

Gordon Cameron¹ , Iain Caimbeul¹ , Conchúr Ó Giollagáin¹ 

A Delicate Balancing Act: Making Decisions for Scottish Gaelic

Abstract

Research on language policy and planning (LPP) decision making for Gaelic in Scotland attempted to map out the major preoccupations and identify blindspots held by those overseeing policy construction and implementation. Interviews with elite players in LPP development elicited key qualitative data which was benchmarked against core issues identified in a survey of participants in a putative Scottish Gaelic socioeconomy and social economy. The research uncovered discrepancies between official aspiration and socioeconomic reality, between benefits for individuals and help for communities, or between specific job sectors and the wider economy. More concerning, it becomes apparent that elite players are unclear on language revitalisation goals. While they understand that more needs to be done for the home and community, they lack strategic direction as to how to achieve this.

Keywords

Scottish Gaelic, decision making, language policy, revitalisation

Corresponding author

Gordon Cameron, Language Sciences Institute, University of the Highlands and Islands, Inverness, United Kingdom; **e-mail**: gordon.cameron@uhi.ac.uk;

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-7723-5168>

¹ Language Sciences Institute, University of the Highlands and Islands, Inverness, United Kingdom.

1. Introduction

This article examines philosophies and opinions regarding language policy decision making for Gaelic in Scotland, with reference to the positions expressed by two distinct groups. Firstly, the elite leadership in the socioeconomic and sociocultural realms pertaining to the resilience of Gaelic, and of the *Gàidhealtachd*. Secondly, those participating in the Gaelic socioeconomic marketplace who should theoretically benefit from those policy decisions if the language has a market value, and if language competency can be regarded as an asset to be exchanged in some social or socioeconomic realm (HIE 2014; Grin 2003; Hogan-Brun 2017, xii).

If Gaelic language and culture are societal assets, then, to flourish, the socioeconomic market conditions to enable this are required. Perceptions of how far language policy has gone towards facilitating these conditions forms the core of this article. Decision makers are in the unenviable position of balancing a range of competing interests against a suite of societal pressures, and there has been little in the way of language policy evaluation to identify what has succeeded for Gaelic (Jones et al. 2016 is arguably the sole example) and its speakers, and to what degree.

Furthermore, this article examines whether there is a dichotomy between the need to present coherent messaging on how Gaelic development can best be supported, and what private conversations reveal about how effective or realistic current revitalisation strategies and trajectories are judged to be.

1.1 Brief Overview of Gaelic Language in Scotland

The Gaelic language, in the Scottish civic consciousness, often remains associated with *A' Ghàidhealtachd*, which may be understood to refer to a notional “culture-region” (McLeod 2020, 11) most often associated with Scotland’s Highlands and Islands, in the north and north-west of the country. The term, and its geography, has been explored in historical context (Ó Baoill 1974; Withers 1988, 40; MacInnes 1989; Dawson 1998), and has been problematised and critiqued (Murdoch 1995; MacCaluim & McLeod 2001) as alternative scholarly perspectives enter the debate around minority language revitalisation and reversing language shift in post-modernity. The north-western Highlands and Islands are still regarded as the core Gaelic-speaking region by the public (Bechhofer & McCrone 2014), despite “presentist evasion of previous

social speaker-group reality and identity” (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020, 387). Gaelic speaker numbers in Scotland declined with accelerating rapidity during the 20th century, and speaker densities eroded not only in the so-called traditional redoubt of the language (Withers 1984; 1988; 1989), but also in the nation’s most populous cities such as Glasgow, which was formerly home to perhaps around 20,000 speakers (MacKenzie 1987; Kidd 2007).

In the period since the reopening of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, Gaelic has received support from across the political spectrum. The Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 set in train a number of actions which have raised the profile of the language nationally, amid attempts to reverse an ongoing decline in speaker (and user) numbers. *Bòrd na Gàidhlig* was established as the principal public body responsible for promoting Gaelic development, and for providing advice to Scottish Government Ministers. The figures from the 2022 Census for Scotland report that Gaelic speaker numbers rose by around 12,000 in the country over the previous decade to reach 69,701 (1.3% of the population) – individuals who are, almost exclusively, Gaelic-English bilinguals. A further 46,404 individuals had some other Gaelic skill (reading, writing, understanding) meaning 131,161 individuals (2.5% of the Scottish resident population) had at least some Gaelic skill. UNESCO ranks Scottish Gaelic as definitely endangered.

1.2 Sociocultural, Demographic and Theoretical Background

In considering the anthropology of policy (e.g. Shore et al. 2011), we may reflect on the function of power dynamics and the broader socio-economic and political systems in which policies sit, and on the connection of different sites and scales (micro/local, meso/regional, macro/national, and even supranational) through which policy processes are played out. It can also be instructive to consider how localised policy manifestations act as a lens for perceiving longer term changes in the organisational structures which shape our existences. In this sense, examining the outlook of policy practitioners in the Gaelic sphere can be instructive for understanding the stratification of influence and power at play in shaping the pathway for Gaelic over the next generation. While parliamentary-political cycles are relatively short, for example, the focus on Gaelic-medium education (GME) (e.g. Dunmore 2018a; 2018b; NicLeòid 2018) and supporting new speakers (McLeod 2018, 86; McLeod & O’Rourke 2015) as a means of generating numbers is

(or ought to be) a *longue durée* endeavour if learners are to be fully supported on their journeys to language use beyond the confines of statutory or adult education. It is also important to consider that the majority of the Gaelic-using population, many of whom reside in the *Gàidhealtachd*, is a substantial client group (NicLeòid 2022) requiring long-term policy support, and that this client group has a fundamental collective importance to the future sustainability of the Gaelic mission.

