and limitations of the modern languages in primary schools project in the 1990s. There was also a price tag associated with that project, which I think would clearly show that £4 million is a drop in the ocean.

The scale of ambition of the policy surprised many people in education, particularly the practitioners on the ground. For example, in the past couple of years, we have experienced the removal of foreign language assistants. That shows the lack of priority given to delivering languages on the ground and, more realistically, it reflects the budgetary problems that local authorities have. That was a necessary and traditional element. It also raises the issue of reciprocity: if we stop accepting foreign language assistants, France will stop receiving our young qualified teachers.

09:15

We need ambition, but we know that the issue is about not just the global sum of money that is available, but where the money is to be spent. There would need to be discussions with the universities on initial teacher education and on career-long professional development.

One weakness in the modern languages in primary schools project was that it did not track the people who were trained, so when people moved to a different school, although lots of money had been spent on their training, as a resource they were not properly deployed. Also, many teachers who were invested in through that project did not receive on-going career-long professional development. Their language skills have been unused and are a resource that remains dormant. Work could be done to help us to utilise that resource by identifying those teachers and deploying them as part of the current project. However, at the end of the day, we will need a lot more investment up front in initial teacher education.

Another point is that the issue is not just about whether we have specialists. Clearly, there are options for introducing blended or tiered provision of teachers. The GTCS has a programme not only of professional registration, which everyone will be aware of, but of professional recognition. It would be possible to use specialists as external supports for schools in the delivery of such a project. That model is applied informally in schools. Teachers who do not have the specialist qualifications could receive professional development in a language to a certain level. If that became a core part of initial teacher education, that would clearly show that priority was being given to teaching languages.

All that takes planning and resources. The project is significant. We do not want to sit here and be gloomy; we would love to be optimistic, but we are aware of the practical realities on the ground. The professional voice must be listened to, because it has identified the obstacles to taking this forward.

Willie Coffey: I am listening, Mr Donnelly, but let me put you on the spot. How much is needed? We are relying on advice from you and from the EIS. How much is needed? If £4 million is a drop in the ocean, what amount is needed?

Hugh Donnelly: As I said, it would not be wise to put a figure on it this morning. Various aspects would need to be considered to get to the first point of reference in finding an answer. I do not know whether anyone else who has given evidence in the inquiry has offered a figure, but I imagine that they would not be so unwise as to do so.

Willie Coffey: Everyone is happy to say that £4 million is a drop in the ocean.

Hugh Donnelly: Realistically, we need to look at the modern languages in primary schools project. That was actually a fairly successful model, but there are lessons to be learned from it and there was an associated price tag. The issue is partly arithmetical, but it is also logistical. However, I am afraid that I am not in a position to give you a figure today.

Willie Coffey: That is helpful, anyway.

Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab): Good morning and welcome. I will start by asking Hugh Donnelly about the comment in paragraph 12 of the EIS submission, which states:

> "the EIS welcomes an approach to language learning in line with Scotland's development as a diverse, multicultural and multilingual nation."

That is an interesting comment, but you have not had the chance to develop it. In your contribution so far, you have not quite been able to put your finger on the overall cost implication. I would have thought that an organisation such as the EIS might have invested some resource in trying to identify that.

At our previous meeting, there was a lot of conversation about the resource issue and, like this morning, there was a unanimous view that the resource that has been suggested is not sufficient. Willie Coffey asked the relevant question, "If £4 million is a drop in the ocean, what is the amount?" It would be helpful if someone could come back to us and say, "We guesstimate that figure to be X."

You have touched on the source of our learning, what teachers and volunteers we will use and whether funding will be ring fenced. Those are valid points and I take them on board. You are right that the policy needs to be developed more deeply than it has been to date.

On funding, the sum of money that is involved is not so much what the Government thought appropriate; rather, it is a pot of money that it had available and that it decided to invest in language learning. The Government wants to know how to maximise that and make it meaningful. Your advice on that is crucial, and you have already given some good indications on where the funding could go.

I agree with paragraph 14 in the EIS submission that the expert role of the teacher is crucial between the ages of three and 18. However, the committee is looking to you to make a commitment that you will come back to us with more meat on the bone and with an estimate on what the resource needs to be. That would help us a lot because, as my colleagues have pointed out, we

need to go back to the Government and suggest what is doable on the ground. There is no point in launching an unprepared aspiration. Your help is crucial to us. Will you come back to the committee with an indication of where the resource is most needed and the price tag that it would have?

Hugh Donnelly: I can take away that request for more consideration to be given to resources. I do not think that it is easy to answer, but I would be happy to explore it with my colleagues.

The Government's policy commitment must be welcomed. At the very least, even if it does not satisfy or achieve the ambitions that are laid out in the report, it will begin to reverse the decline in the teaching of modern languages. We are good at making excuses about our failure to advance the modern languages project. That decline is not inevitable, and it is not an option not to take up the challenge. However, we must be realistic. A survey last year by Scotland's national centre for languages—SCILT—identified that, above all else, teachers were concerned about how the policy would fit into the curriculum or the working week, even if the funding and the teachers were in place. There is massive variation on that across the country.

We must establish clarity on what language teaching is about. Is it about linguistic competence or about having fluent expert speakers? Those approaches need particular pathways and funding on the ground. Another part of learning languages is cultural awareness, understanding and gaining an appreciation of your own language. The purpose and function of language teaching must be clearly understood so that we get it right. We also need planning to avoid inconsistencies in access. We need equality of provision but, as I say in my submission, that does not mean uniformity of provision, which is perhaps a mistake that we have made in the past.

The report and its recommendations are a springboard for something. I understand the committee's frustration when it comes to matching the ambition with a price tag. I am not surprised that I am not the only one who is avoiding falling into the trap of giving you figures. However, there are serious issues, and we have to drive forward the language project. My colleagues and I all welcome it. If, at the very least, we can stop the decline of foreign languages and begin to build on the recommendations in the next couple of years, we would all be delighted with that outcome.

As regards Mr Malik's point about language learning and its links to the multicultural and diversity aspect of Scotland, we should not fall into a trap, because there are different scenarios out there. If I speak to my friends in the north-east who work in the oil industry, I find that it is wonderful, optimistic, shiny and bright, with international companies bringing in people from all parts of the world. That is built on economic success, but we have schools in Govanhill that are affected by a different pattern of migration that we must live with and address. There are wonderful opportunities and challenges in Govanhill and Glasgow, but they are of a significantly and qualitatively different nature from the scenarios in the north-east of Scotland.

A coherent language policy has to build in consideration of social cohesion, agency working and addressing the issues of poverty and migration that we witness. That is why I made that point in the submission.

Hanzala Malik: Thank you for that. I agree with most of what you have said and I have no problems with it.

Hugh Donnelly: Except for the price tag issue.

Hanzala Malik: I accept that you are not in a position to put a price tag on it, and I can understand why.

Hugh Donnelly: I will certainly take that consideration away.

Hanzala Malik: You have kindly agreed to support us in trying to put some figures together, which will be helpful.

I am interested in getting several price tags. You suggest that we need to focus on which languages we want to consider. That is an important element, because it means that we can then focus on the resources that the Scottish Government can provide for those particular languages. A number of languages are more favoured than others, which is fine.

I am also interested in finding out the schools' position on accepting volunteers to go into schools. How do headteachers feel about that? Would they be comfortable with volunteers who are perhaps not fully qualified to engage with languages? How would languages be timetabled and how would that impact on the school? All that depends on which aspect the education unions and staff feel most comfortable with. Finally, the most important element is what the approximate price tag would be. Information on all that would be helpful.

Gillian Purves: On volunteers coming into schools, speaking a foreign language does not equate with being able to teach it, so we have to be careful with that. It is good to use volunteer opportunities but, although I have many parents in my school who are bilingual, which is great, they would not share that second language because they would not be comfortable doing that.

Hanzala Malik: That is exactly what I am looking for—the opinion on the ground.

Gillian Purves: It also depends on the other skills that the individual person has.

Hanzala Malik: You know where I am going with this.

Hugh Donnelly: Yes, certainly. A lot of good work is already done with volunteers, particularly in primary schools, on the promotion of community languages and cultural awareness. Headteachers deploy the facility to get in volunteers. However, despite some of the claims that are made around dynamism, good will, creativity and so on, those are limited. For example, the British Council does a lot of good formal work promoting important and significant initiatives in schools and it offers seed support and seed funding. However, that type of marginal contribution cannot deliver and sustain the ambitions of a policy of the kind that we are discussing.

With regard to the importance of teaching and learning, my colleague Gillian Purves made an important point about the methodology and pedagogy that are involved. Mr Malik also referred to the expert role of the teacher with regard to the three to 18 age group. I referred to the removal of foreign language assistants across the country, but teachers from pre-five schools are also being removed. Glasgow has just announced that 21 nursery class teachers will be removed. Some consideration should be given to the very early introduction of modern languages, because that promotes a base understanding of the language and increases motivation. The evidence on that is fairly sound.

If we are to commit to a project such as this, we need teachers to deliver it. As you would expect me to say, the role of the teacher as an expert in delivering the necessary pedagogy and methodology to take the project forward is critical. There is room for volunteers and other organisations, but we have to win the hearts and minds of the teachers in schools who, at the end of the day, will deliver this.

09:30

The Convener: We will now move on to another topic.

Clare Adamson: We have already touched on some of the areas covered by my questions. The British Council has been mentioned, and we also heard evidence from Le Français en Ecosse that there are as many primary schools in Paris as there are in the whole of Scotland. There is a huge opportunity to take advantage of initiatives such as the connecting classrooms funding.

