



COMMITTEE FOR CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Foras na Gaeilge

9 June 2011

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
Mr Michael McGimpsey
Mrs Karen McKeivitt
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín
Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

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

The Chairperson:

I welcome Mr Arthur Scott, director of culture in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, and Mr Ferdie Mac an Fhailigh, the chief executive of Foras na Gaeilge. Please make your presentation to the Committee, which we will follow up with questions.

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

Thank you for the opportunity to update the Committee on Foras na Gaeilge's progress towards implementing the recommendations of the review of core funding. The main recommendation from the review, which was endorsed by the North/South Ministerial Council, was to move away from allocating funding to 19 core groups annually to an open competitive process through which funding would be awarded in relation to the number of discrete schemes. The North/South Ministerial

Council approved the findings of the review and tasked Foras na Gaeilge with implementing its recommendations to ensure more effective support for the Irish language and value for money.

To address delay in implementing the review's recommendations and representations by some in the sector about the level and nature of engagement on the proposed changes, the sponsor Departments established a steering group to review progress towards the implementation of the review. The steering group meets regularly and comprises senior officials from the sponsor Departments and the chairperson and chief executive of Foras na Gaeilge.

To ensure that the sector was fully engaged in the change process, the two Departments also instructed Foras na Gaeilge to form an advisory group comprising the chief executive, officials from both Departments and the 19 core groups. The purpose of the group is to provide a forum to consider the draft schemes and associated criteria. The group builds on the existing arrangements with the sector. In addition, two public workshops involving the sector sharing, discussing and receiving feedback from the emerging proposals have been held by the chief executive, Ferdie Mac an Fhailigh.

A public consultation in Northern Ireland about the proposed changes is due to finish on 14 June. Ten schemes have been proposed, covering the strategic areas of community radio, arts, community empowerment, family support, youth, advocacy and research, education; educational support sub-themes; early years educational support; teaching materials and lifelong learning. Applications will be invited from all those who are interested in delivering the schemes and will be assessed using agreed criteria. The application that best meets the agreed criteria for each scheme will be awarded the funding determined for that scheme. Foras na Gaeilge has been engaged with the 19 core groups and the sector to determine both the schemes and the associated criteria.

Pending satisfactory progress towards the development and agreement of new schemes, the North/South Ministerial Council has approved interim funding through existing core-funding arrangements until 31 December 2011. A progress report will be made to the North/South Ministerial Council when it next meets in language sector format, which is scheduled for 7 July.

Mr Ferdie Mac an Fhailigh (Foras na Gaeilge):

The criteria for the schemes, which have been drawn up by the development committee, are still in draft form, pending the public consultation process and the submissions from the core-funded bodies, which are to be made by the end of this month. Those criteria will be brought to the development committee, which will make proposals to the board.

The Chairperson:

Are there any differences between the first consultation, which went out in September, and the current consultation?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh:

The current consultation is much more formal than the one that went out in September, but we have been consulting the sector about this matter since April 2008. At that stage, we recognised that the current system was unsustainable. Our budget is decreasing annually, so although core funding is falling, salary costs are rising every year. Eventually, there will be no funding for activities; it will all go on salaries and administration.

The Chairperson:

There was criticism of the narrowness of the window of consultation in September. However, from what you say, there was no real surprise that this consultation would come and there was a lead-in time to it.

Mr Scott:

I referred to the process of engagement. Foras na Gaelige has been engaged with the sector from about 2008, discussing those changes. The consultation that was issued in March probably contains much more detail and is much more formal, in that it is a full public consultation. The engagement that Foras was involved in from 2008 and towards the back end of 2009 was restricted to the sector; it is not as formal as the public consultation. There is more detail on how that engagement has progressed, on the proposed schemes and on the criteria. That was something that the two Departments were anxious about.

That was our response. I referred to it in my opening remarks about the criticism from some in the sector about the nature and level of engagement that there had been with Foras. We now have a full, formal, public consultation, a steering group where the two sponsor Departments are fully engaged with Foras in how the review and change process is progressing, the advisory group that provides a forum for the sharing of ideas and also public workshops. The two sponsor Departments believe that they have done all they can to engage fully and to seek the views of the sector, and those in the wider community who are interested in the Irish language, on this change process in order to determine a way forward.

