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EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

Thursday 21 March 2013

Session 4

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EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE
6th 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:

Robin Parker (National Union of Students Scotland)
Lauren Paterson (Confederation of British Industry Scotland)
Rebecca Trengove (Axeon)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Ian Duncan

LOCATION

Committee Room 6

Scottish Parliament

European and External Relations Committee

Thursday 21 March 2013

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 09:00*]

Foreign Language Learning in Primary Schools Inquiry

The Convener (Christina McKelvie): Good morning. I welcome everyone to the sixth meeting in 2013 of the European and External Relations Committee. I make the normal request that mobile phones and electronic devices be switched off, as they interfere with our broadcasting equipment.

Agenda item 1 is further evidence in the committee's inquiry on languages. This morning we have a panel of experts representing business interests. I welcome Lauren Paterson, senior policy executive at the Confederation of British Industry Scotland; Rebecca Trengove, head of marketing and corporate affairs at Axeon; and Robin Parker, the president of the National Union of Students Scotland. I thank you all for coming. Some of you provided us with written submissions, which are extremely helpful. We will go straight to questions.

What is your interpretation of the one-plus-two pilot project? How will it assist young people in developing skills that they can then use in the business market and in their further education? I am looking for your insight first, and there may be some more detailed questions afterwards.

Lauren Paterson (Confederation of British Industry Scotland): We are very supportive of the policy. It helps to develop young people's employability skills, especially going forward into an increasingly globalised economy in which they are competing not only internationally for jobs but within their own country for jobs with international companies.

Our members have said that, in many cases, they are looking not for fluency from young people but more for conversational skills and the ability to understand and interpret different cultures, as that helps them to develop and cement relationships in different countries, which ensures that there are strong relationships when companies are looking to export. We see exporting as extremely important as we try to rebalance the economy, and those skills will be extremely helpful in that.

Rebecca Trengove (Axeon): I echo those comments. We find it invaluable to have language skills, but we do not get them at present from potential job applicants in Scotland. Anything that will redress that balance will be helpful.

The one-plus-two approach, particularly starting in primary schools, is very much to be welcomed because it develops confidence. At the moment, language teaching takes a bit of a scattergun approach—there is not necessarily any consistency in what is done at the primary school level, and there is no consistency in following that through at the secondary level.

In my experience—partly as a parent—by the time that children reach the stage of making choices about which subjects they are going to take, some of them are turned off by languages. Although they have nominally had several years of language training, they are not in a position to be able to use that conversationally, which is critical.

We are not looking for written fluency; we are looking for the ability to pick up a phone and have a polite conversation with somebody. That should start in primary schools, to develop children's confidence at an early stage so that they are willing to try new things. The policy will be very helpful.

Robin Parker (National Union of Students Scotland): I am coming at this in terms of the employability of course leavers and graduates. Through a lot of the projects that we have been doing and some of the research that we have done, we have found that language skills are hugely valuable when it comes to employability.

I draw attention to the CBI survey that we reference in our written submission. Employers are saying that, when it comes to recruiting graduates, language skills are crucial and they are not satisfied with things as they stand. I do not have any specific figures for Scotland, but it is estimated that underinvestment in languages costs the United Kingdom about £7.3 billion. We are talking about huge numbers.

As Rebecca Trengove said, learning languages has value in and of itself because it gives graduates or people coming out of their courses a global outlook and the confidence to go anywhere and find employment and to help with the Scottish economy.

The earlier that people are given the opportunity to pick up a language the better. The first extra language that someone picks up is always the hardest; after that, learning a language becomes much easier. The sooner that someone picks up the skill of language acquisition, the easier it is. If people arrive at college or university with those extra language skills, it is much easier for them to get experience of study abroad, and we have found that that is hugely important to employability and to people being able to find a job when they graduate.

The Convener: That is a nice segue into my next question, which is specifically for the NUS but also has a business aspect. How do we encourage institutions to make more use of Comenius and Erasmus, for example, and how would business use those students? Could the NUS give us some indication of how we could encourage institutions to use Comenius, European Union funding and Erasmus for exactly the situation you have described?

Robin Parker: A really good thing about Comenius is that it is available to all students who might be interested in a teaching career. They do not necessarily have to have already decided on a teaching career to go on Comenius.

The uptake of all programmes like Erasmus or other study-abroad programmes is very low in Scotland. We are a long way behind a lot of our European competitors in terms of uptake. Fewer than 1 per cent of students in Scotland have some form of recorded overseas experience as part of their course, and in Spain and Germany, for example, that figure is up to 40 or 60 per cent. We have a long way to go.

With the Scotland goes global programme that we are undertaking at the moment, we are trying to do everything that we can to increase the mobility of students. Essentially it is a Scottish Government-funded project. We are doing awareness-raising projects in universities and colleges but one of the really exciting things that we started recently is going out into schools. We have trained up a series of student ambassadors who have had experience of outward mobility to go into schools and make sure that, before they even come to university or college, pupils are aware of the type of programme that is available to them.

I cannot claim that this is down to our programme but we have been promoting the Comenius programme a lot and the uptake is starting to pick up, albeit starting from a low base. I hope that that will continue in future because it is a good project.

The Convener: Can our business colleagues give us some insight on how business would use exchange or foreign students, especially in the more globalised market?

Rebecca Trengove: We regularly take on student interns to do specific business-focused projects, and we do that by working with the local universities in Dundee and St Andrews. It is quite staggering that almost all the applications for those internships are from foreign students who do not have English as their first language.

Perhaps that is an indicator of the type of students who have chosen to come here. They are the ones who are interested in getting that extra experience. From our point of view, they have the technical skills and the language skills. Those are also factors we consider when employing people on full-time contracts.

The approach of students going into schools provides an excellent opportunity, and it should be rolled into the pilot projects for the one-plus-two model. I know that SCILT—Scotland's national centre for languages—is also Scotland's centre for supporting language teaching, and it has a number of pilot projects. Initially, it is looking at businesses working with secondary schools, but the centre is keen to roll out the approach to primary schools so that children from a fairly early stage—around primary 5 or 6—can start to see the business applications for languages as well as the cultural and social advantages. Scotland goes global ambassadors could play an important part in that programme.

Lauren Paterson: Rebecca Trengove's point about businesses going into schools is an important one. We would encourage our members to do that because it not only opens up the importance of languages to young people and gives them an opportunity to look ahead at what careers they could have with those skills; it gives the businesses the opportunity to develop their staff and give them confidence in working with other young people.

On a personal level, I benefited from a similar project when I was at school. The local authority had a good working relationship with IBM and we did business French classes in which we sat in on calls with IBM staff. That was important in developing a sense of how French could be used after we left school. We realised that it was not just about the sort of vocabulary that we learn in school but about how it is applied in the real world. If that sort of programme could be rolled out across the rest of Scotland—even if it was not in every school but there was an option to access it—that would be a positive move.

Rebecca Trengove: Can I make an additional comment? The STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—subjects are very good at involving business in that way. Our company has been involved in a number of STEM projects with a local school in Dundee, which is a great exemplar of what we can do to motivate children and give them a business-type project on which they can work and which gives an indication of how they could use their skills in the working environment. We are talking not necessarily about taking the skills to graduate level but about children developing skills that could be applied in any working context.

Robin Parker: On the subject of undergraduates who undertake outward mobility as part of their course, two points sprung up for

me from what Rebecca Trengove and Lauren Paterson said.

First, at a national level, we cannot measure whether the students involved are Scottish students or EU students, because they are all measured together. However, we have dug down into the data for a couple of universities and it looks like a lot of the 1 per cent consists of European students who come to Scotland and then go somewhere else because they have already caught the mobility bug. The number of Scottish students undertaking outward mobility could be even lower than 1 per cent.

Secondly, the group who undertake outward mobility is quite narrow in terms of what they study. It is very much language students who do it at the moment. That is despite courses in other parts of Europe being undertaken in English, which means that there are opportunities for STEM students and other kinds of student to undertake much more mobility than they currently do. There is real scope to increase the numbers.

The Convener: Thank you. Jamie, do you have a supplementary on this subject?

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Thank you, convener. I apologise for not being here at the start—that was due to traffic problems.