The last four decades have seen what some scholars and commentators have branded a renaissance for Gaelic in Scotland (Rogerson & Gloyer 1995; Macdonald 1997; 1999; McLeod 2001a), even a renaissance without planning (McLeod 2002a), despite otherwise concerning societal trends such as demolingistic decline in the *Gàidhealtachd* (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020). Others have pointed to recent initiatives which have fostered engagement outwith the Scottish polity, noting positive trends in online engagement through language learning apps, or contemporary developments in regions such as Nova Scotia in Canada to which Gaelic speakers had emigrated in large numbers during the 18th and 19th centuries, embedding their language in their new settings (Dunmore 2020; 2021).

Gaelic faces contemporary challenges including (but not restricted to) a weakening in intergenerational or inter-familial language transmission, and a demolingistic decline which indicates that the proportion of Gaelic speakers living inside and outside the *Gàidhealtachd* will become more or less equal, for the first time on record.¹ Also worth noting are sub-optimal learning pathways and opportunities for potential “new speakers” across the country (MacLeod 2018; Carty 2018), and wider societal difficulties such as responding to the cost of living crisis which make competing demands on public resources.

The Scottish Government expresses its overt support for Gaelic largely through provision for Gaelic education, broadcasting, organisational language planning and more symbolic representations (through performance, culture and attempts to bolster the linguistic landscape). Despite this apparently positive promotion, several dichotomous positions expressed by respondents to recent research indicate fundamental weaknesses and blind spots in the policy architecture, which will be explored later.

Recent community-/societally-centred work on facing sociolinguistic challenges has proposed that change is needed, and that agency to make and guide change should be handed to community interests rather than to government and its public bodies (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020; Ó Giollagáin & Caimbeul 2021; Lewin 2023). The discourse around which

approach(es) could best ameliorate the widely-acknowledged challenges facing the Gaelic vernacular community, and wider networks in Scotland and beyond, has sparked some measure of controversy (McLeod et al. 2022; Armstrong et al. 2022). The Scottish public, however, is broadly ambivalent (McLeod et al. 2022, 87): while many Gaels or Gaelic-speakers identify as Scottish, few Scots would identify as or with Gaels (Bechhofer & McCrone 2014).

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The striking increase in efforts to portray Gaelic as a positive public asset for Scotland and its people indicates the presentational aspect of contemporary Gaelic language policy and planning. Such presentation-ism manifests itself in several key strands:

- Portraying a positive image of progress and rejecting a “death discourse” (McEwen-Fujita 2006), or downplaying critiques or views which may be perceived as damaging to the language’s “brand”. This stems from concerns that deviation from positive portrayals of Gaelic’s prospects fuels a self-fulfilling spiral of negativity which erodes the morale of activists and speakers (Bostock 1997; Dunmore 2021). After Ó Giollagáin et al. (2020) presented stark evidence of the demolingistic decline in Gaelic’s so-called heartland areas, those authors were criticised (McLeod et al. 2022) over sensationalised media headlines which predicted the imminent death of the language. Although this criticism ought to have been levelled more directly at the media outlets responsible, perhaps, it was predicated on the fear that overly negative reporting would affect the potential ideological discourses required to move the curious to learn the language, and to encourage those already on learning journeys to continue. These ideological concerns, however, may obfuscate the primary academic responsibility which is engaging with evidence. Media discourse around anti-Gaelic campaigning and claims that support is a waste of resources have been explored by MacKinnon (2012) such that the language inhabits a space between portrayal as a success story of revitalisation and growth that may not necessarily be true, or its existence being sustained by subsidy, which is also false.
- The representation of Gaelic in Scotland’s socio-cultural linguistic landscape (e.g. Puzey 2010), which has the dual functions of the symbolic and the informational (Landry & Bourhis 1997). It may indicate that people who identify in some way with the Gaelic language are more often represented in Scotland’s social spaces, however, the social realities of such language communities or clusters may not necessarily be adequately catered for, even when this sym-

- bolic representation suggests that Gaelic is valued as an element in a postmodernist bilingual or multilingual repertoire (see Moriarty (2014) on Irish linguistic landscapes). The politics of repertoire have little need of a functioning collective of minority language speakers.
- Advancement of a homogenising national outlook complementing a language policy and planning architecture in which “it makes more sense to think in terms of a single, albeit substantially differentiated Gaelic community in which there are myriad interconnections of different kinds” (McLeod et al. 2022, 92). The presentation of Gaelic as a language for the whole of Scotland is an admirable aspiration, which cannot yet be truly realised due to funding and workforce constraints as much as the demolinguistic challenges, and which serves to deflect attention from reality. This means that a one-size-fits-all approach is followed, for example, in a broadly acultural Gaelic educational curriculum, rather than truly planning for the very different challenges facing different clusters and communities of Gaelic speakers and users in their specific contexts. Consequently, a somewhat *laissez-faire* attitude emerges in designing policy which lacks impact.
 - The ongoing commitment to, and funding of, organisational language planning (Bòrd na Gàidhlig 2021) with limited evidence of its efficacy (Jones et al. 2016). Such efforts have a value in promoting visibility and diversity within organisations and in both internal and public-facing operational spheres, however, they appear more symbolic in that it is hard to ascertain how frequently they bring about behavioural or cultural change for an organisation and its potential stakeholders (Dunbar 2018).

