



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

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**COMMITTEE FOR  
CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

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**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
(Hansard)

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**Foras na Gaeilge**

15 September 2011

**NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY**

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

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)  
Mr Dominic Bradley  
Mr David Hilditch  
Mr Michael McGimpsey  
Mrs Karen McKeivitt  
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín  
Mr Pat Sheehan  
Mr Robin Swann

**Witnesses:**

Mr Arthur Scott	)	Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure
Mr Ferdie Mac an Fhailigh	)	Foras na Gaeilge
Mr Éamonn Ó hArgáin	)	

**The Chairperson:**

I invite to the table Arthur Scott, head of the culture division in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL); Ferdie Mac an Fhailigh, chief executive of Foras na Gaeilge; and Éamonn Ó hArgáin, who is director of development services for Foras na Gaelige. You are all very welcome. I believe that you have to leave early, so we will proceed with your opening remarks.

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

Thank you for the opportunity to update the Committee on the outcome of the public consultation on the review of core funding; the progress in making a regulatory impact assessment; and the development of draft funding schemes for consideration by the board of Foras na Gaeilge. Since we last briefed the Committee, significant progress has been made. The public consultation, which ended on 17 June, did not attract a significant number of responses. There were nine responses from individuals and four from the five core-funded bodies located in Northern Ireland. None of the core-funded bodies from the South responded, other than three from local branches of Conradh na Gaeilge.

The consultation invited respondents to consider four main recommendations: a move away from core funding towards a more themed approach; seven funding schemes that would address a particular range of priorities; funding schemes that would be awarded on an all-Ireland basis, with one sole body in charge of each priority, if possible; and the advertising of funding schemes on an open and competitive basis.

In broad terms, those who responded did not support any of those recommendations. As part of the consultation, the consultees were also given an opportunity to make other suggestions or recommendations as to how the funding might be reconfigured in line with the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) decision of December 2009. Some of the recommendations that emerged from the consultation included the need for value for money, which is consistent with the aim of the thematic approach being proposed by Foras na Gaeilge; the need for strategic plans supported by a yearly business plan; and a review of the bodies every five years.

The current proposals include a review of performance each year, with further funding conditional on satisfactory performance being achieved for each scheme. The theme should be closely linked to the 20-year strategy for Irish in the South and adjusted to suit the conditions in the North, bearing in mind the strategy for Irish that the Department will develop. Foras na Gaeilge's statutory remit and considerable experience will ensure the effective promotion and development of the Irish language, North and South.

Minor recommendations for core criteria of the new funding schemes and the operation of

those were also made, and Foras na Gaeilge officials considered and incorporated those, except when the suggestions were anti-competitive. The detailed response by Foras na Gaeilge to the recommendations received is included in the pre-briefing material provided to the Committee.

The regulatory impact assessment has been undertaken, which is in line with the Department's commitment to adopt such an approach as best practice when changing policy or strategy, and work on that is progressing. It is still in draft format and will be finalised and presented to the Minister when she is considering approved schemes from Foras na Gaeilge. The regulatory impact assessment identifies a number of options for achieving a desired change and considers the costs and benefits of each approach. The present draft supports the approach that Foras na Gaeilge proposes.

The advisory committee also met on 6 September, and a further meeting to consider the aims and objectives of the draft funding schemes is being arranged for 22 September. In advance of the meeting, Foras na Gaeilge will also write to the advisory committee providing copies of the draft aims and objectives for each of the proposed funding schemes and inviting comment on those prior to the next meeting of the advisory committee.

The draft schemes will be considered by the board of Foras na Gaeilge at its meeting on 23 September. During that session, the chief executive and director of development from Foras na Gaeilge will be able to set out and discuss the aims and objectives of the proposed draft schemes with the committee. That concludes my opening remarks; I am happy to take questions.

**Mr D Bradley:**

Tá fáilte romhaibh, agus go raibh agaibh as teacht anseo inniu. The core-funded Irish language organisations here argue that the changes that you propose will create difficulties from the point of view of working on an all-Ireland basis because of the different legislative conditions that prevail in the two jurisdictions. What is your response to that?