Do you think that we are making enough of the European Union funding that is available? Is there enough engagement with the Comenius programme and other similar programmes? Have you experienced barriers in your ability to take those initiatives forward?

Linda Gray: We do not access the Comenius funding as much as we could, and I do not think that all teachers are aware of it.

In the term before Christmas, I spent 10 weeks in Edinburgh on a French Institute course on classroom work for primary teachers. The range in ability included those who did not have a single word of French but who were going back into the classroom the following day to teach what they had been taught the night before. I have to say that that filled me with abject horror. At the other end of the scale, I have university French. I also did a local council modern languages in the primary school equivalent, which is nothing like the proper MLPS course but was better than nothing and, with the French that I already had, adequate.

Talking with people at that course, I found that they knew nothing about the Comenius programme, Le Français en Ecosse or the immersion programmes. There is a place for those to be advertised more widely to make people aware that funding is available through the British Council and that there would be no cost.

Where we hit a problem is in the timing of those courses. An email that came out last week about immersion courses in October shows dates that are all term dates for us. I believe that the courses previously took place during holidays so that people could use a week of their holidays and claim that as their continuing professional development. Now the courses are during term time, perhaps not for everyone but for some people. If a teacher cannot get cover and release, they cannot go. The supply issue has a major impact.

There is also the issue of the ability of the people going on these courses. It was quite frightening to sit in a course with people who did not have a single word of French—none—and know that they were going back into the classroom the next day to deliver precisely what they had been taught. Immersion courses are probably not appropriate for those individuals at that stage. They need to build up their French before accessing them.

Hugh Donnelly: Clare Adamson asked whether there are barriers to taking up some of the initiatives such as connecting classrooms. Far too often, the take-up depends on the initiative of a particular headteacher or individual who is embarking on some kind of project. Those opportunities, combined with new technology and new forms of communication, are clearly fantastic.

Teachers need to be motivated and to have the skills to take forward such initiatives. In addition,

they need to work in a context in which clear leadership is shown from headteacher right up to director of education level. That is the problem. I know that it was not the intention, but what we saw in secondary schools in the wake of the removal of language education as a core part of the curriculum and the move to its being something to which pupils simply had an entitlement was the downgrading of languages in secondary schools.

At the moment, there is a pattern whereby more pupils are being denied language education in secondary schools, but there is some evidence that it is being maintained and even increased, to a degree, in primary schools. That is perhaps an unintended consequence of moving to a system in which there is an entitlement to language education rather than its being a compulsory element of the curriculum.

We must examine why there was a move from language education as a core part of the curriculum to an entitlement system, and we must understand why that led to the place of languages in the secondary curriculum being diminished, which I do not think was the intended consequence. I think that that move was an attempt to address the fact that, as I suggested earlier, we teach languages for different reasons.

Quite clearly, when the teaching of languages was a core element of the curriculum, there was a uniform approach to delivery. I taught in departments in which, if it was a certain day, the class would be on page 57 of the book. Unfortunately, that was a practice that endured in schools for a while. We got to the stage at which children were obliged to learn languages, but they were not enjoying it and were not motivated to do so, so there were reasons to move away from language education as a core element to the entitlement approach. Unfortunately, that had unintended consequences.

In a period of cost cutting and in which ever-increasing demands are being placed on the curriculum, it might be the wrong solution simply to compromise the place of languages in the curriculum. The good thing—the upbeat thing—about the current project is that we are beginning to look afresh at the role of languages in the curriculum. We have a big opportunity to stop the rot and to build a base for the future.

I am not being pessimistic; I am being realistic. If we make progress as a result of the recommendations, that will be fantastic. The better and more sophisticated the progress is, and the better resourced it is, the happier I will be, but I applaud and welcome the Government's initiative, because it focuses on an important part of the curriculum and an important part of education for our young children.

We have been aware of the competing demands that exist. As the committee will be aware, they relate to education in science, technology and engineering, not to mention health and wellbeing and all the other aspects of the curriculum. As I said, the single biggest concern that has been identified in the SCILT survey is about where the time will come from. Will there be one hour a week for languages, or three or four hours a week? Will language teaching be done every day? I bet that no one has put a figure on what is necessary.

I promise to take that question away, to discuss it with my colleagues and to come back with more informed opinion. Such issues are extremely important. We must move forward with clarity, as it is clarity that will produce the best possible outcome and the best value for money.

Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP): I will move on to the issue of qualifications. Should all future primary school teachers have a language qualification? If so, at what level?

Linda Gray: Our view is that primary teachers are trained generalists and should remain as such. Making it an absolute necessity for a prospective teacher to have a modern foreign language before they could enter training would add to the qualification barrier. Not everyone is a linguist, just as not everyone is a scientist.

If we are going to go down the route of insisting that every primary school teacher should have a higher in French, German, Spanish, Mandarin or whatever language is chosen, that does not mean that they are inclined to teach the subject, interested in teaching the subject or able to teach the subject.

Our view is that primary teachers should remain generalists. If having a qualification in a modern foreign language allows them to do a small amount of work in the classroom on basic, general and everyday things in the language, that is all fair and well. However, we as a union would not be looking for anything more substantial than that.

Gillian Purves: We debated the issue at length, because we can understand the barriers that would arise from the number of people who would want to achieve a higher in a language. However, the immersion method of delivering a language requires every teacher to have a basis in the language. There is quite a debate on the issue, but I think that it would be a barrier to an awful lot of young people who are very talented and gifted teachers and skilled at teaching but perhaps not as skilled in languages. I think that a balanced approach must therefore be taken.

There should be an opportunity to pick up on the issue during initial teacher education. I did the MLPS, and it was my belief that people would

come through that into schools with a modern language, but I have never yet met a probationer who has done a modern language as part of their training. I think that that opportunity should be offered at various levels so that we do not have the situation of only one teacher in a school being able to teach a modern language. The house of cards falls if there is only one teacher in a school trained to teach a modern language and they move on.

I think that there should therefore be an open approach to the qualification, because it is quite a challenge for many people. I have a number of excellent teachers who could not get into teaching for a couple of years because they did not have standard grade mathematics. Quite a barrier is put up when such a qualification is made a must-have.

Hugh Donnelly: There are also residential requirements for degree-level teaching qualifications in languages, such as three months' residence in the country of the language. It may be a tall order to meet that requirement.

In addition, it is true that not everyone can be a linguist. Primary teachers are trained generalists, but there has always been room for specialisms in primary education—for example, primary teachers deliver physical education, music, art and modern languages. However, primary teachers do not have the same level of proficiency in such specialisms.

There is clearly room to have primary teachers specialise in certain areas rather than others, which I think is the de facto position. There is no reason why that cannot be the case with modern languages. There probably is a case for languages to become part of the core of initial teacher education. How that will be assessed at the end of the day will have to be carefully considered. Obviously, that would be a matter for discussion with the universities and the trade unions.

There is a role for teachers to specialise in languages. As I said earlier, there is also a role for the GTCS and its professional recognition procedures in which people can opt for professional development in particular areas to build their capacity, which would obviously allow for blended provision as well. Primary schools are quite small units and, as we have already heard, teachers become ill and are sometimes absent. If a teacher who is the sole provider of a language in a primary school is absent, the children will miss out.

That would be a flaw in any policy, so we need blended provision. We need people who are confident and able to take forward the language agenda but we also need specialists, whether on-site or visiting specialists, and an external support structure. If we are to commit to such a policy, we must be clear that there is a critical mass of provision that ensures that all children get fair access.

09:45

Roderick Campbell: I will move on to questions on resource sharing. We have already seen examples of such sharing in the schools that we have visited as part of the inquiry, particularly those in rural areas. I saw a local primary school that was sharing a Mandarin teacher with the high school in a nearby town. One of the resident teachers at the primary school admitted to learning Mandarin at the same time and level as the pupils, so they were trying to piggyback on that.

Perhaps you could say a little bit more about how resources could be shared. In your submission, Mrs Gray, you talk about a central support being

"needed to ensure that primary schools are not left scrabbling"

around. Could you explain how that is supposed to work?

Linda Gray: Historically, within cluster areas, secondary schools have provided support to their feeder primary schools by allowing or funding a fully qualified specialist secondary languages teacher to visit primary schools regularly.

I cannot speak for all of Scotland, but I know that in numerous local authorities the funding for that has been withdrawn—it is gone—so the secondary schools no longer have the funding to cover the cost of their staff visiting and providing support and resources to the primary sector. In that respect, there is no longer the sharing of resources that there used to be.

There is also very patchy use of different materials. If we go from school to school, we find them using entirely different resource materials. I am talking about papers, books and teaching materials. One school will choose to use what it likes and another will use something else, unless at some point the local authority has put in the provision and determined what it as a local authority will do.

Where I work, we have that situation. We have a modern languages programme from primary 4 up to primary 7, although I deliver French in primaries 1 to 3 every week. If I am off sick, they do not get it, so there is an issue. The blended provision about which Hugh Donnelly spoke is essential to making the agenda work.

Roderick Campbell: But there is capacity for sharing resources. You said that some secondary schools do not have the funding at present. It is a bit like the situation with foreign language assistants. They are useful but, as the funding has

been withdrawn, they are not being used to the maximum appropriate level.

Linda Gray: Schools can share the resources if they have the funding to do that, but the arrangement can fall apart at certain times of the year when the secondary school finds itself under particular pressure or if a modern foreign languages teacher in the secondary school is off ill and whoever does the primary cover is required to cover their classes, particularly if they are certificate classes—you can understand that those classes take priority.

