



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE FOR
CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

Ulster-Scots Academy

9 June 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)
Mr William Irwin (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mrs Brenda Hale
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Gerry Kelly
Mrs Karen McKeivitt
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín
Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

Mr Arthur Scott) Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure
Dr Bill Smith)

The Chairperson:

Good morning. You are very welcome. Can you introduce yourselves to the Committee, explain your roles and make your presentation?

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

Thank you, Chair. I welcome the opportunity to brief the Committee about the Ulster-Scots Academy ministerial advisory group. I am the director of culture in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), and Dr Bill Smith is the chair of the ministerial advisory group.

It might be helpful to set out briefly the background to an Ulster-Scots Academy. The 2003 joint declaration by the British and Irish Governments committed the British Government to take steps to encourage support to be made available to an Ulster-Scots Academy. An economic appraisal commissioned by DCAL considered the options for establishing an academy and concluded in February 2004 that the preferred option was to establish an independent academy affiliated with a university. The 2005 Budget settlement reaffirmed the commitment to support an academy, and funding of around £12 million over a five-year period was announced. The then Minister, David Hanson, established an Ulster-Scots Academy implementation group to consider proposals on the structure and governance of an Ulster-Scots Academy. The subsequent proposals were subject to an equality impact assessment and a public consultation in 2008. The proposals did not find favour with all the interested stakeholders in the Ulster-Scots community.

During 2008, DCAL commissioned a refresh to update the economic appraisal that had been prepared four years earlier and to take account of the comments and concerns that were raised during the consultation process. In 2009, Minister McCausland highlighted an Ulster-Scots Academy as a priority and convened a series of meetings with relevant Ulster-Scots stakeholders to agree a way forward. An interim project steering group was set up in April 2010 to provide the strategic leadership required to lead, manage and oversee the establishment of the proposed academy. It was tasked with agreeing a revised business case for the establishment of an academy and developing key strategies, including interim objectives for the academy around language and literature; history, heritage and culture; and education and research.

Working with the Minister and DCAL officials, the project steering group concluded that there was an immediate need to start work on core projects in the Ulster-Scots sector, the aim being to move away from ad hoc project selection towards developing a portfolio of projects based around distinct work streams within an overall programme. The programme would seek to focus on authentic projects, which would deliver important outputs that would be widely accessible to the sector and elsewhere. The Minister agreed that funds earmarked to finance the academy approach in 2011-12 would be offered under three broad work streams: language and literature; heritage, history and culture; and education and research. The project steering group also identified a number of potential projects for the various work streams, and in 2010-11,

following completion and approval of business cases by the Department, funding was allocated to seven projects.

The project steering group reconsidered the business case for an academy and, in December 2010, concluded that the preferred option was to recommend the establishment of an Ulster-Scots ministerial advisory group. That group is expected to create a holistic development and research strategy for the sector and, through intersectoral working and co-operation, progress the academy approach. This option places emphasis on the strategic outputs of the academy approach and weighs the need for early progress and focusing available spend on new products against existing economic and financial constraints. It is envisaged that the second stage of this approach would be a decision on a more formal dedicated academy organisation when circumstances and finances allow.

The business case gave the Department a clear policy direction on how best to progress the academy concept, and a publicly advertised competition was held in February and March to appoint the chair and members to the ministerial advisory group. That group has been appointed for a four-year period, and consists of eight members and the chair. Three members were ministerial appointments from key stakeholder groups within the Ulster-Scots sector.

Dr Bill Smith (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure):

I am Bill Smith, chair of the ministerial advisory group. Arthur has outlined the background and you will be familiar with our remit and have seen papers relating to our membership and the tasks that I will be talking about. When he announced the establishment of the advisory group in March 2011, the then Minister made a number of points very clear. First, he wanted to see early and sustained progress. There have been a few false dawns and he was determined that we should carry forward our task with momentum. Secondly, he felt that we should build confidence, capacity and credibility in the sector as a means to secure mutual respect and growth at the wider community level. Thirdly, he felt that the language agenda should be carried forward alongside related work on history, heritage and the broader cultural context.

As a group, we have been given two primary tasks: strategy development and project support. We see those two tasks as being intertwined; each will support the other. Lessons from the

projects will help us to identify priorities for the strategy and test it, and, as it evolves, the strategy will help us to set priorities for subsequent funding. We want to aim to ensure that all the projects are making a meaningful contribution towards our strategic objectives.

The strategy will cover all areas of activity in the sector and all key stakeholders will be invited to contribute to formulating it. We will also be contacting those in other sectors who share some of our interests and concerns in relation to language and heritage issues, in particular individuals and agencies in the Irish language and heritage sector.