It has been put to me that some Scottish students are put off studying abroad because it interferes with the curriculum that they study at home in Scotland. Can you comment on that?

Robin Parker: Universities could increase the flexibility of their curriculums much more. A lot of them are restrictive in that they allow only large periods of studying abroad, such as a whole year under Erasmus and Comenius programmes, at the start of a degree. Universities could be much more flexible to allow study abroad later in degree programmes. That also points out the need to create more short-term windows for people to study abroad for, say, two or three weeks in an intensive programme. That would help to widen access to studying abroad.

Jamie McGrigor: Thank you.

The Convener: Before we move into open questions, I take the opportunity to welcome to the public gallery the Hon Albert Thindwa MP and the Hon Canaan Kaphamtengo Yona MP from the Malawi Parliament. Very nicely, Albert is my parliamentary pair. I welcome you both to the meeting.

Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab): I, too, welcome the Malawi MPs.

Good morning, panel. You have talked about internationalisation, opportunities and so on. How are we coping with the current shortfall in language skills in Scotland?

Lauren Paterson: A lot of our members say that they use individuals in the countries to which they export to make connections and develop language skills. However, they are now also training up their own staff.

One of our international drinks companies recently bought a product over in the Dominican Republic. Although it is using individuals in the Dominican Republic to do a lot of the business, all its executive team are now getting Spanish lessons so that when they go over they can have conversations with people, even just generally. There is a lot of patchworking up of skills by providing intensive training for staff.

09:15

Rebecca Trengove: Although we are headquartered in Scotland we have a manufacturing site in Poland, and we have chosen to site our customer services in Poland because we can get the language skills there. Not only do all the team there speak Polish and English, most of them speak German and many of them speak French, Italian or Spanish as well. We can find those multilingual people over there, so that is where the jobs go.

We also recruit international staff. We have staff working here in Scotland who are Chinese, Italian, Spanish and French, because they bring both technical and language skills.

Robin Parker: I do not have much to add to that.

Hanzala Malik: Are you saying that because we are poor in language skills we are losing jobs to countries overseas?

Rebecca Trengove: Yes, and we are not just losing jobs overseas—people are losing jobs here in Scotland. That trend will continue as time goes on.

Robin Parker has made this point already, but I am struck by the number of foreign students who are studying in Scotland. As I said, they are the ones who apply for internships. When I go to speak at universities on business topics, the audience is predominately international. Our Scottish students are not engaging with the international agenda and they will find themselves disadvantaged at graduation or when they leave school.

Hanzala Malik: That is interesting.

Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP): You have given us some examples of good practice and how businesses work with universities, but could colleges and universities do

more to engage with business about future planning and language skills needs?

Rebecca Trengove: That engagement is always helpful, but it needs to start at schools because by the time children get to university it is too late. By that point, children are either switched on and engaged or—as in most cases—they are not. That is why the one-plus-two agenda and getting children hooked at primary school and in the early years of secondary are so important.

Having said that, I believe that the universities have a role to play. When the other witnesses and I were speaking in the anteroom before the meeting, it was encouraging to hear Lauren Paterson say that the University of Aberdeen is now discovering that a lot of students who study law and accountancy are asking to do languages as supplementary subjects. That is great and exactly what we want to happen, but it needs to start before that.

Robin Parker: People in the academic and business sectors do not get together to talk about policy in this area often enough. As part of our Scotland goes global project we are hosting a conference that is designed to bring together people from the academic and business spheres to talk about studying abroad and to talk more widely about how we make Scottish education internationally facing and internationally focused around language.

The Aberdeen example is really important. We are coming from the position that we need to start learning languages much earlier, in primary school, but the approach needs to be right across the piece. We should learn the core subjects that we are all familiar with, but alongside that we should have the ability to learn languages. The Aberdeen example is very good because flexibility is being built into the curriculum, so that students can learn languages alongside their main course of study. That is the way forward.

The Convener: Willie Coffey will segue into a different subject.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): I invite the panel to look forward beyond the one-plus-two approach to later school and early university, and I ask them to think about modern languages in the context of science and engineering.

Rebecca Trengove touched on the STEM subjects earlier. At the moment, is the curriculum flexible enough to allow that kind of transition to take place and are our Scottish youngsters sufficiently aware of the importance of combining languages with subjects such as science and engineering? If not, how can we improve things so that they are?

Rebecca Trengove: I take it that you mean the curriculum for excellence. Curriculum for excellence offers great potential for integrating languages with other subjects. I have seen that happening in my children's school, which embraced it fairly early on.

With regard to interdisciplinary learning, languages and STEM subjects are potentially a very good match. One great example in that respect is a technology-based company in Dundee that has a parent French company and is looking at bringing kids into the workplace to give them an understanding of how they can use languages and then sending them back to school to work on a technological project through the medium of another language.

Although that sort of thing can definitely be done, I think that the difficulty is that in secondary 4, when pupils go down to six subjects, children generally choose those in which they have the most interest, with the children more interested in science dropping languages and vice versa. If a way could be found of continuing languages in some form, that would be ideal.

I simply do not think that children are getting the message that languages are really important, or are getting the message anything like as much as they need to be getting it. STEM subjects get a lot of attention—rightly so, because there is a big gap in the number of people with those skills and it will only get bigger over the next couple of decades—but the jobs that come from them are not just to be found in the UK. As both of my colleagues on the panel have pointed out, all jobs are becoming increasingly international. As companies develop much longer global supply chains, the ability to interact with other countries will be really important. It does not really matter what language children learn at school as long as they get, as others have pointed out, an understanding of how to learn a language.

That is a very long-winded way of saying that I agree that both disciplines are really important. They are not mutually exclusive, and more needs to be done to encourage children to realise that languages will be useful and will be a medium for progressing STEM careers.

Robin Parker: I cannot say very much about the secondary school aspect, except to reinforce the point that many who arrive at university or college do not have a very firm grounding in languages. That is why this discussion is so important.

Some universities are building in flexibility of their own volition, and it would be a positive move to encourage other universities to do the same. There is a perception that some of the professional bodies involved in accrediting the

curriculum in certain STEM areas can present a barrier. I am not sure how true that is; I know that some are encouraging flexibility in the curriculum and it is the institutions that are not responding. Perhaps you could explore with the professional bodies whether they could do more to encourage institutions or to create flexibility in the accreditation of courses.

Another issue in the university sector that your colleague Clare Adamson will know well from consideration of the Post-16 Education (Scotland) Bill, which is going through Parliament at the moment, is the power it contains to review the landscape of education. The proposal has caused concern in some parts of the higher education sector. Although we in the NUS think that it could be a good and a bad thing, we think that it could be good in language learning if it ensures that enough language provision is available at least somewhere in Scotland. Quite a good example can be found in the problems that arose at the University of Glasgow a couple of years back with regard to the teaching of certain eastern European languages. Anything that promotes collaboration between universities and ensures that someone somewhere in Scotland is teaching both lesser-used and internationally significant languages will be good.

I suppose that the problem with the college sector is funding, with colleges finding it difficult to provide anything perceived to be an added extra beyond the things that are core to their purpose.

Willie Coffey: Has any snapshot been taken of final-year engineering and science students at any university to find out whether any of them—Scottish students, perhaps—have a language or have taken one as part of their university studies? Is a change beginning to take place or are we still some way from realising the importance of combining science and engineering with a language?

Robin Parker: I cannot give you any figures off the top of my head, but I can try to find some for you. I can talk about study abroad, which is not exactly the same thing but is in the same area. The number of STEM students who undertake some sort of study abroad is tiny, particularly in comparison to the situation in other European countries.

Clare Adamson: Rebecca Trengove said that pupils do not have an understanding of how important language is. The Education and Culture Committee has taken evidence about the skills gap around STEM subjects and, in particular, the underrepresentation of women in those subjects. Do you think that there is a specific problem with languages, or is it that our young people are simply not fully informed about the employment prospects and opportunities in Scotland?

Rebecca Trengove: It is probably a bit of both. It is certainly the case that children do not have a good understanding of employment prospects, and that is because teachers do not. Teachers are education professionals and they tend to have only taught, which means that they are less likely to be aware of the changing world of work. That is one area in which better relationships between school and work would probably help.