Emerging from this framework of the importance of the message are questions relating to policy prioritisation and to whether public-facing messaging is supported in private by elite players.

2. Gaelic Development Background and Political Climate

When the first National Gaelic Language Plan (NGLP) was published to cover the period 2007–2012, the Highlands and Islands were identified as a key priority, particularly because the Gaelic speaker density in *Na h-Eileanan Siar* (the Western Isles) stood at 72% in 2001.² The islands were perceived to offer a resource which could be both bolstered to be

sustainable in the region and to act as a foundation for development efforts elsewhere, even if there were criticisms that *Comhairle nan Eilean Siar* (Western Isles Council) had not fully operationalised or optimised all potential aspects of its own bilingual policy (McLeod et al. 2022), with the implication that failing to rigorously pursue fully bilingual opportunities had contributed to a declining density of Gaelic speakers there.³

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By 2018, observers had identified an unacknowledged, or perhaps covert, policy shift which emphasised a move towards attracting new speakers to the language, either through Gaelic-medium education for children (full immersion in ostensibly Gaelic-only settings, or opportunities for learners to study specific subjects through Gaelic-medium) or by targeting adult learners, a trajectory imbued with controversy (McLeod 2018, 86). That such a change has come about was made clear when Bòrd na Gàidhlig observed in the third NGLP: “Gaelic education is central to the ambition of Gaelic growth [...]. Our clear view is that Gaelic education makes an important contribution to the aim of increasing the numbers of those speaking, using and learning the language” (Bòrd na Gàidhlig 2018, 32). This is a similar policy position held in relation to other minoritised languages, such as Upper Sorbian (Dołowy-Rybińska & Ratajczak 2019), Basque (Ortega et al. 2015) or Welsh (Welsh Assembly 2017). Peace-Hughes (2022, 338) suggests recent contemporary studies indicate “a belief that the current GME model in Scotland effectively achieves its goals, and, therefore, any amendments to policy and/or practice are not warranted.” In line with wider criticisms of workforce planning issues, there are concerns over teacher support and resourcing sufficient to deliver the Scottish Government’s 1+2 approach to learning modern languages in the classroom which effectively leads to Gaelic being somewhat “hidden in the wider Scottish curriculum” (Peace-Hughes 2022, 339). Effectively, Scottish Gaelic revitalisation efforts now rely on creating a virtuous and self-sustaining circle of language recruitment via access to statutory education or adult learning pathways, with little evaluation to date of (likely) efficacy (Dunmore 2018a; 2018b); on services provided under the auspices of organisational language plans; and on goodwill generated by increased visibility and symbolic representations of Gaelic on a broader, national scale. In a broader vein, McLeod et al. (2022) observe that policy may function more efficiently if Gaelic language planning is reinforced, although this is challenging in an era of constrained public finances if greater resources for increased staffing is envisaged.

2.1 GLPP Tensions and Contentions

It is in this Gaelic language policy and planning (GLPP) atmosphere that tensions have emerged in the debate on Gaelic's future, and how to secure it. Gaelic has previously assumed a "historic role as the vernacular of a regionally concentrated ethnolinguistic minority" (Lewin 2023, 155). The greatest Gaelic-speaker density, by local authority area, remains in *Na h-Eileanan Siar*, although, in 2022, Gaelic speakers there are now in the minority for the first time in centuries, at 45%. There are important numbers of speakers in major cities such as Glasgow and Edinburgh, although their distribution in these urban areas remains around the national average (a little over 1%).

The declining position of Gaelic in rural Highland and Island Scotland where speaker densities have long been greater than in cities, has led some scholars and campaign groups to advocate for greater efforts to support speakers in these areas, suggesting a shift in emphasis from planning for public agencies and increased visibility or Gaelic-language service equivalence towards provision aimed at strengthening community settings where Gaelic interactions are likely to be more prevalent or to occur (Ó Giollagain et al. 2020). It is argued that LPP which fails to adequately address the root causes of language loss, fails to support first-language speaker communities and, thus, fails to sustain a minoritised language's social salience, corresponds to "language promotion without language protection" (Ó Curnáin & Ó Giollagáin 2023). A counter argument posits, among other factors, that geographic framings of issues related to Gaelic's societal survival are unhelpful, given the Scottish Government position that Gaelic is a language for all, and fail to account for learners' and promotional efforts elsewhere (McLeod et al. 2022).

The suggestion of recognising some *Gàidhealtachd* of language-culture region officially has been criticised as detrimental to Gaelic speakers in low-density areas (Dunbar 2016). The Scottish Languages Act 2025 identifies the potential for designation of Areas of linguistic significance, however the criteria are vague and could be applied in the very broadest set of circumstances (Scottish Languages Act 2025). As Gaelic revitalisation and development efforts have been funded by central government, a putative Gaelic economy has emerged although its scale and impact are contested (see, e.g. McLeod 2001b; 2002b; Chalmers 2019; Chalmers & Danson 2009; 2012; HIE 2014). Economies of scale, infrastructural considerations and numerous other socioeconomic factors have led to the sectoral development of a cadre of jobs, often well-

remunerated, in Scotland's cities and urban Central Belt, a growth not yet matched in rural Scotland, which is a further area of contention (see Table 5 in Annex 1 for an overview of how this issue emerges in recent doctoral research). This suggests that Gaelic language skills are more readily rewarded in low-density speaker areas today, while Gaelic may have been seen as a less desirable skill in the past when seeking employment in urban Scotland.