As Arthur said, the board met for the first time on 12 May. I am pleased to say that we had a very productive and positive first meeting. We agreed on the broad aims and principles that will guide our work and on our future work programme. We have recruited a full-time secretary, who will be joining us in July. Our intention is to promote excellent and useful research by people who are experts in their respective fields; to dig out and disseminate authentic information on the Ulster-Scots tradition — including its international impacts — to make the results as widely accessible as we can; and, generally, to see that some magnificent stories are shared with everyone who wants to hear them, be they citizens and residents, visitors to these shores, creative professionals or academic researchers.

We are committed not only to recording the ways and values of previous generations, but to growing mutual respect between the various traditions in this place, to challenging the myths and misunderstandings that have divided them and to playing our part in building a pluralistic, egalitarian society. The idea of an academy has always been to develop a partnership between the community and academia. That partnership approach, bringing together experts in their chosen fields of research with community activists, is central to the board's vision and is reflected in our membership.

Down the years, the Ulster Scots have contributed enormously to social, cultural and economic development in Ireland, the USA and elsewhere. The advisory group is committed to ensuring that that contribution is properly acknowledged and understood. I want to see a transformation in the standing of the sector. As a board, we will judge our success by the increasing inclusivity, credibility and capacity of the sector; progress in our three work streams;

the quality of our relationships with our partners; and the quality of our community and international connections.

Thank you for your time, interest and, I hope, support.

The Chairperson:

How will the group decide on its priorities planned for the current year?

Mr Scott:

In the run-up to establishing the ministerial advisory group, an interim development plan was developed that looked at a strategy for the sector on the themes of language and literature; culture, heritage, and history; and education and research. There was also a set of principles to ensure that projects selected under those streams would be authentic and deliver the range of outputs that Dr Smith outlined. Each project then has to undergo a proportionate business case and be considered by departmental economists and myself as the sponsor for the body, and resources are then allocated according to how the objectives set out for that particular project are achieved.

The Chairperson:

At what stage will we see the first project allocated funding and starting to do some work?

Mr Scott:

There are already seven projects under way from the project steering group that went through that process. Those were announced by the previous Minister. One example is the minutes of the Antrim ministers' meetings of 1654-58. That is a research project looking at the primary documentation from that time. Another is an Ulster-Scots app, which uses digital technology to bring together the history and sense of place so that people from here or who visit can follow an Ulster-Scots trail.

The ministerial advisory group will now build on that work. Other potential projects were listed but each goes through a rigorous process to ensure that it will be authentic, add value to the sector and is approached in a way that will provide value for money.

The Chairperson:

What steps are being taken to ensure that grass-roots groups are aware of the work that is being done and the projects being carried out?

Mr Scott:

It is at the very early stages but there are people on the ministerial advisory group who want a criterion to be that applicants must provide evidence that they were involved with the grass-roots community. There are people on the advisory group representing those interests, but that will be part of the planned communications. Dr Smith and other members of the advisory group will be out meeting the community to make that connection and ensure that what they are doing and how they are doing it is being explained to the community, and they, too, see value in what is being produced.

The Chairperson:

Those connections are vital to make sure that you bring the community with you.

Mr Scott:

Yes; given the earlier consultation around the whole academy concept, that was one of the concerns. The ministerial advisory group is very much aware that that is an important connection that needs to be worked on and developed.

The Chairperson:

OK, thank you.

Mr D Bradley:

Good morning. How much has been spent to date on establishing the academy?

Mr Scott:

I do not have an exact figure but I will get it and write to the Committee. Do you want that to go right back to the period preceding my appointment?

Mr D Bradley:

Yes.

Mr Scott:

I will gather that information and provide it to the Committee. Going forward, there is a budget of £4 million over the survey period, with £1 million allocated each year to the ministerial advisory group for its programme spend.

Mr D Bradley:

The academy has been quite a long time in the making, and I notice that, even at this stage, there is no certainty that there will be an academy. Your briefing paper states:

“A decision on setting up a formal Academy organisation will be considered at a later stage.”

How much longer will we have to wait until the academy is established?

Mr Scott:

In the project steering group’s assessment of the business case, there was an affordability issue, and, in the financial circumstances that are likely to prevail for this four-year comprehensive spending review period, unless there is significant change, it may not be considered. Nevertheless, it is something that could be considered if there is a change. Of course, another development may arise from the ministerial advisory group’s work on bringing leadership to the sector and co-ordinating its efforts. The nature of what people thought about an academy in the past, as expressed in the business case, could change over time, so there may be other, more affordable options. It is something that will be kept under review as the ministerial advisory group completes its task and depending on how the sector develops.

Dr Smith:

We discussed that at the group’s first meeting. We acknowledged that there is more to an academy than just a physical building and that although it is not possible to get the kind of large building in which everybody could be brought together given the current financial circumstances, we can still do things such as developing the archive, developing specialised research and bringing together the elements that would eventually come into such a building.

Mr D Bradley:

If there is no centre or core, is there not a danger that all those efforts will appear fragmentary?