The issue with languages is probably a cultural thing. We have a dreadful assumption in Britain that everyone speaks English and that we therefore do not need to learn another language. That is not necessarily the school's fault; it starts at home. People go on holiday and find that they can get by without knowing the language—you can go to Torremolinos and not need to speak any Spanish at all.

That assumption is pervasive and needs to be challenged because it might be the case now that everyone speaks English, but it will not necessarily be the case in 20 years' time.

Robin Parker: There are some great British Council statistics on exactly that point. English is a global language but not to the extent that we imagine it to be. Only 6 per cent of the world's population speak English as a first language, which is a tiny amount, and 75 per cent of the world do not speak any English at all. If you speak only English, you are speaking to only a quarter of the world's population.

Lauren Paterson: On the point about informing our young people, I believe that careers advice should start much earlier in school. Although Skills Development Scotland's my world of work website is a fantastic and hugely important tool for young people, there has to be more one-to-one discussion with young people about what they will do when they leave school. If there were more discussions about why languages are important, the message would get through better.

Jamie McGrigor: Rebecca Trengove said that it does not matter what language someone learns. Recently, I visited a good primary school where the pupils were studying French, Gaelic and Scots. One point that was made was that, if they had the funding for the other languages that they had for Gaelic, everything would be wonderful, because there is much more funding for Gaelic than for anything else. From a business point of view, is learning Gaelic as important as learning any other language?

Mr Parker said that only 6 per cent of the world speak English as a first language and that 75 per cent of the world do not speak English at all. Are you talking about the entire population or the population of the business community?

Robin Parker: The entire population.

Rebecca Trengove: I do not believe that Gaelic is useful for business, outwith a small part of the Gaelic-speaking west coast of Scotland. There are cultural reasons for learning Gaelic, and learning Gaelic will help people to learn other languages, but I do not believe that it is particularly useful from a business point of view. I should stress that that is a personal view.

09:30

Jamie McGrigor: You said that it does not matter what language people learn.

Rebecca Trengove: It does not, because the process is about learning a system and a different way of thinking, and understanding how languages can work in different ways. I do not speak Gaelic, but the little that I know about it suggests that it is a different type of language from English. If someone has understood the structure of Gaelic, they will understand that the structure of German differs from the structure of English. However, there will be similarities in grammar and grammatical structure and in how the languages work, and those can be applied from one language to another.

I first studied French, then German and then Russian. It became increasingly easier to learn those languages, because I understood how languages work as a structure. To that extent, learning Gaelic would be helpful for learning any other language, or at least any other Indo-European language.

Robin Parker: The closer someone is to being brought up fully bilingually—whether in English and Gaelic or English and Polish—the easier it is for them to acquire further languages.

Lauren Paterson: I echo that. It is a transferable skill. Given the spread of languages that business is looking for, it is not feasible for all Scottish schools to provide access to all the languages. Therefore, we need to provide young people with the skills to diverge into those other languages.

Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP): Rebecca Trengove talked about SCILT and businesses in schools. The Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages, Dr Alasdair Allan, has said that there might be value in considering the use of business champions to support language learning in schools and cultural understanding in the workplace. I ask the panel members to give me their thoughts on the feasibility of business champions.

Rebecca Trengove: The idea is certainly feasible, but it depends on the number and type of companies that are willing to commit and the levels to which they can engage. A bigger company is likely to have more resources. The company in Dundee to which I referred is a large company and one of the major employers in Dundee. It has a great deal of interaction with its parent company in France, so it has a clear focus.

It is harder for smaller companies to work with a big group of youngsters in the way that a bigger company can. Nevertheless, companies are willing to engage on the issue. Following a speech that I gave at a language conference in November, I made contact with a number of local companies that were willing to support the agenda to different levels.

It depends on the individual company and its resources, but there is general agreement, certainly among the businesspeople to whom I speak, that we need to support our young people's learning, whether that is in STEM subjects, languages or how the workplace works, because they are our future employees. We therefore have a duty to help them to understand the skills that they need to acquire so that they can become potential employees for us.

Lauren Paterson: We see a general willingness among all our members to engage, even if that is at the basic level of providing work experience for young people. Smaller employers tend not to have sufficient resources to give a huge amount of time to going into schools. That is because they have smaller numbers of staff and have to focus on running their businesses—it is not because they do not want to engage; it is purely because their time is critical. There is a general willingness among businesses to engage with the agenda.

Roderick Campbell: Lauren Paterson talked about IBM. Do you have other examples of businesses engaging through work experience, apprenticeships or training or in other ways to promote language skills?

Lauren Paterson: I have no more work experience examples, but I have an example of companies getting involved with a school in Renfrewshire whose language department had a careers day that focused purely on careers that can be accessed with language skills. The school contacted us to ask whether some of our members would go along and speak to the pupils. We had a really good response to that. Speaking to young people and informing them about the opportunities that are out there is a small role that businesses can play, but it could be effective. That goes a bit more broadly than the basic careers advice that people normally get.

Rebecca Trengove: An example that I have heard about comes from a whisky company somewhere in the central belt or Perthshire that does a lot of business in China. The company hooked up with a local school that was doing a

trial of Mandarin teaching and had a group of senior pupils in for a teleconference with people in Beijing. Another example comes from an oil industry company in Aberdeen that did something similar in relation to German, as it had an affiliate in Germany.

There are companies that want to do such work. Part of the blockage preventing them from doing it is the lack of a mechanism by which they can do it. I spoke to the people from SCILT yesterday, who have a couple of pilots that they are keen to roll out. It is a question of resources and of willingness among schools that want to engage and businesses that are willing to host them.

Lauren Paterson: The engagement that happens now depends on the school and the business involved. Rebecca Trengove is right—I do not think that there is a central mechanism for businesses that want to get involved in the school agenda to say that they would be happy to get involved. I do not know how that would be done. It would be a real benefit if there was a way for that engagement to happen, so that it is not a case of a teacher picking up the phone or a connection through a parent or employee.

Robin Parker: Our submission refers to a report that we put together called "Developing Scotland's Graduates for the Global Economy", which includes case studies, and we have videos of employers talking about the value of college and university graduates who have a global perspective. The same principles apply when we talk about school pupils. The point about placements was well put by colleagues on the panel.

The only thing that I will add is about the peer approach in promoting some of these things. That is one of the reasons why we have been getting current students to talk to school pupils about the value of study abroad. That can be really effective.

Roderick Campbell: Is the discussion a bit concentrated on bigger businesses? The submission from the Federation of Small Businesses was not very positive about the promotion of languages. Do you have any thoughts on that? Is it only big business that is interested in that?

Lauren Paterson: I cannot speak for the FSB or its members, but I think that a lot of them are microbusinesses that might not even have employees, so it would be a big ask for them to take time and resources away from their businesses. It is not just huge multinational businesses; a lot of medium-sized businesses would also be interested in involvement.

Rebecca Trengove: On the broader point about the importance of languages for business, although the FSB's submission suggested that languages were not important for FSB members, as Lauren Paterson said, a lot of those businesses are very small and a lot of them are probably service businesses that do not see the need to export. They might see the need for languages if their business involves people coming into Scotland, as with tourism-related businesses. Having staff with language skills might not be crucial to such businesses, but it might be an extra that they could offer. If a bed-and-breakfast owner can speak to their guests in their native language, those guests might give a bigger tip. It is not a huge amount, but that is the sort of benefit that people can see.

Another point is that businesses change. Business is dynamic, and what might start off as a small business could grow, its needs could change and it could be bought by another business. Employees therefore have different opportunities open to them. For a business to say that it is small so it does not need languages is a slightly narrow way of thinking that does not leave it open to the possibility that things could change.

Willie Coffey: I have to spring to the defence of Gaelic, and the Celtic languages in general, after some of the earlier comments. Many hundreds of thousands of youngsters speak their Celtic language as their first language and I would hate the committee to have the view expressed that somehow that is of no value and will be of no value in any business life to come. Those many thousands of youngsters grow into adults who use their Celtic language—whether that is Gaelic, Irish or Welsh—in an employment setting. It is important to recognise that.