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3. Methodology

The research methodology employed for the project was three-fold: data mining of the literature; a corpus of semi-structured interviews with elite decision makers (27 individuals); and a survey of 134 participants in Gaelic's purported socioeconomic marketplace (see Tables 1–4 in Annex 1 for information on sector, location, age, gender and background information on research participants).⁴ This approach allowed for the triangulation of results from the fieldwork with the existing, contemporary academic literature on Gaelic's position in Scotland and the debates surrounding the language. It further meant that the findings could be benchmarked against the main precepts and ambitions outlined in the existing NGLP, the primary language planning framework available against which to assess perceived progress.⁵ All relevant Gaelic LPP materials were examined (National Language Plans, public agency language plans, sector-specific or voluntary group language plans, if available), and the growing body of academic work on Gaelic and minority language policy and planning from other polities was assessed to establish theoretical structure. Extensive scoping exercises were carried out on the two potential respondent pools to enable opinion gathering from a variety of actors operating across the full socioeconomic spectrum which impacts language issues in Scotland: media, education, governance, language development, social and economic development, and so on. This was intended to offer a wide geographic scope but to eliminate risks of institutional bias.

Data was gathered concurrently with both the interviews and the survey conducted in a seven-month block during 2019. After transcribing the interview corpus, thematic analysis was carried out to identify core issues of importance. Aggregated responses were compiled from survey participants, from which key priorities emerged. It was then possible to triangulate the findings from these two datasets with the contemporary literature, benchmarking the most salient examples of shared importance against the NGLP.

4. Thematic Findings

The research dataset provided an ethnographic picture of elite conceptions of Gaelic policy, as well as quantitative results provided by participants in Gaelic's purported socioeconomy which broadly encompasses the creative industries and media, education and language development (see HIE (2014) for estimates of Gaelic's annual economic contribution). What is provided below is a snapshot of a very rich dataset which offers many nuanced perspectives (Cameron 2023). This offered valuable opportunities for triangulating findings with other relevant studies. National Gaelic policy was viewed as effective in supporting the use of Gaelic in respondents' own occupational sectors or areas of responsibility (55.6% (strongly) agreeing), but levels of agreement in terms of respondents' local areas and regions, or nationally, fell to 35.6% and 42% respectively. This sequence of survey responses indicates a positive sectoral impact but levels of use beyond workplace domains are not seen to be as supported.

4.1 Narrow Sectoral Significance of Language Policy and Planning

Perhaps given the relatively restricted sectoral nature of the Gaelic socioeconomy, it is little surprise that elites reflected the findings above as successful policy outcomes for specific sectors. What is more concerning is that elites admit that they generally only acknowledge policy relating to their own sector. Of the interview cohort, none could offer more than a superficial parsing of the then-current third National Gaelic Language Plan (NGLP) or its aims, which suggests a concerning lack of coherence or messaging.

On enabling the use of Gaelic in more informal domains, the responses from those theoretically embedded in a Gaelic socioeconomy were less positive than would be hoped. 11.3% (strongly) agreed that use in the home is supported by current national policy, and 18% (strongly) agreed that use in community settings is enabled. These are two pivotal, yet, alarming, findings if Gaelic is to be revitalised as imagined. It is in the media and educational settings that national Gaelic policy is seen to positively contribute to use of the language. Respectively, 73.6% and 72.9% (strongly) agree that this area of policy enables use of Gaelic. Given the discrepancy between home/community use and educational use, there is unease that educational use does not extend beyond its own silo. There is also a live concern that inadequate workforce

planning, and the challenges of recruiting, training and retaining teaching staff, is a major obstacle to delivering Gaelic education at a national scale which can match parental desire for provision. In terms of media, this may be regarded as an arms-length engagement, or a more passive consumption of content rather than actively enabling the end user's own use (see Willis & Uribe-Jongbloed 2024), despite Gaelic media production receiving major funding from government amid debates about its GLPP contribution to corpus planning, use planning, learner uptake, etc. (Milligan et al. 2011; Willis 2024).⁶

One of the more intriguing results expressed in the socioeconomic survey was that current policy initiatives do not adequately promote the use of Gaelic in the workplace (18% (strongly) agree versus 49.6% (strongly) disagree), even although Gaelic policy is seen to boost sectors. This perhaps illustrates a perceived gap between use and visibility, between instrumentality and image. It also raises legitimate concerns about attempts to position Gaelic-related employment as a viable career option, if socioeconomic opportunities are limited to specific sectors.

The elite interview corpus indicated that current language policy is of limited or negligible benefit at the micro level, with opinions such as "I'm not sure how it impacts, or how the plans impact at a community level ..." (C5), and "I think it's nonsense making national plans for public bodies. They should carry out action on the ground in the communities where it (Gaelic) still is [...] I have lost confidence in the future as regards Gaelic" (C12) being commonplace among interviewees.⁷

The demographic and demolinguistic pressures affecting the traditionally strongest Gaelic-speaking communities are clearly understood as critical burdens on maintenance of Gaelic in community settings and on any hope that language shift can be countered.