The Chairperson:

Therefore you are satisfied that the concerns in the presentations that the previous Committee had received and the criticisms that were noted and which we have just heard from our researcher have been addressed.

Mr Scott:

The two sponsor Departments are satisfied that they have put in place a procedure that ensures effective engagement. There are still some in the sector who are unhappy with the proposals. However, I would be disappointed if they were unhappy with the efforts that the two Departments and Foras na Gaelige have made to engage with them to address their concerns. We cannot make them like the proposed changes, but they have had every opportunity to feed in their concerns and views. The two sponsor Departments and the North/South Ministers will be interested in what emerges from that and what changes may be incorporated or considered as a result of that process.

Mr D Bradley:

Maidin mhaith daoibh; tá fáilte romhaibh. Go raibh maith agaibh as teacht lenár gcuid ceisteanna a fhreagairt. Good morning, and thank you very much for coming to answer our questions. If memory serves me correctly, this came out of what was called "An Bord Snip", the exercise by the previous Irish Government to ensure efficiencies across all Departments.

Mr Mac an Fhailigh:

No; this has been under discussion for some years. In April 2008, I met all the organisations and recommended that they set up co-operation committees. Anyone who looked at our budget and saw how the economy was going would recognise that there would have to be savings somewhere and that something would have to give. One of those co-operation committees met once, so this has been an ongoing process.

Mr D Bradley:

Perhaps "An Bord Snip" gave it a forward push.

Mr Mac an Fhailigh:

I am sorry, but I do not think so. There was no mention of Foras na Gaelige, cross-border bodies or the Irish language sector in the report of "An Bord Snip".

Mr Scott:

There is a particular issue at stake. The review is about ensuring that the bulk of the financial assistance provided by Foras na Gaelige reaches the Irish-language community rather than being consumed by salaries and wages. Where there are salary costs of 59% and administrative costs of 15%, value for money is not delivered. That is not sustainable.

Mr D Bradley:

There is, I suppose, in some of the areas that you tabulated — advocacy, education and so on — a proliferation of organisations. I note from the briefing paper that Foras na Gaelige spends about 42% of its annual budget on administration and the Ulster-Scots Agency about 60%. Is that a very high level of expenditure on administration for an agency or arm's-length body?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh:

Administration covers our salary costs; it also covers the new dictionary project that we are working on. We have IT contracts and so on that we have to meet. I could not tell you what the figure is off the top of my head, but I can check.

Mr D Bradley:

These are the figures that we have been given by the Assembly's Research and Information Service. It seems to me that too much is spent on administration by Foras naGaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency. The more you spend on administration, the less is available for the practical work that needs to be done.

However, I will move on. Perhaps you can help us to imagine the practical out-workings of your proposals. For example, I see that you have Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge, Conradh na Gaeilge, Pobal, Iontaobhas Ultach and Comhaltas Uladh all involved in advocacy work. If the proposals for the funding stream for advocacy went through, would one of those organisations take up the advocacy role, or would funding continue to be spread across all of them. What is the likely outcome?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh:

Our vision is that one organisation will take forward the role of advocacy across the island.

Mr D Bradley:

Will it be an existing organisation or a new one?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh:

It will be an open competition. We have a closed shop for 19 organisations for almost 40% of the funding that Foras na Gaeilge receives from the sponsor Department. Our vision is that there will be one organisation to carry out advocacy across the island. At present, there are four or five organisations involved in that. There is duplication there.

Mr Scott:

There will be nothing to preclude bodies that are involved in the consideration of a merger from putting in a composite application, but it will have to demonstrate value for money and show that it meets the needs. It will be a question of tailoring the service to ensure that it can deliver on an all-island basis.

Mr Mac an Fhailigh:

Four of those organisations have come together and intend to amalgamate under the new schemes.

Mr D Bradley:

How many of those organisations have multi-function roles? Comhaltas Uladh, for instance, deals with education and the running of Gaeltacht colleges as well as advocacy. How is it possible for the multi-function organisations to combine under one heading, which is only one aspect of their work?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh:

The proposed schemes are still in draft form. It will be up to organisations to decide their main area of work and to apply under the proposed scheme in that area, because the various organisations do different areas of work. You have to ask two questions. Is there efficiency in that? Would it be better for one organisation to deal with one aspect?