Dr Smith:

Yes, there is. On the people part of it, we aspire to be the proto-board for the academy. As far as the physical part is concerned, the archive is an important element, comprising the documentation that has been brought together and is currently in storage and relatively inaccessible. Consequently, one of the first projects that we are supporting is the restoration of that collection so that it can be accessed by researchers and others who want to use it.

Mr D Bradley:

How will the archive be accessed? Will you deposit it in an existing library?

Dr Smith:

There are various options. It is currently in storage, and it will probably continue to be held there for the next couple of years. However, there are plans to give it a better physical presence, although we are not yet sure what that presence will be. In addition, key materials will be digitised so that people can access them electronically.

Mr D Bradley:

What are your plans for working in conjunction with the board of Ulster Scots?

Dr Smith:

Do you mean the Ulster-Scots Agency?

Mr D Bradley:

Yes.

Dr Smith:

The agency is represented on the ministerial advisory group. Tom Scott, the chair of the Ulster-Scots Agency board, sits on our group, and we are carrying this forward in connection with the agency. It is important to be very clear about who does what. We are not seeking to trespass on

the agency's territory, and I think that it has a fairly good understanding of what we have been asked to do, with an acknowledgment that that is separate from what it has been asked to do.

Mr Scott:

I would just add that the Ulster-Scots Agency is a North/South body, and it receives direction from and is accountable to the North/South Ministerial Council. As Dr Smith said, it is a partnership, but there is a very clear line on where its accountabilities lie and where it takes direction from.

Mr Hilditch:

I declare an interest as the chair of the project team for the refurbishment of the Andrew Jackson cottage, so I am aware of the robust process that groups can be put through in such situations.

There is a need to identify priorities in relation to the impact on and coherence of the sector, and, perhaps, draw together different themes. That would be beneficial not only to the local, indigenous population but for linking in with the tourism sector. In the past, it has been difficult to establish the impact of some projects; therefore, a more coherent approach and linkage would certainly benefit other sectors.

Mr Scott:

I have been working with the sector for two years. I was seconded to the Ulster-Scots Agency for seven months, and, during my time there and, more recently, in the Department, a number of opportunities arose. In the past, one of the difficulties was that the sector tended to operate in isolation, which is why I see this as an exciting opportunity, particularly with representatives from the key groups coming together in the ministerial advisory group. Through the strategy, we can begin to address some of those issues and produce a better output for the spend in a much more co-ordinated way, which is something that we are looking forward to as we implement the strategy.

Mr Swann:

Thank you very much for your presentation. Dr Smith, has the ministerial advisory group had a chance to brief the new Minister yet? How did you find her direction?

Dr Smith:

We have not spoken to the new Minister yet, but we are in the course of arranging a meeting with her. That is the hands of departmental officials, who I understand are making arrangements with the private office. We are keen to do that.

Mr Scott:

The new Minister is keen to meet Dr Smith, and the private office is arranging that.

Mr Ó hOisín:

Thank you for the presentation. In your preamble, you said that you are looking at best practice in the Irish language sector. What is the nature and extent of that cross-fertilisation and co-operation? When looking at your project delivery here, what examples did you take from the Irish language sector, particularly in relation to language development?

Mr Scott:

The two languages are at very different stages. I was not personally involved in the discussions with the sector; that was Wilfie Hamilton, the person who headed the project steering group. I cannot comment on it from first-hand experience, but I know that the idea was to look at a body that was successful in delivering, because, as I outlined in my answer to a previous question, there were issues in the Ulster-Scots sector as some projects were not considered to be authentic or to be delivering. We are looking at successful delivery in the general context of best practice, examining how others went about similar work to see what could be learned and applied by the ministerial advisory group. I imagine that some of the principles that were established and, as has already been explained, the robust process for selecting projects came from those discussions.

The Chairperson:

Has the secretariat been appointed?

Mr Scott:

Yes. We had an interchange competition, which was a secondment opportunity across the public sector and, following an interview, a suitable candidate will be appointed on 6 July. That one

person at around principal level will act as secretary to the group. The Department has been providing, and will continue to provide, other support such as economic advice and assistance to ensure approval after the completion of business cases. Over time, the need to expand on that will be reviewed. However, for now, the arrangement is for one dedicated full-time resource, and other support is drawn from departmental officials.

The Chairperson:

How does that operate on a day-to-day basis?

Mr Scott:

On a day-to-day basis, the secretary will report to Dr Smith and be directed by him.

The Chairperson:

How often will the group meet?

Mr Scott:

It is envisaged that the group will meet formally once a month. However, other subgroups and subcommittees are working on other projects.

Dr Smith:

We have set up subgroups to deal with each of the three work streams: language and literature; history, heritage and culture; and education. They will meet in between meetings of the core group.

The Chairperson:

That is great. Thank you very much for coming this morning; no doubt we will meet again.