

**British-Irish Council Indigenous, Minority and Lesser Used Languages
Worksector – Legislation Seminar**

Speaking Notes

Welcome

It is a great pleasure to welcome you here today.

I know many of you have travelled far which shows your
commitment to our indigenous languages

So, firstly, I would like to take this opportunity to warmly
welcome you all to Edinburgh – and of course that is extended
to those of you live and work here!

General

This is an important gathering as it offers us an opportunity to
discuss a range of matters that affect us all. We all have a rich
linguistic tradition. This adds to our cultural life and I am glad
that there is a place to include languages in our discussion.

Our minority and indigenous languages are important to all of us. I am sure that many of the public don't realise that there are 10 indigenous languages spoken today in the British Isles and believe that we are a nation of monoglots.

This is far from the case. People throughout these islands are using indigenous languages other than English to communicate with friends, family, teachers, colleagues and public services. That they are in the minority doesn't mean that they don't exist.

The good news is that it is difficult for people in Scotland to ignore our languages. They are all around us and, at some stage, every Scot will have to notice this. It is in the names of our hills and the names of our whiskies. It is in our song and our poetry, our history, our place-names and our politics.

In fact, I suspect that in what is supposed to be an increasingly monoglot 21st century there are actually more opportunities to see, hear and read about our languages now, in Scotland (and beyond) than at any time in the recent past. It is an undeniable element in our heritage and it is right that our languages should be seen and heard.

I grew up in the Borders region of Scotland. There was no Gaelic in my family but I knew from an early age that I wanted to learn the language. I went on to incorporate both Gaelic and Scots in to my education and you don't need to convince me of the value of what you are doing.

As an advocate for Scotland's languages and a Minister, I have a duty to try to ensure that the correct framework is in place to ensure our languages are protected and supported.

Our languages are not only unique they are an essential part of our rich and diverse cultural life. They are also important to our communities and economies.

We must ensure we take the necessary and urgent steps to secure their place in living language communities. To support this we must give thought to how we strengthen and grow these communities.

The Scottish Government has made its position very clear on this matter.

We have a strong programme of ambitious commitments for Gaelic and Scots and we are making good and steady progress with these.

Gaelic

When we were considering the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act during its progress through the Scottish Parliament we looked to learn from other Administrations including Wales and Ireland. I hope that will continue to learn from each other.

The Act forged the way for us in Scotland to establish Bòrd na Gàidhlig and give the Bord the power to require public bodies to produce Gaelic Language Plans.

We in The Scottish Government have produced our own Gaelic Language Plan which sets out the steps we will take to raise awareness and status of Gaelic and to increase its use.

I am confident that these Gaelic plans have led to an increase in the status and use of Gaelic across Scotland, and that we will see further progress as more plans are prepared and delivered.

I believe this status is reflected in the latest Census figures in Scotland. Without being complacent, these show that the efforts to support Gaelic is working. It is encouraging and I was pleased, like many I am sure, to see an increase in Gaelic speakers under the age of 20, with the biggest rise in the categories for 5-14.

The role of education is recognised in other countries too; almost a quarter of school pupils in Wales are educated through the medium of Welsh, Northern Ireland has 30 Irish-medium schools and the Isle of Man has a Manx-medium school which I have visited more than once.

Here in Scotland we have seen continued growth and demand for Gaelic schools and Units which led us in Government to set up the Gaelic Schools Capital Fund to support Local Authorities.

With 12 per cent more pupils entering primary one of Gaelic Medium Schools this year, this consistent rise in numbers of those aged under 20 shows excellent progress and I am full of hope for the future.

This expansion is happening across the country and only this week I announced £500k to support Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (Western Isles Council to those from outwith Scotland) in their plans to develop Gaelic education.

There is still a lot of work to do to halt and reverse the decline in the overall numbers of Gaelic speakers, but this is a clear sign that our targeted investment is paying off and that our strategy of introducing children to the language as early as possible to make it an integral part of their life, their schooling and the way they communicate is also working.

Scots

In addition to what we are doing for Gaelic, we in the Scottish Government is also supporting the Scots language. Scots is key to Scotland's heritage and culture as well as being a living language.

We were the first Scottish Government to host a conference on the language in 2009 and took responsibility to fund both the Scots Language Centre and the Scots Language Dictionaries directly.

We have carried out an audit and research on public attitudes to the language and set up a Ministerial Working Group on Scots.

We are working with a variety of bodies to ensure that the recommendations from the Working Group, included a network of coordinators, are brought to fruition which I am confident will improve the status of Scots, raise its profile and usage in everyday life.

As the man who broke the rules many years ago by writing all my university exams in Scots – lucky I was studying Scottish Literature and not Physics – I want to press ahead with all these efforts.

This year saw the results of the first ever Census question on Scots. Again, I am pleased to see that the efforts to support the language showed that 1.5m of the population can speak Scots.

Future

As you are aware, these are still early days for us in Scotland. It is only 50 years since people were being belted for speaking Gaelic in the playground. We look to you in other member administrations for ideas and support in moving our agenda forward.

The Scottish Government is to consider a Scots Language Policy, Guidance on Gaelic Education and the possibility of legislation on Parental Rights to Gaelic Education and I am sure that we can learn from those gathered here today.

This is a very important gathering. We have officials, academics and practitioners and a theme that is common to all of our interests and working lives is the use of legislation to promote minority or lesser-used languages.

We are at different stages with this but we have certainly learned from the steps that other administrations have taken and my hope is that this will continue.

I am positive that our collaborative working will see good progress and further successes in the years to come.

I thank you for listening and I trust you will find the Seminar's presentations and the opportunities that this setting gives you to discuss the issues of mutual interest around language legislation worthwhile.

I look forward to seeing the report of your discussions and wish you well.

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