Mr D Bradley:

One of the points raised by the groups in the North is that they work in a different legislative, socio-linguistic and developmental environment from those in the South. Could a single all-Ireland organisation for advocacy deal with the nuances between conditions North and South?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh:

We expect an organisation to demonstrate that it could. I speak as one who, in a former life, worked for one of those organisations across two jurisdictions. When you are involved in advocacy, the

conditions North and South are different, but you adapt your approach to suit the legislative and social nuances.

Mr D Bradley:

Some organisations suggest that a thematic approach to funding would endanger core staff in organisations and might cause a turnover of staff, cause many of the key skills and experience that people have built up in those areas to be lost and create a lack of continuity in the work. How do you respond to that?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh:

Initially, we had proposed one-year schemes; however, taking into account our consultations with the organisations and others, we now propose three-year schemes. Funding will cover the essential costs of running a scheme, including staff, administration and activities. The idea is to improve the service to the Irish-language community and to ensure better value for money. Primarily, it is about providing a better service for the Irish-language community and those interested in Irish.

Mr D Bradley:

Recently, there were proposals to change Údarás na Gaeltachta, and it was mentioned that Foras na Gaeilge might be involved. What is the latest on that?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh:

Last Friday, the Minister of State in the Dublin Government announced at a meeting of Údarás na Gaeltachta in Falcarragh that the proposed new Údarás na Gaeilge agus na Gaeltachta would no longer happen, that Údarás na Gaeltachta would remain as it is, and that Foras na Gaeilge would continue to fulfil its remit across the island.

Mr D Bradley:

Not under the auspices of Údarás?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh:

No. People had talked about that, but I think that it was pie in the sky, because Foras na Gaeilge was set up under an international agreement and there is legislation in both jurisdictions setting up the organisation.

Mr D Bradley:

Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Scott:

May I pick up a point regarding administrative costs? One of the challenges that bodies that give out grants face is ensuring effective governance of the moneys that are awarded so that they are used for the appropriate purpose and that the various conditions in government accounting are applied.

You made the distinction between the costs that Foras na Gaeilge provided and those of the Ulster-Scots Agency. The Ulster-Scots Agency issues many low-value grants to very small groups. There is quite an onerous checking regime for that, but we have asked the Ulster-Scots Agency to carry out a review of the financial assistance scheme and to look at whether grants can be streamlined to reduce costs. Both organisations have to achieve the efficiency savings agreed by the North/South Ministerial Council. The Department expects that there will be improvements in those costs. However, there are challenges in giving out grants to third bodies.

Mr D Bradley:

Will the savings go back into activities?

Mr Scott:

The savings, if they are made and retained in the overall budget, will be available for the respective boards to reallocate.

Mr G Kelly:

Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. Tá fáilte romhaibh. I always get a bit nervous when I see that there is some reason not to have an equality impact assessment (EQIA) and, especially, not to have a regulatory impact assessment (RIA); there are very clear guidelines that that should happen. Why did it not?

Mr Scott:

The proposals were screened for an EQIA, and one was not considered necessary.

Mr G Kelly:

Tell me why it was not necessary.

Mr Mac an Fhailigh:

The funding will remain for the community, but it will be spent in a different way. It will now become an open competition as opposed to the current closed shop in which only 19 organisations can apply for what is, this year, 38% of Foras na Gaeilge's funding from the Departments.

Mr G Kelly:

If the money allocated for schemes is not spent, is it handed back? At the moment, if you have core funding for 19 projects, you could almost tell me now how much they will spend and whether they will spend it all, because much of it, as you pointed out, goes on administration and salaries. Supposing that two thirds of the funding is spent, does the other third disappear?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh:

No; the other third will be reallocated in our budget.

Mr G Kelly:

Therefore it does not leave your budget; it does not go back to the Department or the Executive.

Mr Mac an Fhailigh:

So long as it is spent by 31 December.