**Mr Ferdie Mac an Fhailigh (Foras na Gaeilge):**

Go raibh maith agat. We expect that successful applicants will demonstrate to us as part of their application that they will be able to work in both jurisdictions. As you know, I have experience

of working across two jurisdictions in my former life. There are sociolinguistic and legislative differences, but when involved in promoting the language, we take those into account in the approach that we take in each jurisdiction. We expect that one of the criteria that successful applicants will be able to demonstrate is that they can operate while taking into account the sociolinguistic and legislative differences in the two jurisdictions.

**Mr D Bradley:**

So your view is that that is not an insurmountable barrier?

**Mr Mac an Fhailigh:**

Based on my experience, it is not insurmountable.

**Mr D Bradley:**

I think that part of your proposal is that the funding regime will be on a three-year basis. Is that correct?

**Mr Mac an Fhailigh:**

That is the proposal at the moment, yes.

**Mr D Bradley:**

Surely there is a danger of short-termism, if you know what I mean. In my experience, such organisations often have to train the staff whom they hire. That training takes the most part of a year, which means that staff are more effective and efficient in the second and third years. When the funding is finished, those people often have to be let go. There is no certainty of the funding being restored after the three years. Would it not be more sensible to have longer-term funding, perhaps for five years, with reviews after the second and third years?

**Mr Mac an Fhailigh:**

The original proposal was that funding would remain as it is now. At present, funding is awarded annually, not multi-annually, which leads to the problem with new staff that you described. We propose three years initially to enable us to evaluate how the schemes are operating and to work in conjunction with the successful applicants to ensure that the targets, aims and objectives are

being attained, and, if not, to sit down with them and work out any problems. At the moment, our proposal is for three-year funding, which is an improvement on the present system of annual funding.

**Mr D Bradley:**

Would you consider lengthening the funding term?

**Mr Mac an Fhailigh:**

That is a question for the board.

**Mr Éamonn Ó hArgáin (Foras na Gaeilge):**

The 19 schemes that we have in operation at the moment are three-year schemes, and this is the third of those three years. They also operate on an all-Ireland basis, and they work very well for us.

**Mr D Bradley:**

OK. How did you arrive at the recommendations that you promoted in the consultation? Were those based on any type of sociolinguistic research?

**Mr Mac an Fhailigh:**

At present, the 19 core-funded bodies cover those thematic areas of work: advocacy, preschool support, educational support, community support and support for the family. Given that we have some 19 organisations covering those areas, there must be duplication.

We also included something that does not happen at the moment. If someone is sitting in Fivemiletown or Feenagh and wants to attend an Irish class or find out about Irish courses, there is no way simply to click a button, because there is no central database. As part of the advocacy scheme, we want that group to demonstrate that it can draw up an all-island database of the opportunities to learn Irish, the opportunities to take different courses through Irish and a comprehensive list of teach-yourself courses.

**Mr D Bradley:**

Why has Foras na Gaeilge not done that already?

**Mr Mac an Fhailigh:**

It is, in fact, quite difficult because of issues such as SVG.

**Mr D Bradley:**

What is that?

**Mr Mac an Fhailigh:**

It stands for safeguarding vulnerable groups. People teaching classes in any groups to be included on the database would have to be —

**Mr D Bradley:**

Police checked?

**Mr Mac an Fhailigh:**

Yes, they would have to be police checked through Access Northern Ireland and An Garda Síochána in the South. It would also be difficult to keep such a database up to date, and we do not have a full complement of staff at the minute. We produced one two or three years ago.

**Mr D Bradley:**

Is that database on the website?

**Mr Mac an Fhailigh:**

It went up on the website, but we had to take it down because it became out of date. Someone needs to update it fairly regularly; annually is not enough. With classes starting and ending, and circumstances changing in various areas, it needs to be updated every four or five months.

**Mr D Bradley:**

You mentioned the thematic approach and its various parts. Is that based on any sociolinguistic research?

**Mr Mac an Fhailigh:**

It is based, as I said, on ongoing work and internal —

**Mr D Bradley:**

How do you know that those approaches are the most effective?

