Gaelic and Identity:
attitudes to Gaelic and the identities of Gaels
Findings from the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey

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The Scottish Social Attitudes Survey projects

**Project 1:** (McCrone, Bechhofer & ScotCen)
- Investigated the components of Gaelic identity & of Scottish identity, and people’s identification(s) with being a Gael, with being Scottish and with being British.
- Sample: 537 respondents drawn from the most strongly Gaelic-speaking areas of the Highlands and Islands, 59% of sample speak Gaelic.

**Project 2:** (Paterson, O’Hanlon & ScotCen)
- Public Attitudes to the Gaelic Language in Scotland: 2012 SSA
- Investigated public attitudes towards Gaelic in relation to:
  - use in public places
  - language rights
  - education
  - constitutional change
  - the media
  - the future
  - Scottish identity
- Sample: 1,229 respondents, Scotland-wide geographical spread.

Representative of Scottish population in terms of:
- socio-economic status
- gender
- functional Gaelic language competence (1.1% of sample).

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Linguistic & cultural context

14th Century → notion of Gaelic-speakers with distinct cultural practices living in a bounded geographical space

- Linguistic - Gaelic largely spoken in the north and west of Scotland - in the Highlands or ‘Gàidhealtachd’. (McLeod 2004)
- Cultural - ‘The Highlanders and people of the Islands are a savage and untamed nation… hostile to the Anglic people and language, and, owing to diversity of speech, even to their own nation’ (John of Fordun, 1380)

Mid 19th Century → weakening of notion of Gaelic-speakers with distinct cultural practices living in a bounded geographical space

- Linguistic - Population movement, reduction in number of Gaelic-speakers: fewer densely Gaelic-speaking communities
- Cultural - 1960s → Gaelic ‘revival’ movement, which has claimed the Gaelic language and culture as a national asset.
Geographical location of Gaelic-speakers: 1881-2011

Percentage of Gaelic speakers

Year


Highlands

Lowlands
Number of Gaelic speakers in Scotland
1881 - 2011

[Bar chart showing the number of Gaelic speakers from 1881 to 2011]
Geographic distribution of Gaelic speakers in Scotland (1891)

Geographic Distribution of Gaelic Speakers in Scotland (2001)
Percentage of Population over 3 years old at Civil Parishes speaking Gaelic

- 70% to 75%
- 60% to 70%
- 50% to 60%
- 40% to 50%
- 30% to 40%
- 20% to 30%
- 10% to 20%
- 6% to 10%
- Under 6%

(All Civil Parishes in Orkney and Shetland below the 2% Threshold)
Culture

‘tangible cultural differences between the Gàidhealtachd and the rest of Scotland have decreased dramatically … since the middle of the 20th Century.’

(Gebel 2002, p.200)

• **1960s** → Gaelic ‘renaissance’ (Oliver 2005), Gaelic ‘revival’ (Macdonald 1997)

• Associated with **cultural**, not political, sentiments:

  ‘Gaelic development agencies and ‘front line’ activists have contributed to the gradual demise of the Highland Line by rejecting the idea of a Gaelic political party and seeking to restore Gaelic as language for the whole of Scotland.’

  (Gebel 2002, p.202)

• Key premise – Gaelic is an **essential element** of Scotland’s cultural heritage:

  ‘Gaelic is the key to the continuing story of the Scottish people from their earliest origins and to most of Scotland's cultural heritage, place names and personal names’.

  (MacKinnon 2001)
Gaelic ‘revival’ 1960s

MacDonald (1997) – European-wide ‘ethnic revival’ – language and statehood
Oliver (2005) – popularisation of ‘folk culture in Western societies – appreciation of indigenous culture

The transnational ethnic revival beginning in the 1960s involved a widespread ‘pirating’ of the nation-state model. Linguistic specificity, now firmly cast at the heart of a coherent cultural identity, became increasingly politicised. Within Scotland, this led to a flourishing of Gaelic policies and developments throughout Scotland, and Gaelic coming increasingly to be cast as a, or even ‘the real’ (original) Scottish language. To an unprecedented extent, Gaels found themselves regarded as a valuable repository of culture, tradition and community within Scotland.