Of course, we should not confuse the teaching of Gaelic, Irish and Welsh with the modern language agenda. There are clear reasons why Governments in Scotland, Wales and Ireland offer their native language to children. Rebecca Trengove mentioned whisky a moment ago. That is an example where skills in speaking Gaelic would be very helpful.

Many of our world-class whisky brands are uniquely branded using Gaelic names but, to my knowledge, not many people in the business world can even pronounce the names of the whiskies. That is the case in companies from Diageo right down the way. We have to defend our natural, indigenous languages and offer our children as much support as we can to combine them with other modern European languages.

The Convener: I do not know whether that was a comment or a question, but the witnesses are welcome to respond if they wish.

Rebecca Trengove: I had no intention of attacking Gaelic, and I tried to make the point that there are parts of Scotland where it is very useful.

I reiterate my point that learning any other language—any language that is additional to a person's native language—is helpful. If a native Scot or an English speaker learns Gaelic, that will be helpful for learning other languages. If a native Gaelic speaker is learning English for the first time, that will be helpful for them. Robin Parker is absolutely right: being brought up bilingually is a huge advantage in a whole number of ways, and not just in relation to the acquisition of other languages. I take Willie Coffey's point, however.

Jamie McGrigor: That point addressed my earlier question. I have always supported Gaelic as an MSP for the Highlands and Islands. Surely we are here to ask the representatives of the business community what they think about languages—this is not about what we think about them.

To go back to another point that I made earlier, it was expressed to me at a Gaelic-medium school that I recently visited that, if other languages had the same amount of money put into them as Gaelic has had, it would be a better thing altogether, because they could all be taught better.

The Convener: Both those points are well made.

I think that members have exhausted their questions but, if witnesses wish to add anything, I am happy to hear it.

Robin Parker: Mr McGrigor asked an important question about costs. Like many of the previous witnesses, I do not have anything to say about what the right amount is or about whether the amount that is on the table is enough. From the NUS point of view, the one-plus-two approach is extremely important, and if more primary school pupils get the opportunity to learn an additional language, that will be extremely important for Scotland's future. If we are going to do that, let us do it properly.

I want to get a point in about the approach that we take to language teaching. Language is often taught from quite a mechanistic point of view in schools, in a "This is how it works" kind of way, rather than adopting an enjoyable, fun, applicable and applied approach to learning, which is the approach that I would encourage.

The Convener: In our investigations in schools, we have picked up on the difference between how languages are taught at secondary school level and what we have seen in the pilot schools, where we have been in classes where children have started and finished and gone right through the class in the one language. That includes primary 1s, who have had counting, the alphabet, games and songs—the whole gamut. They have enjoyment and motivation, and the most important thing is the confidence that that approach gives those young children. We saw five-year-olds who are much more bilingual than I could ever dream of being, and the confidence absolutely oozes from them. That is the key point. If they feel happy and confident, and quite smart about what they can do, the difference is amazing.

You are right: I know as the parent of a 14-year-old that getting pupils of that age to sit down and do Spanish, say, is difficult. They have their book open and they might find it a bit boring. If they get taken to a Spanish-speaking country and are encouraged to use some of their language, that can be much better. Mr Parker is absolutely right about how to give enjoyment to the process of study and how to build confidence. We have seen a marked difference there. The point is well made.

Rebecca Trengove: I completely agree. That will be critical to changing how language is taught in Scotland. A fair degree of revised teacher training will be required, and I urge the committee to ensure that the funding that is in place—and I cannot say what it should be—is sufficient for good-quality teacher training, not just for the pilot but for what is rolled out.

A director of education has commented that, in other areas of the curriculum where there have been changes, they have been an aspiration rather than a commitment. That leaves a lot of wriggle room. The curriculum is crowded, and there are a lot of demands on teachers. I urge the committee to try to make the commitment as definite as possible—to give the education sector a long-term commitment on something that the Government wants to do and expects to happen over a long period. It is commitment over a long time that will give teachers the confidence to roll out the pilot.

09:45

The Convener: That commitment is one of the Government's clear objectives. You are absolutely right that it is a matter of rolling out the pilot.

Robin Parker: On the approach to training—I made similar comments about the STEM issue—there is perhaps more opportunity either though the General Teaching Council for Scotland or the institutions for BEd students who are studying at universities to have the flexibility to learn a second language alongside their main course of education study, and that would be provided by the universities. That would allow students who have not had the opportunity to study a second language at secondary or primary school to get a qualification. That might help in relation to some of the committee's previous discussions about whether that should be a requirement for entry to teaching study.

The Convener: That is one of the questions on our list to ask the minister, who will be our next visitor to the committee on the subject, in a few weeks' time.

Thank you very much for your evidence, which has been valuable and insightful—bringing together our point of view, the educational point of view and the business point of view. I was not sure whether that would work, but I think that it has, and you have complemented one another very well. If you have any other statistics or information or anything that you think will inform our future work on the topic, we would be delighted to hear from you, and the clerk will provide a conduit for any further exchange of information.

09:46

Meeting suspended.

09:56

On resuming—

The Convener: Welcome back to the European and External Relations Committee. We move on to agenda item 2.

As part of the committee's continuing inquiry into the teaching of foreign languages in primary school, Clare Adamson, Willie Coffey, Jamie McGrigor and I have recently visited various primary schools throughout the country—of course, the launch of phase 1 of the inquiry was held at a school in Glasgow with Hanzala Malik. We will give some feedback to the committee on the outcomes of those visits, kicking off with Willie Coffey.

Willie Coffey: I record my thanks to Eileen Martin, who accompanied me to the meeting with two schools in East Ayrshire, and Alasdair MacCaluim, one of the Parliament's Gaelic officers. Eileen helpfully took some notes of the meeting, which was fantastic to see.

I visited Darvel primary school and Kilmaurs primary school in East Ayrshire, both of which I know well. Both of them teach French.

In Darvel, we visited the primary 7 children, who get about an hour of French every week. Some of the pupils said to us that, before primary 6, they still have difficulty learning English, so a great debate took place between the children in the pupil forum that we held about whether it was appropriate to have one language plus two or more when the children were still getting to grips with the English language. That was a fantastic debate. Opinions were split evenly.

When asked about choices, some of the children felt that the emerging economy languages—for example, Chinese or Russian—were important to focus on. They thought that they would be particularly useful, as did the parent who attended. She felt that, if there was a choice to be made, it would be useful if there was slightly better focus on some of the emerging economy languages.

The teacher at Darvel has a degree in modern languages. She is very dedicated and professional. However, she said that she would prefer one extra language to start with to maintain the quality of language teaching. She felt that introducing two might dilute effort with the additional resources that would be required to support that.

Looking beyond that to secondary school, she then highlighted the need for additional resources if we were to maintain the strategy through and beyond secondary school. I think that that message has been shared with committee members who made other visits.

The children at Kilmaurs primary school are also doing French. We had a wonderful opportunity to see what was going on in the French lessons for the primary 3 and primary 4 class. We saw them at two sessions: doing some work in the classroom and some work in the gymnasium. Kilmaurs is trying to offer the children experience of the French language in different settings within the school, which is really helpful.

The children there were interested in languages from Sri Lanka and wanted to learn Japanese. Some of them wanted to learn American. It was really wonderful to hear that.

10:00

The children in both schools thought that their learning was enhanced by watching cartoons, sport and other things with subtitles on TV. The teacher at Kilmaurs primary school, who has a higher in Russian, stressed the importance of the transition from primary to secondary and said that it is really important to get that right. She also said that the glow facility that is available from Education Scotland can provide exciting interchanges between schools in a safe online environment. That is not really available to Scottish children through normal sources of media such as TV. Glow could be developed much more to support that.

The teacher said that having a language and teaching it are two different things, and she emphasised the importance of training if we are to take this work forward. A common message that we heard in both schools is that the curriculum is pretty full. What do we take out to make way for additional second language teaching? There needs to be some thinking on how we construct and build the curriculum. Foreign language

assistants were mentioned, too, and there was a plea from both schools that we do something in that regard to try to assist the process and take the project forward.

The visits were very positive. I was hugely impressed by the work that is going on and incredibly impressed by the skills and abilities of the young students at Darvel and Kilmaurs primary schools. They are a credit to not only their schools but their families.

The Convener: Thank you for those detailed and insightful comments on your visit. You obviously enjoyed yourself.