**Mr Mac an Fhailigh:**

Consider the areas that we listed: the language needs advocacy and support. People must be out there talking about the advantages of Irish in all areas of life. There is a need for language awareness and raising that awareness. Advocacy is recognised as an important area for a minority language.

Learning resources for Irish-medium education are required. A scheme that promotes the use of Irish in the arts is essential, because a language cannot exist unless there are opportunities to use it.

There is also a youth scheme. We are not getting any younger, so we must encourage the use of the language by young people.

A community radio scheme is important in promoting the language and showing it through new technology. It also gives young people the opportunity to learn broadcasting skills. For example, about 30% of the staff currently employed by Newstalk in Dublin came through Raidió na Life, which is a community radio station in Dublin.

Educational support is important, not only for the Irish medium but for teachers of Irish in English-medium schools. Preschool is recognised as having extremely important educational value.

Under our community support scheme, we intend to have officers working in regions throughout the island to promote the language and co-ordinate the ongoing efforts to do so in their regions.

**Mr D Bradley:**

Does your thematic approach match up with those taken in Wales and Scotland to promote their respective languages?

**Mr Mac an Fhailigh:**

We cannot compare like with like in either case, because —

**Mr D Bradley:**

You never can, but —

**Mr Mac an Fhailigh:**

No, but the Welsh Language Board does not provide support for education. We feel that such support is important.

**Mr D Bradley:**

That is probably because it is provided by another source, if you know what I mean.

**Mr Mac an Fhailigh:**

Yes. In Wales, there is a programme similar to the community support programme. The Bòrd na Gàidhlig, the Scottish Language Board, is drawing up a whole new language development policy that is geared mainly at its core areas, which are Scotland's equivalent of the Gaeltacht areas, if you like. However, it hopes to branch out and employ development officers in places such as Glasgow and Edinburgh.

**Mrs McKeivitt:**

To what extent will the feedback from the consultation influence your direction of travel, given that it was largely negative about the proposals?

**Mr Mac an Fhailigh:**

It was largely negative, but we have feedback not only from the consultation but from the two

public information days that we held in Dublin. Given that the salaries and administration costs in the organisations are rising annually and our budget is shrinking, the status quo is not sustainable. We will to get to a stage at which we will basically be paying people for nothing, because there will be no activities going on.

From the sector and the consultation came the recommendation that we amalgamate the advocacy and the lifelong learning scheme, the database of classes and opportunities. We have done that. Strong arguments were made for amalgamating family support and community support, so we will propose that to our board. The proposals represent a major change from what happens currently, so I am not really surprised that, in the main, the response was negative. We have been in discussion with the sector about changes since April 2008. There is no viable alternative, or, at least, no viable alternative has been put to us. Basically, people proposed to keep the status quo.

**Mr D Bradley:**

One of your themes is community radio. Is that right?

**Mr Mac an Fhailigh:**

Yes.

**Mr D Bradley:**

Radio is a long-established aspect of the media; it is almost a traditional form of media. Why did you not put more emphasis on the more modern forms of media such as social media, online blogging, and so forth, or even on television and print journalism?

**Mr Mac an Fhailigh:**

Television is extremely expensive. We have RTÉ, TG4 and the broadcast fund, so we did not go near television because, given the limits of our budget, it is a very expensive medium. As regards apps, the board recently adopted an Internet strategy for young people. We have included that in our youth scheme, in which there will be a proposal for the development and provision of apps for mobile phones, and so on.

Our newspaper and magazine publications committee is reviewing our whole investment in the area of print media. That includes Internet and hard copy magazines and newspapers. The committee will come to the board with proposals and a policy.

**Mr D Bradley:**

You are the sponsoring body of ‘Gaelscéal’, in that you fund it. What is Foras na Gaeilge’s assessment of the progress made by that newspaper? It has been in existence for about a year and a half, is that right?

**Mr Ó hArgáin:**

Yes, it began in March 2010. We are very happy with the paper’s content and the way in which people have taken to it. However, we are not altogether happy with the current level of sales. That said, there is a general problem with circulation and advertising for all types of newspapers and magazines, not just those in the Irish language.