I suppose it's just the demographic in terms of the older population and the sort of gap in the middle ... but there are good signs in terms of children entering Gaelic-medium education, that's at record levels. But it's like a bath, isn't it, where the tap isn't going as fast as the drain and there's a lot more action needed, I feel, to support the language (C27).

This is a clear and concerning acknowledgment that numbers generated by statutory education are not, currently, coming close to matching the demolinguistic loss of highly competent speakers in the older age cohorts. In essence, policy is not producing a desired outcome quickly enough. Although Gaelic-medium education is projected as benefitting

from policy, there is a private, rarely externalised disquiet with its outcomes. Most interviewees felt that it is under-resourced, inefficient and does not produce the requisite cohort of speakers. Direct criticism of GME, however, is uncommon, and is felt to be like attacking a “sacred cow” of Gaelic revitalisation (C22).

4.2 Opaque View of Policy’s Revitalisation Goals

The educational stuff [is] generally going well, but I think the wider stuff, it’s really: ‘What is the policy? How do you fix it?’ And we probably need to look at other countries. [...] We talk about supporting Gaelic in the community [...] how do we actually do that, what are the things that we can do? (C27).

One of the key elements emerging from interviews with leadership was a clear lack of understanding as to the Gaelic revitalisation end goal, which could also be a blindspot of deliberate omission. Education is broadly seen to be enabled, but wider societal problems related to Gaelic (policy) are not being adequately addressed. Elite interviewees suggested that there is a lack of clarity about what is being done, and to what purpose, with repeated references to not being able to identify what the target should be for 2040 and beyond. The first NGLP contained a sequence of identifiable targets which would be aimed at for the 2021–2041 period.⁸ These targets were subsequently dropped from later NGLPs. Interviewee C9 felt, therefore, that current Gaelic decision making is so vague that no future pathway is being defined. There are further concerns that uncertain longer-term planning obscures current needs:

Some were talking about policies, plans. ‘Oh, we might do this, we might do that.’ I just said: ‘Forget it! Tell me what you’re going to do next week, tomorrow, this year. I don’t care what you’re thinking of doing in five years, that’s no use at all. There are far too many of these people around (C24).

Coupled with an opaque outline of revitalisation goals, there is a sense of impatience with current policy aspiration, which is not seen to meet contemporary or future challenges. Among the policy class, there was a clash between acknowledging the necessity of operating within defined political, economic and statutory frameworks to bring about incremental change, and the desire for more rapid progress. As one interviewee phrased it, drawing on Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*, seeking innovative ways

of disruption is needed as a catalyst to move beyond the glacial pace of government-supported efforts to reverse language shift.

4.3 Concerns Regarding Equivalence in Gaelic-Language Service Provision

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Especially if you're looking for a service, it's the service itself that you want and to a large extent it doesn't matter to you which language it's in. But there was a feeling that people ought to have the option of those services in Gaelic, well, again, it's fine as an aspiration but practically, I don't know if it's useful (C5).

There was a sense among some elite interviewees that the focus on organisational language planning attempts to solve a problem that didn't need to exist rather than focusing on other more urgent priorities which may have less obvious or readily attainable solutions. The desire to provide societal equivalence in accessing services through Gaelic (instead of, or as well as, English) has been pursued vigorously over the previous two decades. In theory, providing a Gaelic communicative platform with public agencies is valuable, however, people do not broadly communicate with those agencies unless it is a necessity. Further, if the agencies are not set up or resourced to communicate immediately, dialogue is stalled and mediated through translators. Funding could, instead, be directed more appropriately to avenues of communication which could be utilised i.e. cultural hubs in urban areas or for the support of established communities and their networks in areas of higher-density speaker coverage.

Intriguingly, one senior professional made the following observation, which appears to confirm why an organisational approach is being followed:

I slip towards being a Gramscian, in trying to create an alternative hegemony that has strong appeal, and that people want it rather than come up with interventions, even whether there is money or whatever they do ... I'm sceptical about heavy levels of intervention in home and community (C26).

If (some in) the elite cadre are sceptical about home and community interventions, this perhaps points to the adoption of covert policy positions related to attracting new speakers with little or no previous connection to Gaelic by presenting (skills) acquisition as something appeal-

ing, and by presenting cultural assets as attractive through output from the creative industries, education and more symbolic representations. The question, raised repeatedly by interviewees, however, remains: is this enough to produce competent speakers who can help to reproduce networks of users?

The dichotomy of the focus on institutional planning as advanced through *Bòrd na Gàidhlig* versus the concerns of the leadership which itself helps to perpetuate the contemporary direction of Gaelic LPP is laid bare in the following comments:

I'm not convinced Gaelic Language Plans work. I think that's become too formalised, I think there is maybe a ... I think that scares more people off, certainly some people who have some Gaelic. [...] I don't think the policy world really touches the real communities and I don't know how you change that (C21).

I mean, who asked the Gaelic community: 'What could we do if we had a national Gaelic agency?' Would they have said: 'Well, you've got to go through a very formal, academic language planning methodology and ram that down the throats of as many public sector organisations as you can'? (C10).