I invite Jamie McGrigor to give us an overview of his visit to Lochyside Roman Catholic primary school in Fort William. You made it to Fort William and back again, Jamie. Well done.

Jamie McGrigor: Yes. It was quite snowy going through Glencoe, but it was fine. One of the teachers kindly took some notes for me, and I am very grateful to her. Literally the following morning, I got a little letter saying:

"Dear Jamie,

It was such a pleasure to welcome you to the school this morning. Thank you, on behalf of all the staff and pupils.

We appreciate your interest and support for our Book Project.

I've attached notes of our discussion".

That was very nice.

I gave the school the committee's set of questions, and I will tell you what the answers were. The first question was:

"Is there enough money?"

The school responded:

"insufficient information to answer the question."

The next question was:

"Do existing teachers have the skills?"

The school responded:

"We should carry out a national audit to ascertain current position of skills in Modern Languages."

On teaching resources, the school stated:

"Gaelic resources are excellent. Audio, visual and display materials are provided as part of the training and are very relevant to CfE methods.

MLPS French: none of the above. Schools are obliged to buy or make their own resources for use with pupils. Good ideas are now coming from websites (such as Passeporte Francophone) which are suitable for CfE.

There is no formal training in Scots at present. A good range of materials is available commercially for schools to buy and staff make their own resources."

The next question was:

"Should there be more training and support?"

The school responded:

"These should be on-going for existing teachers, to maintain fluency, confidence and relevance. Training and support would be good for morale. At present some language teachers can feel isolated or that their language is undervalued by colleagues (NOT in this school!!)

Regular contact with colleagues at ASG level would also help e.g. through an agreed programme of work, ensuring coverage, progression and continuity, particularly at transition stage."

The next question was:

"What is the capacity within the curriculum to accommodate greater language study? Can it be embedded in existing teaching?"

The school responded:

"The best way to accommodate extra language study is through CfE, where language work can easily be integrated with cross curricular activities. The Wee Big Books Project was designed with this in mind."

That project is a brilliant thing. It was designed by the art department in the school, which is a wonderful thing, called the Room 13 studio. It is completely independent and it pays for all its own materials. I was incredibly impressed by that. The pupils designed a book in French—the one that I looked at was about the life of the banana. It was not so much a cartoon book as a beautiful audiovisual sort of book, and it was produced by the children, so I took note of that.

The rest of the response stated:

"Organisation within schools would need to be arranged according to individual circumstances i.e. number of trained staff, composite classes, school role etc. Such a cross curricular approach also requires careful monitoring of progression and coverage."

The next question was:

"Which languages should children be learning and why?"

The response stated:

"I suggest they should be learning Scots and Gaelic because they are our native languages. Traditionally, French (and German) have been taught, so more staff are readily available to deliver lessons in those languages than in Norwegian or Spanish, for example."

The next question was:

"What is the role of languages in economic development?"

The response stated:

"It facilitates other learning. Learning additional languages encourages a broad-minded approach to other cultures. It widens the scope for employment and business, both personally and as a nation."

The next question was:

"What should children be learning to help them get jobs, help Scotland flourish economically?"

The response stated:

"From an economic point of view, at present, perhaps Mandarin might be a good language for children to learn."

The children certainly had no problem with English either—they were very voluble. They were extremely confident and were obviously enjoying the languages.

I took part in a French lesson, and since I can speak a little French I was invited to teach for a little bit—poor children!—which I thoroughly enjoyed. The lesson was a good example of the very good progress in what the one-plus-two model is seeking to achieve. The remark about there being so many more resources for Gaelic was telling, and there was a feeling that, if the other languages were resourced in that way, much more progress could be made.

That is all that I have to say about the school—I am very glad that I went, and it was a useful experience for me.

The Convener: Thank you for a very detailed report, with a lot of questions and answers and information.

Jamie McGrigor: I will give the piece of paper to the clerks, so that they have all the information.

The Convener: That would be very helpful, thank you. I invite Clare Adamson to give the committee an overview of our visit to Machanhill primary school in Larkhall, which is in my constituency.

Clare Adamson: It was a very snowy morning when we arrived at Machanhill primary and the school was under quite a bit of pressure due to staff not being able to make it in, but nonetheless we had two wonderful sessions with representatives of the school council from primary 1 right up to primary 7. There were quite a few members in the round-circle discussion in which I and the convener took part, and we were given the opportunity to go to different classes and see the language teaching in operation.

As we found on our previous school visit to St Elizabeth's primary in South Lanarkshire, the teaching method in the classroom involved complete immersion. The pupils were playing a game and taking part in everyday activities, such as ordering lunch, entirely in French.

In the circle discussion, we found that all the children were really enthusiastic about what they were doing. That enthusiasm spread among younger and older siblings in families: the children spoke about how learning a language had influenced their family and home life, as siblings were at different levels so the older ones were helping their younger siblings with the language.

It struck me, although I have no doubt about the competence of the teachers delivering this part of the curriculum, that every pupil in the school that we visited knew which teacher had studied French and they enjoyed her classes because they recognised the difference between someone who had been trained to deliver language teaching and someone who was completely fluent in a language. That reinforces some of the evidence that we have heard about the importance of native language speakers being involved in schools. The school had been involved in the Comenius projects, so it was well aware of some of those aspects.

I also noted that the school had previously run trips to Paris with a senior group. However, as with many things, because of the current economic climate the school had pulled back and did not intend to run any more international trips. That would obviously impact on the ability of the children to gain more exposure to the language.

The Convener: The only thing that I would add to that is that the primary school is the next one in South Lanarkshire in line for a rebuild and is waiting to move into temporary accommodation. With the new technology that will be installed in the new building, the school is keen to re-engage with the connecting classrooms project. At the session that I attended, I saw a very competent teacher and a very motivated group of young people who were pushing each other out of the way to answer questions in French—in a nice way. That shows the motivation and dedication that exist, and the kids were having fun. A key element of teaching younger children a foreign language is making it fun, as that makes it easy to learn. That is the lesson that I learned that day.

Jamie McGrigor: I would like to add one thing that I forgot to mention about the wee big book project, which is very important and was very much part of the teaching at Lochyside. The aim of the project is to produce a series of A3-size books on topics across the curriculum. Teacher guides will be provided and include suggestions for language work as well as further cross-curricular activities on the themes of the books. Scots is taught in all classes. French and Gaelic are taught in P5 to P7 at present but, by August 2013, that teaching will extend across all stages. The simple text of the books will be in Scots, French and Gaelic, and the text will be written by Mrs Murphy, the French teacher. Translations will be provided by specialists, with input from pupils at Lochaber high school. I will give you the titles of the books that they have made to date.

The Convener: Thank you. That is helpful.

Scottish Government's Country Plan for China and International Framework

10:12

The Convener: Item 3 is the Scottish Government's country plan for China and the international framework. Jamie McGrigor is the star of the show today.

Jamie McGrigor: It seems to be my day.

The Convener: Jamie attended Marine Harvest Scotland as part of the committee's inquiry into the Scottish Government's country plan. He doubled up that day, going to the foreign languages primary school in the morning and visiting the business in the afternoon. That was a good use of resources, Jamie.

Jamie McGrigor: That was the idea.

The Convener: Would you like to give us an overview of your visit to the company?

Jamie McGrigor: Yes. I was grateful to Marine Harvest for sending such a senior person to see me. We had an excellent meeting and, afterwards, I visited the processing factory and saw what was being done. Marine Harvest is a very big employer in Fort William. I had not visited a salmon processing factory for several years, and the improvement in the quality of the fish over that time was extraordinary—I speak as a former fish farmer, although that was a long time ago. It was very good to see that.

Everybody has a summary note of the discussion that took place. Marine Harvest was the first Scottish farmed salmon company to export to China. It is also the largest exporter in the Scottish industry. Marine Harvest is helped very much by the fact that it has two offices in China—one in Beijing and one in Shanghai.