Mr G Kelly:

That is what I am asking. Perhaps I am not making myself clear. If you do not spend the money —

Mr Mac an Fhailigh:

We will reallocate it to our youth summer camp or Irish in the community schemes.

Mr G Kelly:

Therefore you are happy for the money to move into scheme-orientated activity. My worry, which reflects the concern of many of those involved — and we are all for value for money — is that once you allocate the money to schemes, a bidding process begins. As we have seen in other Departments, it can take a long time to get the funding and you end up dealing with gap funding and all that is associated with it.

You said that the schemes were for three years, so a three-year guarantee is needed. Can you guarantee that the money that is allocated to the schemes will be used in full for them?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh:

Yes.

Mr G Kelly:

Let me return to the issue of EQIAs and RIAs. There is a process by which a Minister or Department, although almost always a Department, decides that there should be an EQIA. If people's livelihoods will be substantially affected, both the EQIA and the RIA process should have been conducted.

It says in the Committee guidance that all Departments must comply with the RIA process when considering new proposals or amendments to policy proposals. These are amendments to existing policy proposals, are they not? The guidance goes further and states that such proposals include those that reduce costs on business or others as well as those that increase them. There appears to be no evidence not to have an RIA. I wonder how the decision was made not to have one. Was it made willy-nilly? Did someone say that they did not want to do it and that was that, or do you have counter-criteria that give a good reason not to carry out an RIA for core-funded bodies that are, frankly, in a panic over what will happen?

Mr Scott:

The equality impact assessment, which was carried out by Foras na Gaeilge, did not highlight any adverse impacts on section 75 groups. The public consultation is designed to seek views about the impacts of those schemes, and the two Departments, in conjunction with Foras na Gaeilge, will consider whether any of the proposals need to be adjusted in that context. I do not think that a regulatory impact assessment was considered, but I will have to check that.

Mr G Kelly:

Was one not even considered? It is stated policy to have one, as far as I can see.

Mr Scott:

I am not aware of the considerations around the regulatory impact assessment; I will have to check that and come back to the Committee.

Mr G Kelly:

It would be good if we could get that checked.

Mr Ó hOisín:

Go raibh maith agaibh; tá fáilte romhaibh. Some of my concerns have been addressed. I would like to tease out the leeway for some of the core-funded projects to be tailored to fit a thematic approach. How do you see that working out, particularly post-consultation?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh:

In the strategic areas for the schemes we have looked at the needs of the community and the work of the organisations that come under the remit of Foras na Gaeilge. Those areas have been chosen as priorities by the development committee and the board, and they include community empowerment and advocacy, which some groups are involved in; groups are also involved in different areas of education. We have looked at the work and what we feel to be the priority areas, and we are tailoring the schemes to meet those.

Mr Ó hOisín:

Therefore the current core-funded projects that do not quite fit, for want of a better word, have from now until December to fit in somehow with your new or additional themes. Is that the case?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh:

We have been instructed by the North/South Language Body that core funding will end on 31 December. The schemes are a way of addressing the work that needs to be done with and for the Irish-language community. There is nothing in the areas of the schemes that is not being carried out at present.

Mr Ó hOisín:

Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs McKeivitt:

I want to repeat the question that I asked earlier. Will an RIA be conducted?

Mr Scott:

We will check and get back to the Committee. I am not sure. I inherited this project halfway through its existence, so I am not sure whether that was addressed and considered unnecessary. However, I will check that, and what needs to be done will be done.

Mrs McKeivitt:

Will there be any element of core funding to cover basic core costs such as administration and core posts?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh:

Under the schemes, all essential costs to deliver the project will be met, and that covers salaries, administration costs, rent, lights, phone — the normal costs for running an organisation to carry out the scheme.

Mrs McKeivitt:

Why were those seven themes chosen, and why were tourism and business through Irish not included?

Mr Mac an Fhailigh:

These areas are being addressed by the 19 core-funded organisations. Foras na Gaeilge has a number of business schemes promoting Irish in business. To be honest, tourism was never really discussed with regard to the promotion of the language. We view these as schemes to continue to promote the Irish language and to provide services for the Irish-language community and for the English-language community with an interest in Irish.

The Chairperson:

Thank you for your presentation and for taking the time to answer questions.