**Mr D Bradley:**

What are its current sales?

**Mr Ó hArgáin:**

They are in and around 2,000. I do not have the exact figures, but they are way below what we expected. Having said that, it is recognised that, in the past two or three years, there has been an ongoing problem for newspapers, not just with sales but with advertising, and so on, and ‘Gaelscéal’ is no exception.

**Mr D Bradley:**

The newspaper formerly funded by Foras na Gaeilge, ‘Foinse’, has now appeared as a supplement in the ‘Irish Independent’ every Wednesday. Are you involved in that project in any shape or form?

**Mr Mac an Fhailigh:**

No.

**Mr D Bradley:**

It seems to be making its own success. I do not know how many papers the ‘Irish Independent’ sells on a Wednesday, but ‘Foinse’ seems to be getting an extremely wide circulation.

**Mr Ó hArgáin:**

It is, because it is a free newspaper within a national newspaper. The board’s view at the time was that there should be a minimum of one Irish-language weekly newspaper on sale to enhance the status of Irish. ‘Foinse’ is inserted in the ‘Irish Independent’ newspaper every Wednesday, so it is difficult to estimate its readership. Sunday papers come with all sorts of magazines, inserts, and so on, and one wonders sometimes how many of those are read. It is hard to estimate the readership of something that comes free with a Sunday or daily newspaper. That said, it is nice to see ‘Foinse’ on a Wednesday, as well as ‘Gaelscéal’.

The same applies to magazines. The Irish-language magazines such as ‘Comhar’, ‘Feasta’ and ‘An tUltach’ never appear alongside glossy magazines on newspaper stands or in shops, but they are very important in the promotion of the Irish language.

**Mr Mac an Fhailigh:**

A major problem with Irish-language newspaper sales is distribution, because the distribution companies want to carry big numbers. When I buy my Gaelscéal on a Saturday morning in Omagh, I know that there are three copies in the shop, and I know who buys them.

In addition, when a newspaper is stocked, as Éamonn was saying, we want it to be placed where it can be seen. However, if it is not going to walk out the door, it will not be given priority. It is like the book business: Eason wants publications that will basically walk out the door on their own. So there is a problem when it comes to what people will stock.

**The Chairperson:**

I am conscious of the time. Therefore, in conclusion, will you clarify whether the regulatory impact assessment has been completed?

**Mr Scott:**

It is being worked on.

**The Chairperson:**

Will that impact on the decisions to be made next week?

**Mr Scott:**

Yes, as I outlined in my opening remarks, the Minister will be presented with the regulatory impact assessment. She will have to sign off on that and decide on the proposals that come forward from the Foras na Gaeilge board. In arriving at her decision, she will also take account of the public consultation and the responses to that. Of course, it has to go through the North/South machinery as well, so, apart from our Minister, the Minister for Arts, Heritage and Gaeltacht Affairs and the two Finance Ministers will have to consider it. Finally, the NSMC will have to consider it.

**Mr D Bradley:**

May I ask one final question?

**The Chairperson:**

As long as it is really short.

**Mr D Bradley:**

What is the timescale for all that jiggery-pokery?

**Mr Scott:**

Do you mean the North/South procedures?

**Mr D Bradley:**

All those bureaucratic machinations.

**Mr Scott:**

As I said in my opening remarks, the Foras na Gaeilge board is scheduled to consider the

proposals on 23 September. I cannot pre-empt the timescale for the board's consideration. The Department will wait for the board's response before officials consider it, after which it will be presented to the Minister, so I do not know.

**Mr Mac an Fhailigh:**

How long is a piece of string? We have to bring it to the board for its input, after which it has to go the Departments and then to the Finance Departments. So in a way, it is in the hands of the gods.

**Mr Scott:**

Assuming that everyone is content and has agreed to it, I think it fair to say to the Committee that the intention is for officials to bring it to the next sectoral meeting of the language body, which is scheduled for 12 October. That is the time frame.

**The Chairperson:**

Thank you very much for your attendance today.