It is a bit like a house of cards. If we take one away, the whole thing can collapse.

Roderick Campbell: Is using and enhancing the available resources, subject to funding, a better way forward than committing a load of new funding for new approaches?

Linda Gray: I would have to think about that.

Roderick Campbell: Your written evidence suggests that not enough thought has been given to provision for children with special needs. Will you say a bit more about that?

Linda Gray: Children with special needs need special provision. Not every child who has special needs will cope with the introduction of one modern foreign language, let alone two. Where I work, there are at least two primary 7 pupils who do not do French—they do not take part in French classes—simply because they are not in a position to do so.

We need to look at the equality impact and determine how we should address the situation. It is unfair to exclude children from learning modern foreign languages if they can cope with it—my daughter has a higher in French despite being dyslexic—but a modern foreign languages setting will not be appropriate for every child with special needs.

Gillian Purves: In our authority, we work closely on a cluster basis and, to overcome the fact of staff being unable to visit primary schools, we do quite a lot of glow meets. That does not replace a visit, but it allows the secondary school to speak to seven primary schools. We use that quite heavily in a French project that we are undertaking in a cluster.

Roderick Campbell: Do you find that easy to use? Some schools that I visited found glow quite difficult to use.

Gillian Purves: We obviously have good technical people. With good technical people, it can be reasonably easy to use. We have had more successes than failures with it. It is important to have the right preparation and the information technology skills, but those may vary from establishment to establishment.

Hugh Donnelly: It is logistically absolutely necessary that we utilise existing resources. I referred to the fact that there are many teachers—some of whom may have been promoted and may now be more involved in management and administration—who have language skills and qualifications but are not being deployed. People will have come through the modern languages in the primary school project who have been trained in certain languages but whose skills have become dormant over a number of years. We may have to go out and identify those people, give them some professional development, and encourage them to take up the teaching of languages again. That will take planning and resources.

There are problems with the sharing of resources. You mentioned Mandarin. It is fashionable to talk about Mandarin. China is a powerful emerging country, but so was Russia 20 years ago. We used to talk about Russian, but Russian has virtually disappeared from schools. As I say in my written submission, most teachers are trained in French and French is still a major European language. Spanish is a world language, but I think that French will still be the main first language because our biggest resource is in French.

I spoke about equality of provision as opposed to uniformity. We need some commonality if we are going to manage properly the transition for the first foreign language, although there can be diversity in what is available locally and what people can aspire to with the second foreign language. A second foreign language is an ambition: despite everything that I have said about resources, practicalities and all the rest of it, we should not lose sight of the arguments for introducing a second language. However, we must keep in mind the fact that not everyone will be a fluent speaker of another language. The purpose and function of introducing a second language must be considered carefully in terms of the aim and intention.

We cannot get away from the fact that the biggest resource is in French. If there is a commonality of resource, we can share it much more effectively and practically. With all the schemes in the world, if a school does not have the teacher or is trying to organise the transition, what is available at the local school is what pupils are going to get—that is what will be available.

There has been lots of sharing of resources. During the MLPS project, lots of secondary school teachers went into primary schools. However, the fact is that, as we know, everybody is now timetabled up to the hilt and headteachers do not

have the facility to release those teachers—and neither do directors of education.

We come back to the issue of resources. Of course, it is not all about resources; it is about resource sharing, imaginative approaches, and other organisations such as the British Council feeding in. However, at the end of the day, without resources we can do very little.

Linda Gray: Hugh Donnelly is absolutely right. We need to agree where we go and what language we will teach as foreign language 1. I spent a year and a bit on day release learning German on the MLPS German course. I loved it, and when I went back to school I used it for one year. What is the funding cost of sending someone like me out a day a week for 40 weeks, to use a language for one year in class and never use it again because we have ditched German?

At school, 40 years ago—I wish it was just 20 years ago—I studied Russian. Говорите ли вы по-русски? Я говорю по-русски. It is very useful, and it is nice to be able to do little bits like that. However, as has been said, that was the language of the time. I studied it, but it is not any use any more, other than to entertain the children, show them how to write in Cyrillic and so on.

If you have commonality and say that modern foreign language 1 is going to be French—or Spanish, or whatever—then you know where you stand. You know that when people are trained in that language, they will be able to use it, and it will not matter whether they are working in Shetland, the Borders, the Western Isles or West Lothian. It will be the same language. There may be different physical resources, but the same language will be taught. That is absolutely imperative.

Hugh Donnelly: On sharing resources, online information and communication technology and glow have been mentioned. The technology is improving every day and there is a massive opportunity to deploy it more effectively.

There is a fallacy, because many people think that online provision is a cheap option. It is not. There is a particular pedagogy to educating people online. The idea that you just sit children in front of a screen or a SMART board is a major fallacy, which I would like to think we would avoid. The British Council's connecting classrooms programme and the way that it uses technology and promotes effective pedagogy for using technology is a useful model. However, the idea that somehow something online is a cheap option is a major fallacy and a trap that I hope we would avoid.

Willie Coffey: I do not know anybody who says that sitting children in front of a screen is a cheap option. I have never heard that. We had the glow experience in my early days with Learning and Teaching Scotland—we are going to hear from somebody from Education Scotland next—and we are aware of the implications of bringing in technology to learning and teaching, and so on. It is well understood and has been for a number of years.

The chink of light was related to glow and its potential. Glow started off with the prospect of a bright future, but it had some teething problems in its initial years. It can always improve. It presents an opportunity, and Gillian Purves mentioned its power. I hope to ask the next panel some questions about it. I think that it is really quite exciting and can be deployed even more effectively for modern languages, to bring online richness of experience to children.

I do not think that there is a fallacy or that people think that just sitting kids in front of a screen is a cheap option. Frankly, I think that that idea went out years ago.

The Convener: I will pick up a point that Linda Gray made about transition, and choosing a language and sticking to it. A concern has been raised with us from a number of areas about a difference of opinion between language teachers and linguistic professors. One view is that people should pick two languages, which they should stick to throughout their learning life, whereas others say that it does not matter and that people can have a mix of languages. There is a bit of a difference there.

One of the challenges is the transition from primary school to secondary school. Young people may have been speaking French and Spanish all the way through primary school, but their secondary school might only teach German and Italian. There is a real issue there. Has any work been done on, or have you any experience of, more joined-up thinking between primary schools and secondary schools to make that transition much more seamless, so that children can stick to one language and learn perhaps French from primary 1 right through to fifth or sixth year?

10:00

Linda Gray: Because where I work we have a very clear programme for what will be covered in primary schools in the area and because the language being taught is predominantly French, the secondary schools know what the children coming up from primary will have covered and the language they will have covered it in. However, I cannot speak for any other local authority.

I might be in a slightly different position in that I teach in one of the few Scottish primary schools that feed into two different local authority areas. Although the school sits in the West Lothian area and I teach the West Lothian primary curriculum,

for historical reasons to do with Lothian region the vast majority of our primary 7 pupils go to the secondary school in the neighbouring Edinburgh authority. I would like to examine that issue, but I have not yet done so.

We certainly need joined-up thinking because I know how frustrating the situation was for my own children, who are now long grown up. One did French and the other did German at primary school but when they went to high school the one who had done French got German and the one who had done German got French. Hey-ho—they now have a little bit of each.

Children are fairly flexible. If they like languages and enjoy learning them, the introduction of another language can sometimes be a good experience for them. However, we have to be very careful that our teaching of and approach to languages in primary school do not switch pupils off to the extent that when they get to secondary school they think, "I don't have to take this after this or that year—and I'm not going to."

The Convener: We have heard evidence to that effect and are certainly taking note of it.

Willie Coffey has a final question on career prospects and disadvantages, but I must ask him to be quick and our witnesses to give extremely brief answers. We are eating into our time for the next panel of witnesses, and I want to be fair to everyone.

Willie Coffey: I want to hear your views on the broader issue of the impact that modern language teaching in primary school could have beyond secondary school and into employment and the importance of bringing this initiative into Scotland to Scottish children, to their prospects and to our economic future. Figures from the British Council suggest that Scotland is losing out economically because our children do not have language skills. Do you agree with that view? Secondly, what else can you offer to support the committee's deliberations?

Hugh Donnelly: It is extremely important not only with regard to employability but psychologically as individuals and as a nation that we break the myth that we cannot learn modern languages. After all, there is no gene that determines that sort of thing.

Modern language learning is complex, although, at one level, it can be very simple if you take a parrot-like approach. People who have no academic qualifications can learn languages at a very young age without teachers or anyone else. It is an instinct; people are born to learn languages but somehow we are getting it wrong. It is also absolutely critical to employability.

As I have said, not everyone is going to be fluent in a foreign language but if we want diversity, open-mindedness, cultural awareness and the confidence to go into markets where people speak other languages we must be aware of language and not see it as a barrier. We have already discussed what are seen in formal educational terms as the key transition stages from nursery into primary school and from primary into secondary school, but another important transitional stage is from school into the big wide world. There has also been a diminishment of languages in further and higher education.

Everything comes back to clarity of purpose: we need to be clear about why we are teaching languages. If you want to be a fluent speaker in a language, you will need a certain linearity in order to build your capacity, your grammar and your expertise—and all of that will require real, targeted and expert input. However, everyone else should simply enjoy the idea of learning a language, which is why there must be differentiated provision. Not only do we need fluent speakers who can improve their employability and take advantage of the economic opportunities but we must break down people's inhibitions so that they can embrace the wider world, go into markets where they might not be fluent speakers and be comfortable with the traditions, the language and their ability to cope. I agree with you entirely in that respect.