Both elite interviewees (i.e. C4 above on the family and home being the key sociolinguistic battleground) and survey participants (only 18% strongly agreeing that home use is supported by current national language policy) indicate that they are aware that there is a deficit between policy aspiration and policy outcome on home and community use of Gaelic, however, there is a reluctance to criticise official bodies in public, with the positive messaging about Gaelic revitalisation regarded as more important than accepting reality. Interviewee C9, on shaping a future pathway, simply told the researcher: "We can't handle the truth."

5. Commentary

What emerges from the dataset are beliefs about a language and its speakers that can shape a range of assumptions and reactions related to altering the circumstances in which those speakers can interact with and through their language.

Huws (2018, 302) identifies two key factors which cause non-use of a language: "a reduction in the critical mass of speakers, and the alienating effect of linguistic normalization." This lack of a critical mass prevents, as Huws observes, unmarked language use. Further, it reduces

informal opportunities to put skills into practice, a particular issue in areas of low speaker numbers and densities. It is here that the paradox of Gaelic visibility through legislation and the perceived lack of Gaelic use being enabled resides.

The formalising and organisational bent of much language planning for Gaelic means that Gaelic's revitalisation is imbued with a sense of linguistic insecurity (see the first presentationalism point noted above) which stems from the state's attempts to legislate for how individuals and groups interact with service providers, such as Local Authorities or public agencies. This linguistic insecurity often manifests as a reluctance to engage with such service provision opportunities as exist, so the state's obvious focus on formalised interaction is, perhaps counter-intuitively, ineffectual, especially if under-resourced. Evas and Cunliffe (2017) suggest a behavioural economics approach could mitigate a lack of uptake of e-services in Welsh, for example, and a similar approach may be beneficial for increasing use of Gaelic services.

If there is a lack of uptake, there is less of an imperative for service providers to hire, train or upskill individuals who can provide minority language services to (potential) users. This is a very clear issue in relation to Gaelic because fewer than 25% of public agencies with approved Gaelic language plans have a named or identified Gaelic officer.⁹

Low, or declining, take-up of services is also evident in the education sector, partly due to persistent failure of demand (not enough teachers in post, lack of availability of provision even when there is sufficient parental demand), which means systemic leakage of potential language users from the GME or learner systems. This is most common between preschool and primary one, during the transition from primary school to secondary school, and when making subject choices in the years leading up to the attainment of formal school qualifications. Effectively, a bureaucratic utopianism prioritises a risk-laden investment on creating service providers and the resources with which to cater to potential service users. There is little evidence that this is desirable rather than fulfilling a legislative requirement.

Consequently, such initiatives do not appear to facilitate increasing the use of Gaelic, except in a limited range of domains or scenarios. Alternatively, shifting policy towards more communal or familial opportunities could seal up some of the systemic leakage points noted above. This would have the advantage of not being seen to privilege the rural over the urban or vice-versa, as operationalisation would focus on actions which could also occur in networked settings. After all, as one elite respondent noted, it is in the family setting that the ultimate language

battle is being waged on a daily, persistent basis when one is trying to reverse language shift. In other words, *gemeinschaft*, rather than *gesellschaft*, domains may be more challenging to access but offer sturdier foundations on which to build viable progress.

Since the passing of the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005, there has been notable investment in organisational language planning, due to attempts to ensure identical (or near-equivalent) service provision in Gaelic and English. This means that informal domains continue to fight for attention and resourcing. A shift in focus towards planning for social domains may be necessary, such that more emphasis is placed on home and community where there can be direct inputs into familial language use. C21 suggested that as the Scottish Government has chosen the direction of pursuing numerical growth, for example through Gaelic-medium or adult learner education:

... you're only going to get growth in the cities because the numbers don't exist in the Islands or the Highlands. [...] And then if you think, well, in terms of the development in the cities, if you don't have the lifeblood, if you don't have that being fed, are you not just fighting a losing battle? Which we aren't. There are parts of Scotland that you'll never get to embrace Gaelic, but then why should they? (C21).

It has been suggested (McLeod 2022, 358) that the archetype for familial or intergenerational transmission of a (minoritised) language is an extended, traditional family

with tight, deeply established social linkages, and ideally in a territorially bounded rural setting. Such assumptions are particularly firmly rooted in relation to regional or minority languages ... and often incorporate essentialist, frequently conservative perspectives that appear to assume substantial social and cultural stasis.

This view is problematic in that it implies that regionalist or micro-localised interventions are constrained by outlooks that eschew progress. It also inadvertently undermines the notion of constructing localised network contexts in urban areas. A more accurate view, perhaps, may be that the commitment to speaking a minoritised language, which has been undergoing further minoritisation, suggests a more open-minded, nonconformist stance in a globalised and globalising society. This commitment mirrors that identified by MacLeod (2022) in relation to family language practice in the Western Isles.

6. Conclusions

Among other scholars, Dunmore (2018b, 74) has observed that “it is clear that the goal of strengthening Gaelic language socialisation in the home and community needs to be prioritised alongside developing GME as a policy objective”. This is replicated in the findings referred to here in which GME policy is viewed as a qualified success, while home and community settings are pinpointed as priority areas in need of greater future investment. In reality, these findings and views dovetail with recent work on the Language Dynamics in Society (LanDS) concept which has grown out of the “significant discrepancies and divergence between empirical findings and policy aspirations inherent in formal provision for minority speakers and their communities” (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2025, 26–27).

