



## THE FUTURE OF SCOTS

### Project report on Policy-Makers workshop

#### Introduction

This report addresses the themes that have emerged during a workshop with participants involved in policy making and policy implementation with regard to the Scots language. This workshop was part of a series of workshops which were conducted for the Future of Scots project, a collaborative research project aiming to understand how a community-driven language policy could be developed in the case of Scots in Scotland.

Before the workshops, the Future of Scots team designed and conducted an online survey addressed at the general public. This was done in order to have an understanding of the views on Scots and its use in various domains such as education, media, culture, and in policies. The workshops were then designed to engage with the survey results. The purpose of the policy-makers workshop was to hear from stakeholders not only their views on Scots as a whole and the roles of policies, but also to discuss arising issues and how they could be addressed.

In addition to the moderation team, 8 participants joined the discussions for a total of 2 hours. All the participants had been involved with policy-making or politics more generally, held a range of political views, and all had an interest in Scots. Before the discussions started, participants listened to two brief presentations, one about the survey results obtained thanks to the Future of Scots project, and the other one dealing with language policy. The starting point for the discussion was the use of a prompt (*"The Scottish Government should do more to promote and protect Scots"*) presenting the results that were obtained to it by 1616 self-selecting respondents who were overwhelmingly in favour, across all age groups. It is important to note that the survey was carried out before the Scottish Government had launched the public consultation on the Scottish Languages Bill in summer 2022. The questions about Scots were of general nature and were designed to elicit a broad range of reactions and suggestions for the forthcoming Bill, including the recognition of current support for Scots through government-funded organisations and projects. The survey data

pre-empted the consultation responses, which meant that our workshop with policy-makers was perfectly timed to feed into the consultation process.

From the discussion with the participants, several themes arose and are summarised in this report: 1) current support from the Scottish Government and the need for legislation, 2) stigma vs prestige, 3) practical challenges, and 4) Scots in politics.

## Discussion themes

### 1) Current support from the Scottish Government and the need for legislation

Participants agreed that the existing government-funded organisations have made great progress in supporting Scots speakers and writers. Nevertheless, the shortage of funding means that the current projects are limited in scale and ambition. It was felt that the extent of funding does not match the policy requirements set out in the [Scots Language Policy 2015](#). Another detrimental aspect was the lack of evaluation power regarding existing policy on the national level.

A more robust legislation, making Scots an official language of Scotland on a par with English and Scottish Gaelic, could address this situation by explicitly underlining their equal status. The participants felt that such legislation is a matter of human rights and the bedrock on which to build future support. Following from the Bill which would set out general principles, working documents could be designed to include benchmarks, milestones and action plans, as well as ways to ensure their implementation and evaluation, for example a Scots language body. Some concern was raised, however, in relation to the funding of such a body and a potential detrimental effect on existing organisations and initiatives.

While recognising Scots as an official language could lead to positive impact, it was acknowledged that legislation was not the only way to enhance its position. It was stressed that the speakers are the best resource for the language and therefore supporting the speakers on the community level is the best way to enhance the position of Scots. In the meantime, the ongoing cost of living crisis in the United Kingdom was also thought to have a detrimental effect on securing more funding for Scots-related initiatives.

### 2) Stigma versus prestige

Participants were in agreement that there was a stigma attached to Scots, rooted in the lack of education about the language, or – in some cases – its active suppression especially during formative years, both historically but also within people’s living memory. The stigmatisation of Scots was seen as having real-world consequences. For example, cases of ridicule or reprimand for the use of Scots in the classroom were recalled (see Education Workshop, where these issues were also addressed). Another important point was the perpetuation of social inequalities by stigmatising Scots, for example health inequalities and access to higher education. The question was how legislation can break this cycle of stigmatisation.

One solution was linked to raising the prestige of Scots. An interesting observation was made about Scots being acquired by immigrants settling in Scotland and embracing the local language as their own. Participants maintained that if people keep thinking of Scots as a

dialect or as slang, the negative attitudes towards the language, its users, and potential support measures will prevail. Putting policies in place may change perceptions in the long-term but it is not a guarantee. A take-away from the introductory project presentations was that policy is created on various levels, also by institutions, groups and individuals, and this is where the need for targeted support lies.

Participants also expressed the wish for Scots to have greater presence on social media to raise awareness and normalise the use of the language. However, they were conscious of the large degree of negativity surrounding the use of Scots (see also Media Workshop). Indeed, using Scots on social media often elicits responses such as “you’re wasting your time”, “you’re speaking slang”, or “it’s not a language”, or even more straightforward abuse.

### 3) Practical challenges

Among the practical issues which may have an impact on policy-making, as identified by the participants, was the lack of spelling standardisation for Scots. As explained, Scots is a language with substantial regional variation, and – importantly – the speakers of Scots dialects are rarely in contact with each other. One participant held the view that Scots is mostly a spoken language and it would therefore confuse people if it were to be put on signs. The discussions in other project workshops, however, suggested ways forward regardless of the dialectal variation, see reports on Education and Creative Industries.

In terms of legislation itself, getting a Bill through parliament is a long process and the Scots language community needs to engage with it. There should be clarity on what the Bill can achieve, and it should be communicated both to the politicians and the general public. It was stressed that in order to make progress, a cause needs to stand out among other legislative proposals.

### 4) Scots in politics

The place of Scots in politics was also addressed by participants. It was felt that Scots as a language is highly politicised. There was an agreement around the fact that Scots should not be linked to a specific political party, and overall, the need to depoliticise Scots and see the language as a unifying factor across the country. Suggested and ongoing actions taken towards that goal were seen positively by the participants, such as the Scots Language Cross-Party group, which involves Members of the Scottish Parliament and others sharing an interest in Scots, beyond political party lines. However, the question of specific support for Scots remains political and should be put firmly on the agenda across the political spectrum.

Making Scots more visible in official contexts, also by politicians and policy-makers themselves, could bring about a change of perception. However, using Scots by politicians and public figures is often criticised as artificial and affected, which was put down to the lack of normalisation of Scots in the public sphere. In addition, some participants admitted that they did not feel comfortable using Scots for official purposes as their education and working life had not prepared them for being bilingual in those contexts.

Workshop participants appreciated the role of grass-roots activism in lobbying for more action from the Government and other official bodies. It was stressed that it was important to bring new folk on board and draw inspiration and lessons from other minority language contexts in Europe.