



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

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**COMMITTEE FOR  
CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

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**OFFICIAL REPORT  
(Hansard)**

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**Indigenous Languages Strategy**

10 December 2009

**NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY**

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Barry McElduff (Chairperson)  
Mr P J Bradley  
Mr Dominic Bradley  
Mr Francie Brolly  
Lord Browne  
Mr Kieran McCarthy  
Mr Raymond McCartney  
Miss Michelle McIlveen  
Mr Ken Robinson

**Witnesses:**

Mr Arthur Scott } Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure  
Mr Donal Moran } Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

**The Chairperson (Mr McElduff):**

Members, we move to the briefing on the indigenous languages strategy. Since the Minister's office has advised that the Minister will not be attending our meeting, officials have been asked to come in his place. Members may note a recent newspaper article in which the Department states that the Minister would be unable to brief the Committee before its 10 December deadline, as he

was still in discussion with education and broadcasting officials. I advise members that that information has not been conveyed to the Committee. However, the Minister referred to it in response to questions on the statement that he made to the House on Tuesday of this week.

I welcome Arthur Scott and Donal Moran from the Department to the meeting.

**Mr Arthur Scott (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure):**

Thank you, Chairman. The Committee will be aware that, originally, the Minister was scheduled to appear before the Committee today. Unfortunately, since he cannot be here he has asked officials to attend in his place.

On 22 October 2009, I, and two other officials from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, provided the Committee with an update on the strategy for indigenous or regional minority languages. At that presentation I outlined the high-level principles on which the strategy would be based and set out the actions that the Minister had taken to progress the language strategy since his appointment.

Since that meeting the Minister has had further discussions with Welsh and Scottish Ministers on language issues. On Thursday 5 November, the Minister held a video conference with Michael Russell, the Scottish Minister for Culture, External Affairs and the Constitution, to discuss language issues; and at the British-Irish Council summit meeting in Jersey on 12 and 13 November 2009, the Minister met Alun Ffred Jones, the Welsh Minister for Heritage, to discuss language issues. Both engagements were very positive, and the Minister intends to pursue them further in the new year.

On 24 November 2009, the Minister requested a meeting with the Minister of Education to discuss the promotion of culture in the classroom and in the Youth Service. The Minister of Education agreed, and dates are to be agreed. The Minister of Culture wishes to see how that discussion could play into the development of the draft language strategy framework.

**Mr McCartney:**

I realise that my question would be better asked of the Minister, but my understanding of the 22

October meeting, and from the Minister's statements, was that he was ready to present his strategy document to the Executive and that it was only because the strategy had not yet gone to the Executive that he was unable to share it with us. Is that your understanding?

**Mr Scott:**

Yes. Subsequently, however, the Minister had further meetings that he found useful, and he wants to reflect on them and incorporate what he heard at them into his thinking.

**Mr McCartney:**

Nevertheless, is it your understanding that the strategy document is complete?

**Mr Scott:**

In view of the further discussions that the Minister had, he would say now that it is not complete and that he wants to add to it and to reflect on the discussions that he has had.

**Mr D Bradley:**

In the Chamber on Tuesday, the Minister of Culture said that the Minister of Education was holding up progress on the strategy. However, you tell us that the Minister of Culture wrote to the Minister of Education only on 24 November 2009, just a week before he made his statement in the House. Surely, the Minister of Culture should have sought a meeting with the Minister of Education much earlier. Has he met any other relevant Executive Ministers?

**Mr Scott:**

In my answer I mentioned the meetings that the Minister had of which I am aware; he may have had other meetings of which I am not aware.

**Mr D Bradley:**

Apart from the Minister of Education, which other Ministers would the Minister of Culture need to meet?

**Mr Donal Moran (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure):**

When the paper on the language strategy goes to the Executive, all the relevant Ministers will have a chance to feed into it. The Minister of Culture has not told officials what other Ministers he specifically wishes to speak to before that happens.

**Mr D Bradley:**

Therefore he may have other ministerial meetings after the meeting with the Minister of Education.

**Mr Moran:**

I am not aware of any such meetings; he has not told me of any.

**Mr Brolly:**

Neither were you aware that he had requested to speak to the Minister of Education only on 24 November.

**Mr Scott:**

We were not aware of that when we last appeared before the Committee.

**Mr McCarthy:**

Have the Irish and British sign languages been considered in discussions on the indigenous languages strategy?

**Mr Moran:**

Both Irish and British sign language are recognised languages in Northern Ireland; it is hoped that the strategy will incorporate them.

**Mr McCarthy:**

That is what I like to hear.



**Mr McCartney:**

Perhaps I did not pick up properly on what you said. On 22 October 2009, was it reported to the Committee that the Minister was ready to submit his paper on the strategy to the Executive?

**Mr Scott:**

My understanding is that the Minister was nearing the stage at which he was prepared to submit the paper to the Executive.

**Mr McCartney:**

That predates the 24 November when he asked for a meeting with the Minister of Education, whom he now says is the obstacle to the strategy paper's being submitted.

**Mr Scott:**

He has had subsequent discussions, and his thinking has changed.

**The Chairperson:**

Am I right in thinking that the paper that will go to the Executive is neither a strategy nor a draft strategy, but, rather, high-level principles that will inform a strategy? Is that the document that has not yet gone to the Executive?

**Mr Scott:**

That is correct.

**Mr D Bradley:**

What is the projected date for the strategy to be written?

**Mr Scott:**

The strategy would follow on from the Executive's agreeing the high-level principles. When we last appeared before the Committee, we outlined an indicative timetable of about 42 weeks.

**Mr D Bradley:**

Forty-two weeks after the high-level principles had been agreed?

**Mr Scott:**

Yes.

**Mr Brolly:**

Was this last-minute desire to speak to the Minister of Education necessary for the formation of the high-level principles behind the strategy? If the Minister of Culture were here, how would he rationalise that for us? Had he his high-level principles all ready only suddenly to realise that he could not finalise them without speaking to the Minister of Education? You will understand our scepticism.

**Mr Scott:**

The Minister of Culture has indicated clearly where he wants to go with the strategy. I can only assume that there was substance in his discussions with other UK Ministers and that he wants to

reflect that substance in the high-level principles.

**Mr Brolly:**

Then why did he say on 22 October that the high-level principles were ready?

**Mr Scott:**

I do not think that I can add further to what I have already told the Committee.

**The Chairperson:**

I thank Mr Scott and Mr Moran for their presentation.

Are members content to note the presentation for now rather than agree on any action that we may take?

*Members indicated assent.*