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The elites acknowledge, too, in concerns raised privately that the efficacy of GME as a sociolinguistic or sociocultural base on which to build new, resilient networks or communities is questionable, and indicate that the Gaelic policy environment needs to consider changing course. However, Bòrd na Gàidhlig itself appears reluctant to change course or focus, detailing in a briefing paper ahead of a Scottish Government committee session in 2021 that it “supports development across Scotland primarily through Gaelic Language Plans” (Bòrd na Gàidhlig 2021).

MacLeod’s (2022) micro-level study on the Isle of Lewis indicates that it is possible for individuals and families to re-establish familial Gaelic practice, utilising the existing communal and societal networks around them, often with no direct support or intervention from external agencies. This idea of personal agency may not necessarily extend to those individuals themselves becoming competent speakers, indeed this may not necessarily have been desired, but the proximal infrastructure afforded their efforts by the presence and accessibility of grandparents, wider family members, friends and colleagues offers a range of opportunities. As MacLeod (2022, 69) observes:

the experiences of this group could be relatively easily supported and replicated in threatened ‘heartland’ areas by informing and supporting grandparents, and the extended family and community in general, to take an active role in supporting a Gaelic language choice and repairing the damaged intergenerational transmission.

Numbers, however, do not necessarily equate to competence or regular use. Policymakers, then, perhaps ought to pay closer attention to

the possibilities afforded by even low-level interventions in areas of low population but greater Gaelic speaker densities, where societal reinforcement could, still, be accessed. This offers an alternative route to potential success and stabilisation, and, ultimately, more holistic growth. The key is language socialisation opportunities which may not always be available in settings around the national average of Gaelic-speaker density (around 1.3%), however, as per MacLeod's (2022) observations on the family, if home and community (networks) are given a greater prioritisation there is a possibility of strengthening use and transmission in a range of circumstances. What is very unlikely to work, however, is the type of *laissez-faire* non-interventionism noted above, which contributes to the societal demise of Gaelic, while interventionism for sectoral interests continues. As per Ó Giollagáin et al. (2020, 420–421), this leads to political and public bodies facing the “language-policy irony that they are promoting policy aspirations for a language which has very few vernacular speaker-groups or a recognisable communal presence in society”.

In the Welsh context, community-centred solutions featuring more holistic approaches to housing availability and economic stability in more rural, higher-density Welsh-speaking areas are being examined along with recommendations on setting funding support to community groups to support medium-term ambitions (Chartered Institute of Housing Cymru, 2023; Commission for Welsh-speaking Communities, 2024). Social cohesion, identified in the Welsh context as pivotal to future aspirations, is recognised as a key concept in revitalisation approaches such as Sami language nests which aim to socialise (young) individuals through communal societal processes (Äärelä-Vihriälä 2024; cf. Ó Giollagáin et al. 2025).

Dunmore (2021) contrasts the more hopeful outlook of new speakers of Gaelic in Nova Scotia, where intergenerational transmission has all but died out, and where native speaker communities had long since disappeared, with the observation that “the decline of Gaelic communities in Scotland continues apace in the language’s heartland areas, in spite of official policy to bolster second language acquisition elsewhere.” This, despite repeated uses of the terminology of revival and success, allows Scotland’s traditional Gaelic communities to be painted as unsalvageable and to prepare the way for revitalisation to be associated with alternative populations, and with lowered horizons of what constitutes success. In essence, policy advisors audit their own performance. McLeod (2022, 359–360) observes:

Successful language acquisition (whether in linguistic terms in relation to ‘accuracy’ or in social terms in relation to confidence and actual productive use) is more likely if there are multiple, diverse inputs – but this will be impracticable or even impossible in cases of advanced language shift.

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Some critiques seem not to consider that in traditional language communities or settings, those multiple, diverse inputs could (still) be obtained with targeted support meeting localised needs. It is challenging to envisage how such inputs could be developed quickly enough to make a real impact in user numbers in areas of low speaker densities which calls into question the reliance in contemporary Gaelic language policy of seeking new recruits at the likely expense of communities with greater densities. Greater and expanded institutional language planning with clear objectives can be important. The elite themselves, however, indicate a clear understanding that targeted interventions supporting family units of all constructions, the home and community settings have been less realised. Achieving a more nuanced balance of these philosophical positions, if this becomes a focus, may ultimately prove the more beneficial pathway.

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Annex 1

Table 1 to 5 (own data): details on location, age, gender and sectoral affiliation in relation to elite interviewees and sectoral survey respondents.

Table 1: Location and sectoral affiliation of elite interviewees (N=27). Sectors have been aggregated for anonymity. Some interviewees were based in one location but had a job which had a nationwide remit.