Willie Coffey: Do our other witnesses have any comment to make?

Gillian Purves: I have nothing to add.

Linda Gray: Hugh Donnelly has encompassed the matter. I, too, have nothing to add.

The Convener: I thank the witnesses for their extremely helpful evidence. We will certainly accept the EIS's offer of help in pinning down the costs of some resources and I look forward to hearing from the organisation about that.

The committee will be taking evidence for its inquiry for the next few weeks. At our next meeting, we will hear from a panel of business representatives and, at the committee meeting after that, we will hear from the minister. Your additional information will inform our questions to the minister.

You are welcome to stay and listen to the next evidence session but if you cannot I wish you safe home.

10:06

Meeting suspended.

10:08

On resuming—

The Convener: I welcome to the meeting today's second panel of witnesses for our inquiry into foreign language teaching in primary schools: Sarah Breslin, director of Scotland's national centre for languages—or SCILT as it was fondly referred to earlier; Fiona Pate, Her Majesty's inspector of education, Education Scotland; and Jim McDonald, qualifications manager in modern languages with the Scottish Qualifications Authority.

I know that you were present for the previous session. As this session will follow the same format, we go straight to questions.

Clare Adamson: My first two questions are the same as those that I asked the previous panel. First, with regard to funding, have you done any substantive analysis of the Scottish Government's suggested costings for roll-out of the initiative after the pilot?

Fiona Pate (Education Scotland): I am afraid that you will not be surprised to learn that we have not looked at the costings. At the moment, the Scottish Government is engaging with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on this issue and, with local authorities, is looking at the kind of funding that might be necessary.

A key recommendation in the report was that education authorities should do an audit of their resources, including trained teachers, so that they could see the full implications for funding, particularly for funding posts in 2013-14. We have talked about specific funding for this session, but authorities need to think about sustainability for future years. The working group's view was that there was likely to be a need for more in the budgets, but until there are specific details about the needs of local authorities it would be impossible to put a figure on that.

The other thing that would have to be taken into account would be the information that will eventually come from the implementation group about the timing and staging of implementation. That information is bound to have an impact on the amount of funding that will be needed over a number of years.

As well as looking at an audit, authorities are considering how they can be creative. It has been very cheering to see the way in which authorities are looking at what they have and at other ways of bringing in aspects of language learning. They are not saying that they will not need other things, but they are looking creatively at what they have. Authorities are looking at working together to share resources, for example training programmes, and at how they can use other experts in the classroom, existing IT resources and the glow network.

Authorities are also looking at ideas that people have mentioned in previous reports to the committee, such as language champions and one person in a school linking with others. Throughout the country, a lot of creativity and thought is going into this and a lot of good stuff is going on.

Hanzala Malik: You say that many schools are doing good things. We heard from the previous panel that Glasgow City Council is removing language support from nursery and primary schools. That is the biggest authority in Scotland, and I am sure that a lot of other authorities are strapped for cash at the moment. That is why it is so important to get a realistic figure for resources.

It is not just resources that are important, but what other skills or benefits we can bring to schools. Although many schools are uncomfortable about the idea of using volunteers, I am convinced that if we could encourage volunteers to get themselves suitably qualified, they could be used. There are also retired schoolteachers and headteachers who have language skills. What is your opinion about that?

Fiona Pate: I repeat what someone said earlier, which is that although such things are a wonderful additionality to young children's experience, volunteers are not trained teachers. They would certainly need some training to work with children.

Last year, I was asked to evaluate a project in some East Lothian primary schools. International students taught languages in those primary schools for approximately six weeks, and it was clear that that did wonders to encourage children to be open to learning other languages, to feel enthusiastic about it and to feel that they could succeed. It emerged that such a project worked only when the class teacher and the volunteer worked well together. The teacher was the one who had the pedagogical knowledge and the knowledge of the children, and could work with them and suggest ways of doing things, whereas the international student had the language skill. The work relied on them linking up between lessons and deciding who was going to do what.

There is huge potential for such work to make a big difference; it could certainly help when authorities are trying to share or boost existing resources. However, it would not be a replacement for teachers who are trained to teach a language.

Clare Adamson: My second question relates to the use of EU funds, the Comenius projects and connecting classrooms. Could more work be done to encourage that?

Sarah Breslin (Scotland's National Centre for Languages): More could be done to encourage access to those programmes. One of the things that we do, as the national centre, is to try to bring together all that information into one website and to alert as many schools as possible about the deadlines, the advantages and so on.

Sometimes it is a question of someone in the school having the time to fill in the paperwork; there are practical issues like that to consider. However, we have a partnership with the British Council and discussions are going on about how the process can be simplified and made more accessible. Certainly the teachers who have gone to France or Spain under Comenius funding, organised through the British Council and Le Français en Ecosse, have all come back saying what a wonderful experience it was.

There is a job to be done. We are trying very hard to get the information out, to work with the British Council to find ways of simplifying the information, and to ensure that when a school is looking for the options available to it or its staff, it can find that information in one place. That is critical, because people are under a lot of pressure and a lot of work is going on.

10:15

Clare Adamson: We have considered whether there is a geographical difference across Scotland. Are some local authorities more engaged with Comenius than others?

Sarah Breslin: I do not know, because we do not look at the data centrally. It would be for the British Council to give you that information.

Helen Eadie (Cowdenbeath) (Lab): I would like to return to funding, because that is a matter of great concern for the committee. How many primary schools are there in Scotland?

Sarah Breslin: I do not have that figure but I could certainly get it for you.

Helen Eadie: Can you give us an estimate?

Sarah Breslin: I cannot, I am afraid.

Helen Eadie: Does anyone on the panel have an estimate of the number of primary schools in Scotland?

Jim McDonald (Scottish Qualifications Authority): I would not be able to give that information.

Sarah Breslin: I do not have it with me.

Fiona Pate: It is something that I should know, but I do not have the figure with me.

Helen Eadie: No one can take the £4 million and divide it by the number of schools in Scotland.

Sarah Breslin: It would be divided by the number of local authorities in relation to the number of pupils they contain.

Fiona Pate: Yes. The Government will decide what each local authority's share of that money will be, and I assume that the figure will be proportionate to the number of schools in each area. No one is trying to say that the funding presents no challenges. We were talking earlier about finding creative ways around that, but that does not take away from what we said about trained teachers.

I cannot say what amount might be necessary for an individual school. The local authority will look at how to use that money to serve several schools, I imagine, as opposed to giving each individual school a certain amount of money. Using that money centrally to provide training or additional resources across the piece would make more financial sense and would benefit more young people than if an amount of money was given to an individual school. One school might be in the happy circumstance of having a number of trained teachers, but another might have one or none.

Helen Eadie: We could be talking about as little as £1,500 per school across Scotland when we talk about the allocation of funding to deliver the policy.

Fiona Pate: Again, it will be up to the local authorities to decide how to use that money.

Helen Eadie: You are at the centre of things as the education inspectorate in Scotland and you cannot tell us how many schools there are in Scotland. You can say to us that the policy can be delivered, but you cannot tell us how many schools there are in Scotland.

Fiona Pate: We are saying that, until an audit is done of provision, we will not be able to say how much money will be required.

Helen Eadie: You know that the budget is £4 million and that that is the amount that will be spent on the project, but you cannot divide it by the number of schools and work out the potential pro rata allocation per school. I suggest that it is not unrealistic to say that that figure might work out at £1,500 per school.

Fiona Pate: Again, that £4 million will be divided by the 32 local authorities and they will decide whether the money goes to individual schools or a centralised training system, or whatever. Putting a figure on what will go to individual schools would be unwise.

Helen Eadie: I am just surprised that the education inspectorate cannot tell me how many schools there are in Scotland.

The Convener: There are 2,186 primary schools in Scotland. Individual schools have been chosen for the pilot, so the £4 million will be split not between all primary schools, but between those that are not taking part in the pilot.

Fiona Pate: Sorry, but there is specific funding for the pilot schools in addition to the £4.2 million.

Helen Eadie: To be clear then, the £4 million will cover the whole of Scotland but there will be pilot money on top of that.

Sarah Breslin: The pilot money has been allocated for the current year, although some of the pilots are continuing into next year. That money was a separate pot of funding to get the pilots off the ground.

Helen Eadie: What does that work out at per school? Perhaps one of the clerks can do the arithmetic for us. In my sort of maths, that does not work out evenly at £1,500 per school.

The Convener: To be fair, I do not think that it would work out evenly. It would depend on the number of pupils in a school, the skills in a school and how many teachers need to be trained. Rather than the money being split equally between all primary schools, each school would have to be looked at individually to assess what resources are required. I understand that the audit is trying to work out what is needed and when. The helpful suggestion from the EIS will help us to inform that process. The minister will be with us on 18 April, so we can perhaps direct some of our questions to him.

Willie Coffey: On that point, we are not starting from scratch. We are not suddenly bringing modern languages into primary schools because they have had nothing before. There is a lot of good practice in languages in primary schools. The current initiative is an exciting one for Scotland that will complement and build on previous good work.

We have heard from a few contributors that the £4 million is perhaps not enough, but it will be for the local authorities to prioritise where they want to complement existing initiatives. I do not see the situation as an argument about the per-school slice of the £4 million. I do not think that it will work out like that in practice. We must allow the local authorities the flexibility to determine their needs.