In 2011-12, the value of Marine Harvest's sales to China was approximately £20 million. Marine Harvest has a Chinese logo. I was told that that was incredibly important, because "marine harvest" means absolutely nothing in Chinese. I do not quite know how to explain it, as I do not speak Mandarin, but it appears that the phrase does not mean anything. Therefore, it was necessary to rethink what the company would be called. It adopted a Chinese logo, which incorporates a recognisable Chinese character that is pronounced in the same way as "delicious". That seemed a sensible thing to do. The words "good", "beauty" and "dignity" are also incorporated in the meaning. That branding is used for marketing and communications within the Chinese market.

10:15

In the Chinese market, the preferred size profile is larger fish. For some reason, the Chinese like bigger fish, which suits everyone. As a result of AGD—amoebic gill disease—which came in recently, Marine Harvest made no sales to China in the fourth quarter of 2012, because of heavily reduced volumes. Exports have begun again in 2013. Approximately 370 tonnes have been sent to China so far in 2013. The company's aim is to increase sales volumes year on year.

The Marine Harvest representative asked me, "Do you want me to moan?", to which I replied, "No, I don't want you to moan." She seemed to be very happy with Scottish Development International, although she mentioned that Marine Harvest was in a far better position than other Scottish salmon companies, partly because it already had expertise in China. The fact that it had an office there was extremely important. In addition, the location of the processing factory makes it easy for lorries to come and pick up the fish. The shelf life of fresh farmed salmon is about two weeks, as long as it is kept at the right temperature in an icebox. All Marine Harvest's fish are processed in one processing factory. They are picked up, taken to Heathrow and flown out, which means that they can be in China in a very short time. The quality is immaculate.

If I compare Marine Harvest with the Scottish Salmon Company, which I also visited for the committee, Marine Harvest's advantages include the fact that it can get the product out of the country easily and the fact that it already had links in China. In addition, it is a far bigger company that operates on more of a worldwide level. Its office in China deals not just with Scottish salmon but with fish of all sorts from all over the world. The fact that it already had links in place was extremely important.

Apart from that, the company representative was very grateful to the committee and said that she would be delighted to see any of us at any point in the future. After a long discussion, I proceeded on my way.

The Convener: Are there any questions?

Clare Adamson: Yes. You mentioned that the company had not been able to sell into China in the fourth quarter of 2012; you also said that there was a preference for big fish in the Chinese market. Was that to do with not having the capacity to sell in, or was it because the fish were smaller as a result of amoebic gill disease?

Jamie McGrigor: I should have made that point. AGD is rather like emphysema or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease in salmon. It starves the fish of oxygen, so when they get to a certain stage, they start to die. There is nothing

wrong with the flesh of the fish—the disease is caused by a little parasite in the gills, which simply prevents the fish from breathing properly. That meant that the fish had to be culled earlier, so they were smaller, and the Chinese market does not like smaller fish. That is why Marine Harvest stopped the volume exports.

It is now exporting again and it hopes that the AGD, which seems to have been a result of increased water temperatures, will not be present this year; it is just keeping its fingers crossed.

The company seems to be fairly happy. I was looking for problems, but there did not seem to be any. It did not even complain about there being too much red tape and that sort of thing.

The Convener: That was a positive visit.

Willie Coffey: There is a wee note at the back of the sheet about flawed and incorrect export data from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. What was the issue?

Jamie McGrigor: What are you referring to? Is that in my report on the visit?

Willie Coffey: Aye. Was the problem about export data and documentation and other such issues?

Jamie McGrigor: Yes. Marine Harvest said that it sometimes has problems with HMRC. The Marine Harvest representative was not explicit about what those are. I asked whether it would help if it could export direct from Scotland. I was told that it would in a way but that, in another way, it would not, because the lorry drivers are so used to the Heathrow system, which is so good. Perhaps we could follow up on that, because I am not certain. The Marine Harvest representative said that there is a bit of a problem but passed over it.

Hanzala Malik: An advantage of sending fish down south is that many of the lorries that come up north end up going back empty but, if they take a product back, that is helpful not only for exports but for internal, national use of the fish industry. There are fringe benefits to fresh fish products going to London. It is not about HMRC being more helpful or better equipped to deal with that; it is about how the industry operates. There are advantages in that for us and the industry. However, I am sure that we could look at exploring ways to encourage industry to export directly from Scotland. That would save at least a day, if not more. We could consider how to help industry in that way. I am sure that HMRC would be more than happy to support us.

Jamie McGrigor: That raises one more point about the visit. Marine Harvest said that a huge advantage in being based in Fort William is that it is close to the fish health inspectors. They would come at a moment's notice, sometimes even during holidays, and do their best to help the company. Marine Harvest would arrange cover with the inspectors because they have to stamp the fish before they leave the plant.

Marine Harvest said that the disadvantage for some remoter fish farms is that they must wait ages for the inspectors to come. If we look at that, we can perhaps help other fish farms. It made strongly the point that Fort William seems to be a good centre to be in from the business perspective.

The labelling on the boxes is amazing. You can not only see what cage on which site the fish came from but tell which individual had packed that box of fish. The traceability was good.

"Brussels Bulletin"

10:24

The Convener: Item 4 is our usual update on the latest edition of the "Brussels Bulletin", which again reflects the fluid situation in Europe. The bulletin is put together by Ian Duncan. I ask Ian to give us this week's messages from Europe.

Ian Duncan (Clerk and European Officer): I start my report from Europe with the discussions about Cyprus. Members will appreciate that when I was writing the section on Cyprus the situation was fluid, and I am afraid that it was pretty much wrong the minute I had finished it.

I will bring members up to date on the situation. The vote on the package did indeed take place in the Cypriot Parliament. It had been suggested that that would be a difficult vote; rather, it was quite straightforward and easy, because nobody voted for the package. The rejection of the bailout package has begun a serious process. That is combined with the fact that Russia, which is a major depositor and user of the Cypriot banking facility, is also troubled by the situation and has declared that its loan to the Government of €2.5 billion may be in jeopardy if things are not resolved in the short term.

The situation in Cyprus has resonated across the whole of the eurozone. Given that Cyprus is one of the smallest economies in the eurozone, the bailout package should have been one of the most straightforward and the cost to the bailout mechanism should have been marginal. Despite those things, however, the package has all but destroyed the growing confidence in the eurozone's systems, has created a significant problem for the euro inside Cyprus and has created repercussions for depositors not just in Cyprus but across the eurozone.

It is hard to believe that that particular package could have created a run on the banks, but that is exactly what it has done, and not just in Cyprus. In the other countries that fear that they, too, will have to take a second package, people are also removing money from banks. Interestingly, the deposits of depositors are protected from—one would imagine—almost everything except a tax. The bailout package would in effect be a tax and therefore no depositor is protected. Even the smallest deposit would be liable to a tax at just over 6 per cent, and higher deposits would be liable at a higher rate. The Government is trying to remove and adjust that, but we can see immediately that it would affect everybody who has a bank account. How quickly would people stop having a bank account if they were fearful that they would be taxed? At present, the banks in Cyprus remain closed and the Government is trying to find a package that will work.

Somewhat unhelpfully, the Germans have been clear in stating that perhaps the banks will never open, which I thought was a little bit dramatic. We can see the tension between Germany, which has an election of its own to face in the months ahead and is being very strong, and Cyprus, which is trying its best to find a solution that is workable. The Germans have said to the Cypriots that they should not go to Russia to seek an extension of the loan and the Cypriots have said that they will do that. They are in Russia just now, not only to shore up the loan that they already have but to look at other loan opportunities. That is the situation in Cyprus.

There are several other things to mention. The European Parliament has voted against the multi-annual financial framework, as is its right. Importantly, the Parliament set out some of its own preconditions. It has broadly accepted that the budget will need to be lower, but it does not want to be bound by the ministers' particular take on it. The Parliament's view is, "We are a sovereign Parliament and co-decider, and you should not be telling us these things—they must be decided in dialogue." The trilogue discussions, which will involve the Parliament, the Council and the Commission, will take place in earnest in April.

One development that the Parliament is keen to set out is on the shortfall issue, which continues to bedevil the overall funding. You might recall that they ran out of money last year, which was going to affect various EU programmes. The Parliament says that we need to make sure that the books are balanced now so that there is no roll-over into the next cycle. That would mean that quite a significant amount of money would have to be found before the next MAFF is signed off.

There is a bit in the bulletin about the common agricultural policy. I will not go into that in detail, but you may wish to read it.