Location	Sector	Participants
Highland/Gàidhealtachd	Education	5
	Gaelic Development & Public Sector	12
	Media & Private Sector	4
Lowland/Galltachd	Education	2
	Gaelic Development & Public Sector	2
	Media & Private Sector	2

Table 2: Gender and age range of elite interviewees (N=27). Age categories have been aggregated for anonymity

Age group	Number of interviewees	% of Interviewees By Age Group	Female interviewees	Male interviewees
25–44	6	22	5	1
45–54	7	26	4	3
55–64	11	41	3	8
65+	3	11	1	2

Table 3: Location of sectoral survey respondents, by Local Authority (LA), by number and percentage (N=134). Scotland has 32 Local Authorities (also known as Council Areas), but responses were only received from 15 LAs

Local Authority Area	Number of Responses	Responses (% by Local Authority)	Response Language (Gaelic only/English only/Both)
Highland	50	37.3	Both
Na h-Eileanan Siar	31	23.1	Both
Glasgow City	22	16.4	Both
City of Edinburgh	13	9.7	Both
Argyll & Bute	5	3.7	Both
Aberdeen City	2	1.5	Both
East Dunbartonshire	2	1.5	English only
North Lanarkshire	2	1.5	English only
Dumfries & Galloway	1	0.75	Gaelic only
East Ayrshire	1	0.75	English only
East Renfrewshire	1	0.75	Gaelic only
North Ayrshire	1	0.75	English only
Perth & Kinross	1	0.75	Gaelic only
Renfrewshire	1	0.75	Gaelic only
Stirling	1	0.75	English only

Table 4: Gender and age of sectoral survey respondents (N=134)

Gender	Age Range						Age not answered	Totals
	18–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	65+		
Female	3	21	13	9	13	5	0	64
Male	2	12	11	17	18	4	0	64

Prefer not to say	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	4
Prefer to self-describe	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
No answer	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	2
Totals	5	34	26	28	31	9	1	134

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Table 5: Earnings by location reported by respondents to sectoral survey (N=134). For accuracy, this calculation uses historic average exchange rates (GBP:EUR) for the period in which the research was undertaken

Location	Under £12,500 (Under €14,500)	£12,500– £24,999 (€14,500– €28,500)	£25,000– £44,999 (€28,500– €51,300)	£45,000+ (€51,300+)
Urban Lowlands/ Central Belt	37.5%	25%	35.9%	50%
Urban Highlands	12.5%	4.2%	29.5%	22.7%
Rural Highlands and Islands (<i>Gàidhealtachd</i>)	50%	70.8%	34.6%	27.3%

Notes

- ¹ At heart, much recent debate centres on whether to pursue greater support for the “vernacular community” or the Gaelic “speaker group” existing in the *Gàidhealtachd* (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020), or to bolster networks (from localised to international) more widely even if speaker densities may be much lower (McLeod et al. 2022; Drilseach 2022).
- ² 72% of people aged three and over in the *Comhairle nan Eilean Siar* authority area (geographically, Scotland’s Western Isles) could speak Gaelic in 2001. For Skye and Lochalsh, the proportion was 43% (Registrar General for Scotland 2005). By 2022, the Western Isles had declined to 45% Gaelic-speaking (Watson 2024).
- ³ *Comhairle nan Eilean Siar* represents all islands in the chain from Lewis in the north to Vatersay in the south. In 1975, the islands were brought together under one modern authority for the first time following the Local Government (Scotland) Act.
- ⁴ The research was granted ethical approval by the University of the Highlands and Islands’ Research Ethics Committee in May 2018 [OL-ETH AB-1,357] for elite interviewees; and in January 2019 [OL-ETH AB-563] for a sectoral economy survey.

- ⁵ The fourth NGLP was published in 2023.
- ⁶ In response to a petition for increased government funding of Gaelic language matters, the Scottish Government confirmed: “In 2024–25, of the £25.6 million of resource funding in the Scottish Government’s resource budget for Gaelic, around half of this budget, £12.6 million, goes to Gaelic Broadcasting – which is the Scottish Government’s contribution to MG Alba. The funding for Bòrd na Gàidhlig is £5.1 million” (SPICe 2024).
- ⁷ Interviewees are referred to with a non-gendered identifier, and interview order number has been randomised, for disclosure and privacy reasons.
- ⁸ The 2022 Census indicated that numerical targets for 2021 had been met, but it is unclear what levels of competence pertain to reported speakers.
- ⁹ 12 bodies out of 57 have a “Gaelic Officer”, “Gaelic Development Officer” or similarly identified role with some day-to-day operational responsibility for implementing or monitoring that body’s Gaelic plan, its outputs and outcomes (Bòrd na Gàidhlig, n. d.).

Občutljivo ravnovesje: odločitve glede škotske gelščine

Izveček

Namen raziskave o odločitvah glede škotske gelščine, sprejetih v okviru jezikovne politike in jezikovnega načrtovanja, je osvetliti področja, ki jih pristojni za oblikovanje in izvajanje teh politik pogosto spregledajo. Prek intervjujev z vodilnimi akterji so bili pridobljeni ključni kvalitativni podatki, ki so bili kasneje primerjani z vprašanji, izpostavljenimi v anketi med deležniki domnevnega družbeno-gospodarskega in socialno-ekonomskega okolja, povezanega s škotsko gelščino. Raziskava je razkrila neskladja med uradnimi načrti in socialno-ekonomsko stvarnostjo, med koristmi za posameznike in podporo skupnostim ter med posameznimi sektorji in gospodarstvom na splošno. Raziskava je obenem razkrila, da vodilni nimajo jasnih ciljev glede oživljanja jezika. Čeprav se zavedajo, da je treba za dom in skupnost storiti več, jim primanjkuje strateških usmeritev, kako to izvesti.

Ključne besede

škotska gelščina, odločanje, jezikovna politika, oživljanje jezika