The Convener: Helen, could you put the BlackBerry away, please?

Helen Eadie: I am just doing the maths calculation—that is all.

The Convener: Okay.

Earlier, we heard evidence about language learning declining in further and higher education and the challenges that some local authorities face in obtaining language assistants for high schools. What work is the Scottish Qualifications Authority doing to encourage young people to take up languages? I do not know whether the SQA's involvement in initial teacher education could give us an insight into what is proposed for teachers learning languages.

Jim McDonald: We do not have a remit for initial teacher education, nor do we have a remit for primary education. However, we are committed as an organisation to the modern languages agenda. We are looking at the diversification of the types of qualification that are on offer, especially with the new qualifications that are coming in under the CFE. We have a range of national courses, which are normally certificated to examination level—that is, they include an examination. However, as well as our national qualifications, we are diversifying our range of qualifications.

We are introducing a new award at Scottish credit and qualifications framework levels 3 and 4, which is roughly equated to standard grade foundation and general. It is an entry-type qualification called the modern languages for life and work award. The qualification can be taken in the senior phase, but it could be taken before that. One of the award's key aspects is that it can be taken in more than one language; another key component is a unit called building own employability skills. That is a departure for us in the languages sphere, in that we are putting greater focus on a range of skills that can be brought into a languages qualification.

The Convener: The final question that my colleague Willie Coffey asked the previous panel was about teaching young people not so much fluency in a language, but to have competence and confidence in using a language to boost their economic opportunities. Was that taken into account in the process that you have described?

Jim McDonald: Absolutely. In the languages for life and work award, we seek to deliver communicative competency and to put languages into a context that allows young people to see that languages are useful in an employment setting and that, by using the language, they are building their employability skills. That is a key aspect that languages can deliver.

The Convener: Do you have any idea what the uptake of that award is across Scotland?

Jim McDonald: It is a new award that comes under the aegis of the curriculum for excellence developments. The forerunner was a single skill unit, called languages for work purposes, that we have developed in the past three or four years and which is delivered in a range of languages. Uptake has been growing steadily and where there is

uptake in schools it has been very successful. The SQA has developed an action research project in one centre that has run the award very successfully. That research into what was happening in schools led us to develop the single unit into the award. The award comprises three units: languages for work purposes; a new unit called languages for life; and building own employability skills, which is the meshing element.

The Convener: Okay. You might be able to help the committee, given some of the evidence that we have heard about choosing one, two or three specific languages to teach from primary 1 and from primary 5 and then through to high school. Did you limit the range of languages available in that award to specific sets?

Jim McDonald: There are 10 languages available at the moment. The units on which the award is based are generic, so we would have the option to expand the range of languages.

Hanzala Malik: What criteria do you choose when you are deciding on languages? An issue that I currently face from constituents in Glasgow is that Punjabi and Urdu are in growing demand. We recognise Urdu and hold exams in it, but we do not do that for Punjabi, even though it is widely spoken. In fact, it is the second most common language spoken in Scotland today. Why is that not on your list?

Jim McDonald: Obviously, we have to review matters and take a view. On Punjabi, in 2008 or 2009 the SQA conducted a survey into the provision of Punjabi and the potential for qualifications in Punjabi—specifically, national courses in Punjabi. It was felt at that time that, given the experience south of the border in England with awarding bodies and uptake levels, we were minded not to develop a national course in Punjabi because we did not think that it would be sustainable. However, we keep everything in review and we will look at any developments in modern languages at primary school level that might impact on that in the medium term.

The closest parallel is our development work in the past three or four years on introducing from scratch national courses in Chinese languages—Mandarin and Cantonese. A particular driver for that was Scotland's stronger engagement with China—the China plan came in in around 2006. The first of the 10 points in the plan was that there would be national qualifications in Chinese. We had to act on that and we were glad to. That was a significant driver and was directly and fully funded. There are implications for the development of future qualifications and national courses in terms of the funding streams available.

Clare Adamson: On the same lines as my colleague Hanzala Malik, I note that we have seen a multitude of second languages in our primary and secondary schools across Scotland. Polish is another one that is very prevalent. Has there been any investigation into a qualification that would be flexible enough to recognise a second language for a student, without that necessarily being a top language in the school?

Jim McDonald: Polish is one of the 10 languages included in our new languages for life and work award and our languages for work purposes units. Last year, I spoke to a committee at the Parliament about provision in Polish. At that stage we were also minded to ensure that we included Polish as one of the 10 languages in our suite of languages for life and work.

Clare Adamson: Will that be limited to those 10? Are there no opportunities for students from other backgrounds?

Jim McDonald: As I said, there may be opportunities in that regard, but we have to take a view on the sustainability of the surround—as we call it—and support for the qualification. In certain instances we might have to ensure that there is provision for teaching people who are qualified to act as verifiers for the quality assurance aspects for the qualifications, and that is not always discernible.

10:30

The Convener: Willie Coffey has a question about glow and other technologies.

Willie Coffey: Glow has been mentioned by the previous panel and by previous contributors during the committee's consideration of foreign language learning. I do not expect Fiona Pate to have had a great deal of exposure to glow over the years, but I am aware that it offers exciting potential for engaging in such learning. What plans and preparations do you and your colleagues have for using such technology to assist with the languages initiative for Scottish schoolchildren?

Fiona Pate: At present, glow is undergoing a major reform to make it easier to use, which will be good news for those who have not found it as easy as we would have hoped. First, there should be a big improvement on the technical side. Secondly, a primary school in Dundee is piloting the use of glow in a really good way to link its pupils' learning and training with that of pupils in other schools in the area. As Gillian Purves mentioned earlier, initiatives such as glow meets and sharing with other schools are taking place.

In addition to glow meets for teachers, children are linking through glow to share their learning. There is huge scope to expand that, particularly in more rural areas, where glow provides a way of linking schools. Resources—those specifically

produced by Education Scotland as well as other resources—have been added to glow to support all languages, and they are now available for sharing.

As has been said, we cannot simply put someone in front of a computer and expect them to learn a language, but there are many interactive resources that can be used with a teacher to engage children in learning. More of those types of resources are being produced commercially and by Education Scotland. For example, we worked with Richard Tallaron just last year to produce a major resource for primary schools that has been welcomed. It is aimed at upper primary pupils at present, but there is scope for extending the use of such resources further down in primary schools. There is huge potential in that regard, and people are beginning to tap into it.

Sarah Breslin: The use of technology is wider than glow; it also involves social media. As an organisation that develops professional learning for teachers, we use glow. One of my staff members is currently working on a programme of glow meets to support primary teachers in delivering modern languages. She has said that the changes in the technology have been very successful and make the technology much easier to use.

We are part of a university, and the BEd students have their own way of interacting through social media. Information goes out via Twitter, and they are engaged in that type of learning. As Fiona Pate said, there is huge potential in that regard. For example, we have uploaded to our website a number of interactive Chinese language resources for people to download and use.

In primary schools, online resources can provide primary teachers with a back-up on the correct pronunciation of foreign words, which is a huge concern as there is a lack of confidence in that regard. Across the board, we are looking at ways of developing further the potential of technology. The teachers who are currently training are so IT literate that such technology is just part and parcel of daily life for them. We should be positive, because they will bring all that knowledge to bear in the classroom in future years.

Fiona Pate: The pupils are more computer literate than us or the teachers.

Willie Coffey: I am delighted to hear that. As someone who worked for Learning and Teaching Scotland for many years, I think glow was technically ahead of its time, if the truth be told, but its time has come.

Technical limitations apart, is it intended that children and their parents will be able to access glow materials from home and interact in that environment? The theme of how to engage parents with their children, and their ability to learn and interact with modern languages, has run through several of the committee's previous meetings. Will glow be extended, or is it possible at present to allow access from home for children and their parents?

Fiona Pate: Yes, that is certainly being considered. A number of schools are currently using IT in that way—for example, they put really interesting homework and extra resources on their own websites—but we are seeking to put in place fully the use of glow at home.

Willie Coffey: Super.

Fiona Pate: Glow is a national resource, so there is currently no ability for schools to link up with other countries in that way, but that can be done through other means.

Hanzala Malik: Would it be helpful if a national curriculum was rolled out for the whole of Scotland, so that every school was on the same period on the same day? Would that support better learning and the use of IT equipment to support the school and the staff, particularly with regard to languages and other educational topics?

State schools have always been charged with not being able to teach general knowledge, whereas private schools tend to do reasonably well in that regard. Would it be beneficial if we were all singing from the same hymn sheet at the same time on the same day and providing a larger range of subjects through IT? Should we consider going down that route?

Fiona Pate: I would suggest not. One of the strengths of the Scottish curriculum—and curriculum for excellence in particular—is its flexibility and its responsiveness to the local needs of schools in rural communities or in cities. The curriculum states that there are certain elements that should be part of a broad general education, and sets out the experiences and outcomes. All children are therefore entitled to those things, but the way in which they are addressed and placed on the curriculum is up to local authorities and schools.

One thing that was mentioned earlier when we were talking about languages falling out of favour was the importance of promoting languages, being positive about their benefits and ensuring that that translates into a positive approach in individual schools. If headteachers see a place for languages in schools, they will promote language learning.

Hanzala Malik might be suggesting that a national curriculum should identify certain languages. As we have mentioned already, there are huge resources in French, but any language that a child studies will give them specific skills

that will be worth while now and later in life—for example, when they reach senior levels of employment. They gain the skills and a predisposition to learning a language, and they feel that they can be successful. One of the key things that we hope that children will get out of learning a language in primary school is a sense of confidence that they can do it, and an interest in other cultures, which is important further down the line.