I know that a number of members are interested in the issue of small and medium-sized enterprises in the EU. There are a number of rules that are believed to be onerous to small businesses. The bulletin contains a list of those, but they include data protection, working time and recording equipment in road transport. Small businesses believe that those things are too onerous and they would like changes to them. European leaders are committed to making changes in those areas, and that should happen.

There are a couple of other small things in the bulletin. The dates for next year's European elections have been agreed and will be 22 to 25 May. It is worth noting that, at the previous election, the turnout in Scotland was the lowest in

the UK at 28.6 per cent. The UK average was 34.7 per cent.

Finally, the president of the European Council has declared that he will not seek another term. Van Rompuy will demit office at the end of his term on 1 December 2014.

I am happy to take any questions.

10:30

Hanzala Malik: I just have an observation on the idea of people going outwith the European Union to try to resolve financial issues. They may be unofficially encouraged to do that because the EU cannot possibly continue to carry the burden of failing economies. There is a raft of them, from Greece and Italy—but not Spain as yet—to island countries, now. People want to invest in Europe, and particularly in Governments, because that provides long-term, secure investments. It can only be helpful if the Russians come in. Given that they are neighbours of the European Union, I would have thought that it would be in their best interests to ensure that the European economy is buoyant, because they want to engage with us in international trade.

I therefore think that it would be not a bad thing if the Russians came in, but a good, positive development. It would also take the pressure off Germany, which is looking towards an election. The Germans have little room to manoeuvre except to provide the kind of strong defence that would be unhelpful for any economy at this stage. I therefore think that Russian help would be a good development rather than a bad one. If the Cypriots are successful in that regard, it might encourage others to look for funding elsewhere. Just as we encourage our community organisations to look for funding other than Government funding, it is the same for countries in the European Union; we must explore the possibilities of venturing outside the European Union for support in hard times.

Ian Duncan: I do not disagree with that. Germany is not happy at the moment—full stop. That remains broadly the issue throughout the eurozone just now.

Hanzala Malik: I think that the Germans' stance may be more political than financial.

Ian Duncan: Yes, there are nuances to it.

Willie Coffey: I want to pick up the Cyprus issue with Ian Duncan. Where on earth did the idea come from of introducing state-sponsored looting of people's private savings? Did they not realise the effect that that would have, with people queueing up to withdraw their savings from their accounts? I find it incredible that somebody in Europe came up with that idea as a means to solve the Cyprus issue. Has any value been placed on the impact that that would have on the Cypriot deficit? Would it cover it? I very much doubt that it would. I note Ian Duncan's second point that depositors would be compensated with an equivalent amount from shares in the banks. Does that mean that people would get their money back at a later stage?

Hanzala Malik: That is, if the banks open again.

Willie Coffey: Yes. However, I am astounded by the current idea, which is causing so many problems and further worry, unnecessarily, throughout the European Union.

Ian Duncan: It is certainly an unusual idea. It should have been the easiest bailout of them all because it is the smallest, so there should not have been any problems. Two things are happening here. First, there is an unsaid but implied belief that a lot of the money in Cypriot banks has come from Russia, not all of which is—

Hanzala Malik: Okay.

Ian Duncan: Yes. We could fill in the blanks about what that money might be. The issue then is—Germany has implied a lot of this—that we should therefore not compensate questionable investors from Russia.

In applying the proposed rule, they would catch not only the big fish but the minnows, which would clearly be a trial. However, the amount of money raised would not be enough to offset the bailout; it would be about a third of the value of the bailout. Mr Coffey's point is well made in that the idea seems to have been ill thought through. I suspect that, somewhere along the line, they believed that the offer of bank shares, which were meant to be underpinned by the future oil wealth of Cyprus, could be used to offset depositors' losses. The shares may indeed be more valuable than the losses from their bank accounts, but there are a lot of qualifications around that involving use of the words "may" and "if", which people did not pay much attention to as they whizzed off to the nearest bank machine and took out all their money.

Clare Adamson: On a different topic, I am interested in the "Clusters & Entrepreneurship" section of the bulletin. I note that, in the final budget, John Swinney put an additional £50 million into entrepreneurship in Scotland. With regard to the two calls for proposals that are highlighted in the bulletin—I am thinking in particular of the biosciences and renewables—does the mechanism for replying rest with the UK Government or could the Scottish Government be looking at this?

Ian Duncan: It is not for the member state to bid per se; that will happen more at the level of what

are called regional consortia or non-governmental bodies, enterprises and agencies. That said, I suspect that the Scottish Government and its agencies—and, indeed, the UK Government and its agencies—will be seeking to encourage different would-be bidders to come together and draw down the money. In short, it is not a Government draw-down as such; one might look at it as Government-supported assistance to help others draw down the funding.

Roderick Campbell: I have more of a comment than a question. I note in the "Language learning" section of the bulletin the comments by the language and culture commissioner, which, I have to say, are fairly apposite in light of the comments that we heard this morning. Obviously we cannot predict what the new multilingualism proposal will be, but how is Europe engaging with initiatives such as the one that we have been discussing? Can you add anything in that respect?

Ian Duncan: It is a good question. I have been asking what the multilingualism proposal will look like and, more important, whether it will come with funding to develop programmes and exchanges. From what I understand, they are looking again at expanding and enhancing various existing schemes, primarily those for language teachers and exchanges, which is one aspect of the proposal, and at encouraging students through the Erasmus programme to learn and study abroad, which is another part. Its likely promotion in businesses and the workplace suggests a move away from the academic or school base towards the business base, and another aspect is the encouragement of apprenticeships abroad through an exchange between like businesses—it might be better to describe it as an Erasmus for businesses. Although those are some of the likely aspects of the proposal, there is no indication yet of the money beneath it.

Roderick Campbell: Fair enough.

On broadband, I wonder whether you can tell us anything else about member-state reaction to the national infrastructure database proposal.

Ian Duncan: The EU's strong encouragement to move in that direction has not always been married up with funding to make the difference at the right level. I think that what is happening now is that an audit is taking place to establish the blind spots and shadows, find out the exact amount of coverage and look at the best way of targeting solutions.

We talk about the UK's significant problems in rural areas, but they are as nothing compared with some of the problems that are faced by some member states to the east. The EU is trying to get a sense of the size of the problem so that it can target its finances at a more tailored solution. Moves to target the money in a more exact way will probably happen under the next multi-annual financial framework, but we must remember that there is money left in the current broadband allocation.

Jamie McGrigor: I have a couple of quick questions that Ian Duncan might or might not be able to answer. On the CAP, does the reference in the bulletin to

"capping payments for big farmers"

mean that there will be extra money for member states? Will the capping happen in member states and not across the board?

Ian Duncan: We are talking about an acreage cap, by which I mean that a farm over a certain size will not be able to get the multiplier simply on the basis of its acreage—it is usually an acre multiplier—but will be capped at a certain point. I think that the figures are in a previous bulletin, but I would be misleading the committee if I tried to remember them just now. What it will mean is that less money will certainly be spent from the overall national allocation at the higher end—in other words, the bigger farms—and because the money will be in the same envelope it should be available for—

Jamie McGrigor: So there should be a redistribution of sorts.

Ian Duncan: Broadly, yes.

Jamie McGrigor: My second point is on broadband, which I notice is also mentioned. In the figures that we saw previously, the money for telecoms was to be cut by something like 80 per cent. However, the bulletin states:

"The Commission wants Member States to set up national infrastructure databases. Any operator bidding for public money will also need to declare what infrastructure they own in the area ... to facilitate infrastructure sharing."

That seems a sensible thing to do, but do we know whether there will be enough money for that? Do we know whether there will be less money for broadband, or is the money that has been promised so far safe enough?

Ian Duncan: You are right that the figures that the committee considered previously included an 80 per cent cut in the budget heading for broadband or the telecoms area. The European Parliament did not like that reduction, which it thought sent the wrong message, but it has not yet produced its preferred alternative. The trilogue negotiations that will take place in April should begin to reveal some of the details about what that funding line will look like.