Whichever language a child learns, they will benefit from those same skills. It is important that we consider the practicalities of local needs in relation to language learning. For example, one pilot scheme in Shetland is concerned with introducing Norwegian as another language that can be learned because of the contacts that are already in place there. That is specific to Shetland, but we must consider local resources, the trained teachers who are available and the languages that they can offer.

Another key point is that, certainly for languages that offer qualifications later, progression and transition are extremely important, as has been mentioned today. The objectives of the policy are twofold. One is that a first modern language will be studied in depth and will enable progression. The depth, competence and confidence that we hope for will be developed by following the same language all the way through a child's broad general education so that they can use that language flexibly.

The other focus is on young people having an exposure to languages and other cultures. The issue of the second modern language, which we are talking about introducing at some point in primary and at some point in secondary, is about building skills, seeing another culture and building confidence in another language. In that regard, progression is not what is being looked for in this report.

We are looking for two things to come out of the report, which should make people feel more comfortable about the situation. We are still promoting progression and depth, but we are also bringing in an openness to other cultures. When you speak to children in primary schools who are enjoying the experience, they want to learn more languages—their enjoyment means that they do not see any barriers to doing so.

Hanzala Malik: I understand what you are saying about the limitations. I am suggesting the opposite. I think that, with technology, each school could home in on whatever topic or subject it wanted to, at any given time. If the Scottish education authorities put together a package, various clusters can get involved in different languages at the same time. For example, you could have two schools in two different clusters, one learning French and one learning German, at the same time of day. That capability is available. I am exploring that possibility. We have large gaps in language skill at the moment. Might the ability to tap into such a resource be an additional support for teachers?

Fiona Pate: It would be, if it were flexible. The notion of doing it at a specific time each day might be inhibiting for some schools. In the previous model, children had an hour of language a week. Now, we are looking at ways of building that into the school day, with simple things such as registration and so on being done in the modern language and with the adoption of a little-but-more-often approach, which makes the model more complicated. However, I can see a value in having resources that are available for schools to use as and when it is appropriate to do so.

Sarah Breslin: There are local authorities where perhaps three or four secondary schools within a reasonable distance have timetabled Mandarin lessons at the same time to facilitate the sharing of resources. That can work in certain circumstances. It fits into the notion of pooling resources and working together, but we need to maintain flexibility as well.

Jim McDonald: There have always been neighbourhood agreements that have worked quite well. The SQA certainly sees presentations from candidates who are presented by another centre. Those arrangements can work well, but they have to be well managed.

Clare Adamson: I sit on the Education and Culture Committee, which has also examined the usage of the glow network. I do not think that statistics on the parental usage of glow are still being produced, but they were when that committee examined the issue. They showed that East Renfrewshire had a high rate of parental log-on, which you might expect from a local authority area that is one of the highest performing in Scotland in terms of qualifications. However, in North Lanarkshire, where I live and where my son goes to school, the log-on rate for parents is much lower. I do not expect an answer today, but would it be possible to have some monitoring figures of log-on rates across the country so that we could get an idea of how glow is being used?

Fiona Pate: I can take that back as a positive suggestion.

Roderick Campbell: Do you have any thoughts on the question of the level of qualification that it is appropriate for primary school teachers to have? We had a debate about that with the first panel. Could you also say something about the use of foreign language assistants?

Fiona Pate: On the qualifications of languages teachers, the GTC is considering the notion of a

higher as an entrance qualification. Whatever qualification level is finally decided on—it is not unreasonable to suggest some form of qualification that teachers might have on entry to their initial teacher education—the most important thing is that they have some input on language learning and language during their initial teacher education.

Although they are generalists, they are generalists in a lot of things, and modern languages are part of the general teaching that they will be expected to do. The only way that the policy will work is if all teachers are able to deliver some form of language teaching further down the line. Obviously, that will not happen tomorrow, which is why we are considering interim methods for training just now.

10:45

Input during initial teacher education is important for two reasons: to give teachers knowledge and to give them confidence. Giving them the confidence to feel that they can use the language is the most important thing. In addition to that, other support is important. We talked about support from visiting specialists. They may not come in to teach but may be there as a support mechanism for teachers. Such support is important.

Foreign language assistants can also be a huge support on pronunciation and through cultural input. It is rare for a foreign language assistant to be assigned to one school only. The assistant tends to be a shared resource, so a lot can be gained from having one foreign language assistant. They could also support teachers in primary schools, for example, as well as giving additionality to the secondary curriculum.

Sarah Breslin: Interestingly enough, SCILT has organised a three-day introduction to French for fourth-year BEd students as an extra. The message was tweeted across the community and the places were filled within 20 minutes. That shows that future primary teachers are keen to get involved and recognise that languages are important. We were delighted with the response and we hope that, over the coming years, we might be able to roll out that approach more frequently.

We are the organisation that trains the foreign language assistants. We provide them with ideas and support because many of them are not teachers and may be not even intending to become teachers, so they need support with how to work in schools.

Over the past couple of years, one of my colleagues has been examining a project-based approach to using foreign language assistants. Much of that work has involved supporting primary schools. Those projects have been powerful. The impact has been felt across the learning community concerned.

Foreign language assistants are an excellent resource but, because they are not teachers, they require support so that we can ensure that they are deployed in the best possible way.

Roderick Campbell: We have heard evidence that foreign language assistants represent good value for money. Do you agree with that?

Sarah Breslin: Yes.

Fiona Pate: Yes.

Helen Eadie: You have already told us that pilot programmes are under way and that the £4 million will be for their roll-out. What is the cost of the pilot programmes? Can anyone give us an initial report on how they are progressing? How is the embedding of the language in the curriculum working?

Fiona Pate: Sarah Breslin is heavily involved in that, so perhaps she would like to start the answer.

Sarah Breslin: One hundred and twenty thousand pounds has been set aside for 10 pilots this year. Those pilots are already under way except for one, which is working on its focus and action plan. It specifically focuses on transition, which has come up many times. It is considering transition in German in a cluster.

The other pilots are under way. You heard evidence from Richard Tallaron from Le Français en Ecosse. He and his colleagues are involved in three of the pilots with support from Education Scotland and SCILT.

Fiona Pate and I have begun our support visits and, overall, the level of engagement and enthusiasm is exceptionally high. Teachers in schools who are not MLPS trained and who have never really been involved in delivering a language are thoroughly enjoying the opportunity to develop their skills. Perhaps more important, children love the experience as well.

There is a range of pilots in different geographic areas and different languages. Some focus on the plus-one element and how to start it in primary 1. Others look at how to bring in a second language. Overall, they are all at different stages and they are all doing different things. That is important, because we want to see from these pilots what works and what does not in order to work out what the future training programme or programmes should look like. We cannot say yet exactly what the programme will look like, because things are changing daily. Certainly, the particular schools that I have visited and that my staff and I are

supporting are delighted to be part of a pilot. They are grateful for the opportunity to develop what was already there and to take it a step further.

Fiona Pate: It is interesting, with reference to an earlier question, that of the three secondary schools that are involved in projects—there is also one secondary school involved in a cluster—one is looking specifically at planning for the languages for life and work award with fifth-year pupils who would normally be quite disengaged with school. It is linking the award to the hospitality industry and to future skills in that area. There is an interesting spread of projects.

Helen Eadie: Do any aspects need further development when the programme is rolled out?

Fiona Pate: We have mentioned training. The previous training programme for MLPS has had its day. We are looking at quite a different model of training. For a start, the previous model was extremely costly. It was also specifically planned around an hour a week for languages in P6 and P7—it was a one-size-fits-all approach in some areas, so we are looking at a different model.

We hope to work out exactly how that different model might look by studying the pilots. We will also be working with SCILT to produce a framework for P1 to P5, because at the moment, experiences and outcomes for languages begin at second level. A framework of how the programme might be delivered is definitely on the cards.

Helen Eadie: Thank you very much.

Willie Coffey: To pick up on Fiona Pate's point about the involvement of secondary schools in the pilot programmes, a theme that has run through previous committee meetings is whether there will be sufficient flexibility to allow our children to study a modern language at secondary school along with their science subjects. It is important from the economic point of view to persuade students who perhaps want to study science and engineering to combine those subjects with a language. Do we need to do a lot more or a little more to open up those opportunities for children as they move through the education system? We want to capitalise on our investment in languages and allow children to get the best out of that when they move to secondary and beyond.

Fiona Pate: We have already said that a language should be in the broad general education along with science. Schools are doing good things in that regard: some are able to bring in a full second language or second science through the broad general education as well, so there are patterns of interesting use of timetabling structures through the broad general education while still maintaining that breadth of education, which is important.

Into the senior phase, we hope that the examples of best practice in language learning in schools that we are promoting through the curriculum for excellence and through learning in primary will encourage more people to enjoy languages and to want to continue to study languages. One of the things that will help them will be the flexible provision through the SQA that we are talking about now. We are talking about encouraging young people to do even a unit in a language to support things such as business education or science. Many degrees now are science, business or law with a language. We are trying to encourage pupils to see that there is scope out there—degrees and jobs—involving languages. We want to encourage everyone, and not just pupils who are going on to do degrees, to see that there is a place for a language in their curriculum and the benefits of that.

Dundee City Council, in conjunction with SCILT and Education Scotland, is looking at links with business to promote languages. We invited someone from Michelin, which is based in Dundee. He explained that all Michelin's staff, including apprentices, need some French. If they do not already have some French, they are given training when they arrive. Pupils are often unaware that a lot of businesses do that. It is a matter of getting that message out there, and the message that, even if a company needs a language that someone does not have, the fact that they already have a language makes it far easier for them to learn a second one. It is interesting to see the way that things are opening up in the senior phase.

Jim McDonald: It is important to state that our modern languages for work purposes units are available at the level of SCQF level 7 advanced higher. We are interested in promoting the use of languages for work purposes units together with the baccalaureate interdisciplinary project. That could create an option for students in the senior phase who do not want to do, or cannot commit to, a national course to keep languages in an applied fashion.

Willie Coffey: Excellent.

Sarah Breslin: I will add something on science. We promote language learning in general, but we have also been working with the Scottish Schools Education Research Centre. We know that some universities, such as the University of Strathclyde, have a strong language ambassador scheme, but there are also the science, technology, engineering and mathematics, or STEM, ambassadors. It is very powerful if a language ambassador and a STEM ambassador speak together in school. We are not competing; we are trying to show young people that those are key skills for their future.

Along with looking at flexible qualifications in the senior phase, it is about getting that message out to young people in schools and to parents. We speak at parents evenings about the transferable skills that language learning brings. The international outlook, flexibility and problem solving that come from language learning apply to whatever job someone will have in future. It is a fantastic asset for an engineer to be able to say, "I've also got some German"—or whatever language. We are working closely with the science community to promote science and languages—we do not see one as being against the other.

Willie Coffey: I am delighted to hear that.

Clare Adamson: I have a supplementary to Willie Coffey's points. We tend to think of the Comenius project as being about an interchange of language teachers. Does the way in which the project is set up provide an opportunity for science and maths teachers to come to Scotland to teach?

Sarah Breslin: That is not my area of expertise. We do not directly look at the criteria for the programmes. I do know, however, that L'Institut Français brings over science specialists, who have been working in schools. I do not know a great deal about that, but I am aware that there have been initiatives in that area.

The Convener: That exhausts all our questions. If there is anything else that you think that the committee needs to know about, we would be very grateful to have that information. On behalf of the committee, I thank you for coming today.

Fiona Pate: Thank you. If I am called again I will ensure that I have at my fingertips the number of primary, secondary and special schools.

10:59

Meeting suspended.

11:04

On resuming—

"Brussels Bulletin"

The Convener: Welcome back. We move on to item 2, which is the "Brussels Bulletin". Dr Ian Duncan, who compiles the bulletin, will talk us through it.

Ian Duncan (Clerk and European Officer): Members will have noticed that, in the past couple of bulletins, the section on developments in the eurozone had shrunk slightly. The information related to that topic has, in this week's bulletin, once again increased.

There have been a number of developments, and I will draw members' attention to a couple of them. Members will, of course, be aware of the developments in Italy. The dilemma facing the Italian political system is that the parties that secured significant support are against the broad terms of the EU's likely engagement on debt, which will cause significant problems. The Italian Parliament meets on 15 March; we will know after that what the Government there will look like.

There are a couple of smaller—but no less important—issues to note. The bailout for Cyprus has been delayed, although there is likely to be quick movement on that. Cyprus needs a bailout of around €17 billion, which is almost the size of its gross domestic product. In addition, the Slovenian Government has fallen, and Slovenia is likely to need a bailout of around €5 billion. Those developments are a reminder that so much is going on in Europe; it seems at times that some of it is flying under the radar.

Members will recall that I said at the last meeting that there was to be a presentation in Glasgow, by the European Parliament information office in Edinburgh, on the multi-annual framework. I went along and my report is included in the bulletin. The committee was concerned about the potential reduction in structural funds for Scotland. I have reported a little bit on what David Martin MEP said to explain the position, which was that if the overall pot of money is divided between more qualifying regions, each region will get less. I have included in the bulletin the regions that are expected to qualify. This is a domestic matter—not an EU matter—that must be resolved at United Kingdom level. Work is being done on that.

There are a couple of other points to note from that conference. Members might remember that, at the last meeting, I said that the European Parliament is concerned about the state of the multi-annual framework. The view of George Lyon MEP and several other MEPs is that MEPs would likely accept the overall reduction. However, they

are not content about where the money lies in the overall pot, and want greater flexibility to move it around.

On the common fisheries policy, members will recall that I have said that great progress was made in respect of achieving an overall discard ban. However, things are never quite what they seem in the EU; the discard ban is not total. There are allowances for certain countries—primarily in the Iberian peninsula—that are unable to meet the criteria. That is a concern.

The bulletin includes an overview of the horsemeat crisis, to show how the EU functions when dealing with such matters. There is a call for proposals for the LIFE+ 2013 fund, which puts money into environmental projects. Members should note that the UK does not normally use its full allocation. It is necessary to bid for the money and success is dependent on the quality of the bid. It is a reminder that there is money out there that we are not always able to draw down. The programme has one more year left to run before the next financial cycle starts.

I am happy to take questions on anything else in the bulletin.

The Convener: We should ensure that our colleagues in the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee know about the LIFE+ programme, because there are opportunities there.

On the eurozone situation, let us hope that people do not say,

"Beware the ides of March"

on 15 March, given how significant that day is in Italian history.

Helen Eadie: I congratulate Ian and his team on the full and informative bulletin. Obviously, the horsemeat crisis is an on-going concern for people. I think that a food labelling directive is under development. Perhaps Ian will confirm whether that is the case, how it will impact on the horsemeat crisis and what difference would have been made, had such a directive already been in operation.

Ian Duncan: What comes out of the crisis is that the law has been broken—it is important to note that fraud has been committed. The greater concern is that detection of the problem happened almost by accident, and the scale of it became apparent only when people began to explore the matter. Regulations are in place that are meant to prevent such things from happening. The laws exist, but the dilemma is about how they are enforced. That is the problem.

The food labelling directive will be important because it is about ensuring that people know what is in the packet and where it has come from. However, the issue here related to the step before labelling, where there needs to be monitoring within the various production houses. Clearly, enforcement varies across the EU. Although there are clear standards for the whole EU, they are not being enforced adequately; indeed, crimes are being committed, which is even more troubling. On the fact that the crime has been identified, the bulletin has a little on how that will likely go forward, with Europol being involved.

Some people in the European Parliament take the view that more regulation is needed, whereas others take the view that the regulation that is already in place needs better enforcement. There may well be truth in both those views, but the issue is certainly an example of enforcement not working to the advantage of the consumer.

Helen Eadie: A particularly welcome development is the bulletin's including observations from MEPs, which are good to have. On an issue that the convener mentioned earlier, I notice that David Martin MEP underlined the point that the budget agreement's impact on structural funds

"had unintended consequences for Scottish funding, to the tune of around €300m".

Obviously, as the note points out, that is really a matter for the member state, but I hope that the Scottish Government—I believe that Nicola Sturgeon is doing this—will make the strongest possible representations on that. As committee members, we should perhaps write individually to our own political contacts to highlight just how serious the issue is. We cannot just lose €300 million from our budgets without its having an effect; it matters enormously.

I also agree with David Martin 100 per cent in being

"offended by the retention of tobacco growing subsidies".

I, too, am hugely offended by that. I think that it is time that the whole of Europe got together to address that, but I know that there are interests within Europe that will stop that being developed.

Finally, on the issue that David Martin raised about the European Parliament having two homes in Brussels and Strasbourg, it seems to me to be a nonsense that people have not tackled that issue in times of such austerity.

Ian Duncan: Interestingly, following a speech that he delivered in the European Parliament, President Hollande of France was asked whether, in an age of austerity, its having two homes is a cost that the Parliament could do without. He said that it could not because they are a symbol of reconciliation across Europe. It was pointed out

that that is a very expensive symbol, which is measured in hundreds of millions of euros a year.

Clare Adamson: I echo Helen Eadie's comments about the bulletin, which is once again a very useful and informative document. I also record my welcome for the development of an EU scientific advisory group, which follows the appointment of Professor Anne Glover in January 2012. That is a really important move forward in ensuring that science-based and evidence-based policy making is at the forefront in the EU.

Ian Duncan: Yes—the move has been welcomed across the EU.

Roderick Campbell: Has there been any controversy about the appointment to that group of a scientist—albeit a very distinguished scientist—from Israel, which is outside the EU? Has that caused any ripples?

Ian Duncan: The group includes a scientist from Israel and a scientist from Switzerland, both of which are outside the EU. However, the answer to the question is no. I have not picked up anything about that, nor can I explain to you why the group has been extended beyond the EU, although that may well be on the basis of the credentials of the scientists. I have not heard of any concerns being expressed.

Roderick Campbell: The scientist from Israel is a Nobel prize winner, so I suppose that that might count in her favour.

Secondly, one small issue is the upcoming accession of Croatia, which is obviously a near neighbour of Slovenia. Are there any concerns about impacts on the Croatian economy as a result of what is going on in Slovenia? I appreciate that according to the bulletin it is primarily a banking issue.

11:15

Ian Duncan: I suspect that the risk of contagion is strong, not just to Croatia but to the whole Balkan region, and there are concerns about that. The Slovenian situation has been bubbling under for some time, and only broke through when the Government was, in effect, dismissed by the Parliament. I understand that it was a corruption issue to do with the Prime Minister that led to the fall of the Government, although they had been keeping a lid on the situation. There is now a risk of contagion throughout the Balkans, but great efforts are being made by the European Central Bank to ensure that provisions are in place to guard against that.