I think that the Commission is being pre-emptive in recognising that, if there is less money, it needs to consider the best way of ensuring that that

smaller amount of money is spent wisely and sensibly. That is why there is mention of infrastructure sharing and requiring operators to reveal what infrastructure is already in place. The notion is that there should be an audit of what is available to allow the money to go to where it can do the most good, with a focus on need, rather than the money simply being spent equally among member states.

Therefore, the answer to your first question is no, but we should know more in April. However, the Commission is trying to ensure that whatever money is available is spent in a more focused fashion.

Jamie McGrigor: I have one more question. You mentioned the trilogue discussions, which I understand involve the Council, the Commission and the Parliament. Can you explain the significance of those trilogue discussions in relation to what actually happens at the end of the day?

Ian Duncan: The trilogue discussions bring together the key players. As you will recall, the multi-annual financial framework is broadly co-decided, so it must be signed off by the European Parliament. However, the Parliament does not have the powers to sign off the individual parts of it. The trilogue is an attempt to ensure that negotiations take place to allow the Parliament to be content to sign off the whole thing.

In May and almost certainly through into June, the Parliament will state clearly what things it will not accept. Unless those things are changed, the Parliament will not vote for the whole thing in its plenary session. The Parliament will set the red lines for those negotiations. Some of them may be political and some will be totemic, but the Parliament will try to demonstrate that it is a Parliament with equal powers. There may be a little bit of posturing, but issues that are important to particular countries or regions—whether that is regional broadband or agricultural funding—will become the issues on which the negotiations turn.

As you will recall, the member states are keen to take the view, "We have done it now. Take it or leave it, because we don't want any more meddling with the agreement that we've reached." The Parliament's view is, "Oh no, you haven't. This isn't acceptable to us and we want significant changes to the details." The Commission's job, more or less, is to hold the coats and to allow the Council and the Parliament to fight back and forward. When an agreement is reached, the Commission will draft up the outcome of that. However, the Parliament is determined to ensure that the complexion of the multi-annual financial framework reflects more what it wishes to see rather than what the member states would like to see.

If no agreement is reached, the current settlement will roll over, if you like, for another year. That would have advantages for some but disadvantages for others. For example, those who are likely to experience a significant cut in their agricultural funding would much prefer that this year's budget rolls over, as they would then keep the money. There will be a lot of games played, with member states determined to get the best for their citizens.

The Convener: I want to pick up on Rod Campbell's point about language learning and the multilingualism proposal that will be presented in 2014. Would it be appropriate for the committee to draw Commissioner Vassiliou's attention to our languages inquiry? We have learned quite a few lessons from what we are doing here. If we look at the figures, 82 per cent of 15-year-olds in Sweden are competent in their first foreign language, compared with only 9 per cent in Britain. That is a vast gap. Perhaps we can learn something from that proposal and, in return, offer the benefit of our own measures on language learning.

Jenny Goldsmith has just reminded me that Commissioner Vassiliou will be coming to our languages conference on Europe day in May, so we will be able to have direct conversations with her. That will be valuable.

10:45

On sustainable transport, I note that Aberdeen City Council came top out of three finalists—the others were Toulouse in France and Ljutomer in Slovenia. We are winning awards around the world.

I have a wee question about the Croatian accession and the fact that some countries are losing their European Parliament seats because the seat limit has been set at 751. I was interested to see that Germany will lose three of its 99 seats, bringing its MEPs to 96, which is the maximum allowed by the Lisbon treaty. The number of MEPs that Germany has in relation to the number of MEPs from other countries must directly affect Germany's power in the Parliament.

Ian Duncan: Yes, it does. Because the number of European Parliament seats is capped, any new accession states are allocated seats from the existing quota. Those new seats will therefore be subtracted from existing member states, whose balance of seats will fall. Several countries are losing one MEP because of the Croatian accession.

Capping the number of seats has a name—it is something like degressive proportionality, which means that smaller member states are entitled to a greater share than an equal proportion would allow. For example, on a population basis, Malta

would probably qualify for less than one seat, but in fact it has five seats because of the degressive proportionality principle. Smaller member states are always slightly more represented than the larger member states such as Germany, France and the UK, which have fewer seats because they are at the top end.

Commissioner Vassiliou and her colleagues are very interested in what the committee is doing and will welcome our report. We know that the director general is coming to the event. There will be great merit in launching the report with the commissioner in Brussels. I see no reason why the committee should not do that, as it will be a powerful document. It would be good to aim to do that in the autumn season.

The Convener: Thank you. On your points about accession and seat quotas, if a country that already has MEPs gains independence, would that mean that the issue of a cap has less impact? That is a potentially political question, although I am trying to make it as non-political as possible.

Ian Duncan: I think that I can make my answer non-political. If a member state were to split into different components and the part that stepped away was smaller, the challenge would be whether that smaller new state would be entitled to more MEPs, given that the degressive proportionality principle would kick in. The question then would be whether the original state—which would have had a capped number of MEPs—lost MEPs from its entitlement. I do not know the answer to that. There might be a formula available to calculate it, although it would probably be a fiddly formula.

The Convener: Okay.

Hanzala Malik: I would have thought that if any state or country in the European Union—for example, Scotland, Spain or any other part of Europe—were to split from its original body, it would lose its MEPs initially, until it rejoined the EU and became a member state, and that its quantity of members would not be affected by the fact that it was a part of another country before. It would be an independent nation in its own right, so its population would be taken into account. Malta is an example. Whether other members of the EU would lose MEPs is another issue. They may well do so. There would probably be a cap on the number of MEPs and it would probably work through that system.

Ian Duncan: The challenge for the whole EU is that it is clear that, if it continues to grow, with accession states, and the number of MEPs is capped at 754, everybody will have to take a hit.

Jamie McGrigor: I have a tiny question about that. If a country's population increases, does it get more members?

Ian Duncan: I imagine that it would be entitled to more members if there was a lot of increasing, but I think that a lot of breeding would have to go on over a period. You are right. If there was a huge population migration to a country and its population therefore changed, the formula would be applied, but changes are usually minimal, so the numbers do not move that much.

The Convener: Jamie McGrigor is nodding. That is a hint of his prolific fatherhood. Do you have five children, Jamie?

Jamie McGrigor: Six, actually.

The Convener: I wanted to draw the issue of accession or succession countries to members' attention, given our future work on the referendum bill and aspects of our European position. That is just a wee marker that we will perhaps need to consider that matter so that we cover all the questions.

Hanzala Malik: Yes. Absolutely.

The Convener: Okay. Are members happy to ensure that the relevant committees get a copy of the "Brussels Bulletin"?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: I think that the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee should be made aware of the award to Aberdeen City Council.

Ian Duncan: Yes.

The Convener: That concludes our business today. No, it does not. I am sorry—I am away ahead of myself. We have to spend a bit of time considering our EU priorities report.

European Commission Work Programme

10:52

The Convener: Members have a small report from the Local Government and Regeneration Committee that sets out its EU priorities. Due to an administrative error, that committee's EU priorities were not included in the European and External Relations Committee's published report, and we gave a commitment to come back and deal with the matter. With my rush to get out of the meeting, we nearly forgot about them again. I apologise for that.

I refer members to paper 4 and invite them to comment.

Roderick Campbell: I think that we should just note the paper.

The Convener: Do members agree?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: We will publish the paper with a flourish on the committee's website and draw it to the attention of the Local Government and Regeneration Committee.

Finally, because of where the recess falls and how the parliamentary sitting time for the committee is structured, our next meeting will be on 18 April, which is after the recess. At that meeting, we will hear evidence from the Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages in our languages inquiry. Jenny Goldsmith has provided us all with a huge document to read over the recess, in case members have nothing else to do. That document pulls together all the evidence, and it would be worth while to have perhaps even just a scan through it to get relevant questions for the minister.

I wish you all a restful recess, even if you will be reading a lot.

Jamie McGrigor: Will that meeting start at 8.50 or 9 o'clock?

The Convener: It will start at 8.50.

Hanzala Malik: Could we have a shorter version of the document that has been put together for us for the report?

Ian Duncan: Our plan was that the document will form the basis of the beginning of the report, so you will get a shortened version of it. The document is simply to give members the evidence itself as a fallback. It will be considerably shortened and focused.

The Convener: Okay. I close the meeting.

Meeting closed at 10:54.

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