Willie Coffey: I want to broaden the discussion a bit to talk about the debt management measures in the EU and how they impact on the accession states. What I see in Ian's report is that Governments are falling with a bit of rapidity on some of these issues, particularly on austerity measures. Some populations are, to put it mildly, objecting strongly. We have seen that in Greece, and to a lesser extent we are seeing it in Ireland. I saw it at the weekend at the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. The Taoiseach was not quite manhandled, but there was a huge demonstration outside the conference that I attended on austerity, and Enda Kenny dealt with it really well. He said that the problem is not going away and that they are dealing with it.

Do you get any sense that the EU needs to review its demands on debt management? I do not mean to suggest that we should forget all about it, because the problems are there. However, it seems that Governments are coming under extreme pressure because of the debt management and austerity measures that they have to bring in. Is the situation being reviewed to make it more manageable for economies such as that of Ireland, and perhaps those of Slovenia, Cyprus and other countries?

The flip side of that question is this: why are accession states clamouring to join the EU if they face the EU's possibly asking them to introduce further austerity measures to be a part of the club? It does not make a lot of sense that they would be desperate to join, but they are.

Ian Duncan: You have put together a series of questions that could be answered by a team of academics. I will give a bit of an overview. The first thing to state is that no Government that has gone to the polls during this crisis has survived; all have fallen. That is the first thing to note. Some have been replaced by technocratic Governments, not even democratically mandated Governments, which is a concern.

The second point to make is about the protests that are taking place. The ones that we hear about are only the tip of a vast iceberg. The protests are east to west, north to south and are significant. Willie Coffey asked whether there is any suggestion that the demands will be reviewed. There is not, and the reason why is that everyone is waiting for the German election. Chancellor Merkel has declared "This is the plan—this is what will happen," and the ability to adjust that in advance of that election is very limited.

There is clearly grave concern in a number of member states. Take, for example, the level of youth unemployment in the Mediterranean countries. One imagines that that would be unsustainable were it to tip beyond 50 per cent. Everyone is crying out for a form of change because we are seeing that the current system is not working for people. It might be working in terms of the stability of banking, debt management

or repayment of debt, but there is only so long that people will tolerate that.

I suspect that the German elections at the back end of the year will be the tipping point, after which there will have to be serious change. The question will be whether Angela Merkel bucks the trend and her Government survives the election. She is in the contra position of needing to appear strong, because they have got more to lose by the reform, as they would get less money back to their bankers and so forth. They have more to lose by relaxing the measures than do others who have more to lose by seeming to tighten measures. The challenge will be what happens in the next six months.

On the would-be member states that want to join, that is a reminder that the EU is still a powerful organisation; it is still a powerful union for trade, movement of ideas, funding and so forth.

The greater question is why some countries are still keen to join the euro, which seems to be so unstable that the suggestion that they can join and create greater stability is debatable. The "Brussels Bulletin" notes Latvia's intention of joining the euro on 1 January 2014, and Poland has set a date for its plans, although that date is further away. It is interesting that those countries still believe that being part of a bigger block, with its problems and instabilities, is better than being a smaller country with an isolated currency.

Willie Coffey: Are the accession states bringing their own banking crises to the EU, or are they in a fairly healthy state? There has been a lot of talk about the convergence criteria being met, but it has been doing the rounds for years and the UK has never met any of them while remaining in the EU. Do the other smaller countries that want to join match up to the convergence criteria? Are their banking and financial institutions stable? I do not get it. If they are not, why are they getting in?

Ian Duncan: That is a good question. My advice would be that it is probably not a good time to buy shares in banks. A lot of those smaller countries were less affected by the direct crisis itself because their economies were not able to benefit. A lot of countries within the family, if you like, were able to benefit from the interest rates within the eurozone, which meant that they were pegged to the German success. The interest rates allowed for bubbles to be created. Those on the outside were less directly affected by the crisis, except countries that have big banking sectors, such as Iceland, which was already doing great things, albeit on an unstable foundation.

The smaller nations that are coming in are not bringing with them a banking crisis, but they will be affected by the broader issues. There is no doubt that there is much instability that is yet to be calmed.

Helen Eadie: Bulgaria is one of the smaller nations that have already joined the EU. It has never required to borrow from the International Monetary Fund so it has not brought instability with it because it has a fairly stable economy, although it was affected and impacted by what was happening in the rest of the EU. It is required to join the euro by 2014, as is Romania. My understanding is that that is progressing, in the same way that Latvia had to sign up under the requirements of the treaty to join.

The Convener: We in the UK do not have our troubles to seek because the austerity measures do not seem to be working either for the people or the banking sector. Figures that came out this week show a lack of lending, which is a problem, given that a group of the banks is owned by the state and that the UK's credit rating has been downgraded from AAA status.

Helen Eadie: That means that it is more important for us to press the questions about why the member state is not doing its utmost to draw down the funding to which it is entitled. That is mentioned in the "Brussels Bulletin" under the heading for the LIFE+ programme. It is lamentable. The UK could be drawing down all sorts of money, but the national Government is so busy bleating about the money that we are putting in that it will not even think about the money that could be drawn down. It is outrageous.

The Convener: Committee members have expressed concerns at a previous meeting about the European structural funds situation; you will know that I had a topical question lodged that week for the Deputy First Minister. We are drawing up plans to take that forward and to bring the Deputy First Minister before the committee. It might take a wee while to organise that, but Helen Eadie is right: if we impress this on the Scottish Government, it will have the opportunity to impress that on the UK Government.

I am conscious of the time; some members need to get to the chamber for general questions. There is one more point in the "Brussels Bulletin" that I wanted to pick up, which is the UK Government's breach of the directive on minimum VAT rates on insulation materials. We should raise that with our colleagues on the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee because it is about the Government's new green deal programme, and that is something that we are interested in, given our climate change targets.

Hanzala Malik: Under "Upcoming Events and Meetings" I see the agriculture and fisheries council is meeting twice. Do we need additional representation at that to lobby for our case? I

know that our minister will probably be there, but do we need anyone from the committee to be there?

Ian Duncan: I have a couple of things to say about that. I know that Richard Lochhead, who is the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment, has an impressive record of attendance at council meetings—I think that he has not missed one. I am not certain that he will attend the next one, but I suggest that his record indicates that he will.

I will be in Brussels next week, where I will be doing quite a bit of work on fisheries, so I should be able to pick up on what is going on and report back to the committee on what I have learned. We should have adequate resources out there, but it is an issue to keep an eye on. The meeting that is coming up is important, but the one after it, which will take place towards April, will be more important because some of the key fisheries issues will be put to bed.

Hanzala Malik: I would like to go one stage further and suggest that we formally agree to allow you to make the decision to provide a presence at the meeting, if it is needed at short notice. That would mean that you could attend without having to seek the committee's permission. Given that it is such an important event, I think that we should have that flexibility.

The Convener: That would be welcome. The only thing that I would say about formal council meetings is that it is the UK that chooses the delegation. Is that right?

Ian Duncan: Yes, it is.

Hanzala Malik: I am looking at the issue from the Scottish Parliament's point of view. If we felt that an issue is so important that we need additional representation, you should not have to come back to the committee to get permission.

Ian Duncan: If the convener is content to take that responsibility—

The Convener: I may look for volunteers.

We will send the "Brussels Bulletin" to the relevant committees and will highlight specific points to them.

Scottish Government's Country Plan for China and International Framework

11:26

The Convener: It always becomes a bit of a sprint at the end of our meetings. We move quickly on to agenda item 3, which is on the committee's inquiry into the Scottish Government's China plan. Last Thursday morning, Clare Adamson, Jamie McGrigor and I attended the launch of the inquiry at the Scottish Salmon Company. We will give feedback on the event.

Jamie McGrigor went into a lot of detail, because much of the operation is in his region. I found the visit to be extremely interesting. It was intriguing to discover how the company manages and sustains its business overseas and to hear about some of the challenges and pressures that it faces. I think that a note will be prepared for the committee on what we did that day.

Clare Adamson was there, too. Do you have any recollections that you want to share?

Clare Adamson: Yes. I would like to thank the Scottish Salmon Company for its time and hospitality on the day. It was an extremely interesting visit. What I understand about the company's engagement in China is that it still does not feel that it is supported by the existing networks. Even though it has an office in China and someone who is based there, it does not feel that it has sufficient link-up.

One of the most significant messages that I took from our visit was that the company used the New Zealand Government's website to find out about engagement in China and to get advice about best practice and so on. It said that that was extremely useful, but that it had got very little from the websites and the support that are available here. We should certainly look into that.

Hanzala Malik: I suggest that we consider inviting the Department of Trade and Industry and Scottish Enterprise to give us a presentation on what they can do for small companies in Scotland, and how they explore new businesses. We produce a lot of dairy products that we are not really known for overseas, although we are known for them in Scotland and, possibly, the US and Canada. That would give them a good opportunity to explain what they do for small businesses, how they engage with and support them, and whether they do so from a British or a Scottish point of view.

Ian Duncan: We will hear from some panels as part of the inquiry. Those organisations will certainly be invited.

The Convener: Lauren Spaven-Donn, who is one of the committee's clerks, is doing a power of work in looking at businesses, organisations and support networks and how we can link into them for the inquiry.

That completes our meeting. Our next meeting will be on 21 March, when we will hear from business representatives in our foreign languages inquiry.

Meeting closed at 11:29.

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