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Selected developments

1960s
- Scottish Education Department funding of An Comunn Gàidhealach & the Gaelic Books Council
- Establishment of the Highlands and Islands Development Board

1970s
- Bilingual Education Project in Western Isles
- Establishment of Sabhal Mòr Ostaig

1980s
- Establishment of Comunn na Gàidhlig
- Expansion of Gaelic TV and radio
- Development of Gaelic-medium pre-school and primary education

1990s/2000s
- Campaigns for language legislation: *Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005.*
- Establishment of Bòrd na Gàidhlig
- Establishment of BBC ALBA
National Plan for Gaelic 2007-12

‘The Gaelic language is a unique part of Scotland’s national heritage. Gaelic belongs to the people of Scotland and it is our responsibility as a nation to maintain its existence in a modern, multicultural and multilingual Scotland. The Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 passed through the Scottish Parliament unopposed, marking an important milestone in progress towards securing the status of Gaelic in Scotland.’

(Bòrd na Gàidhlig, 2006, p. 8)
Key Questions

- What are the Scottish public’s views:
  (i) about the cultural place of Gaelic in Scottish life and identity?
  (ii) about policies to promote the learning and use of Gaelic in Scotland?

- What are the views of those living in Gaelic-speaking areas of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland about the identity markers of a ‘Gael’, and of a ‘Scot’

- Is there a relationship between views of Gaelic and views of constitutional change in Scotland?
Structure of today’s seminar

Morning session:

• The place of Gaelic in Scotland
  - Question 1 – Gaelic and Scottish life & identity, policies for Gaelic

• Public attitudes to Gaelic and the constitutional future of Scotland
  - Question 3 – Gaelic and constitutional change

***Lunch***

Afternoon session:

• What makes a Gael?
  - Question 2 – Gaelic and identity in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland

• Discussion of the issues raised by the research
The place of Gaelic in Scotland

• Is Gaelic accepted as part of Scottish life and identity?

• To what extent do people support policies to promote the learning and use of Gaelic in Scotland?

• What are people’s hopes and expectations for the future of Gaelic?
Public attitudes to Gaelic in Scottish life: language

Comfort with hearing people in Scotland speaking to each other in Gaelic

Sample size: 1,112. Percentages are weighted, sample size is un-weighted. Excludes non-response, and those who had not heard the language spoken.
Comfort with hearing Gaelic, as compared to Scots and English with an English accent

Comfort with hearing Gaelic, as compared to Scots, English accent, Polish and Urdu

Sample size: 1,184. ‘Much’ incorporates the response categories ‘a great deal’ and ‘quite a lot’. ‘Not much’ incorporates the response categories ‘not very much’ and ‘nothing at all.’
Public attitudes to Gaelic and identity: Perceived relationship to (i) Scottish heritage and (ii) Scottish identity

Sample size. Scottish heritage: 1,140. Scottish identity: 1,152.
Symbolic and communicative functions of language

(i) Symbolic

- language as ‘an emblem of groupness, a symbol’

(ii) Communicative

- language as an ‘instrumental tool’

Edwards (2009: 55)
Summary: Gaelic in Scottish life & identity

‘Gaelic has come to be accepted as a symbol of Scotland’s distinctiveness’ (Macdonald, 1997: 256)

- 94% of people are comfortable hearing the language as an element of the Scottish linguistic landscape
- 68% of people perceive Gaelic-speakers to have much in common with others in Scotland.
- 76% of people accept Gaelic as an important element of Scotland’s cultural heritage.
- But 86% of people do not believe speaking Gaelic to be important to being ‘truly Scottish’.

Thus, Gaelic may be a ‘banal’ (Billig, 1995) aspect of national identity.
Public attitudes of relationship of Gaelic and cultural heritage:
(i) of Scotland (ii) of Highlands and Islands (iii) own

Among those surveyed:
- 76% view Scotland's cultural heritage as very/fairly important.
- 86% view the cultural heritage of the Highlands and Islands as very/fairly important.
- Only 24% consider their own cultural heritage as very/fairly important.
Patterns of view about language and identity

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Sample size: √ = 90% of the sample or more. ✗ = 10% of the sample or less.
Attitude to government spending on promoting the use of Gaelic

Sample size: 1,229.
Right to use Gaelic

Sample size: 1,229.

Percentage

- Council: 84% Only Gaelic areas, 38% Anywhere in Scotland
- Witness: 71% Only Gaelic areas, 40% Anywhere in Scotland
- NHS: 71% Only Gaelic areas, 37% Anywhere in Scotland
- Public meeting: 75% Only Gaelic areas, 30% Anywhere in Scotland
- Bank: 66% Only Gaelic areas, 32% Anywhere in Scotland
Summary of respondents’ views of Gaelic in education and in the future

Education
- No clear view on teaching Gaelic as a subject to all English-medium pupils in Scotland between the ages of 5 and 16
- 48% of respondents were in favour of a parental right to Gaelic-medium education across Scotland, with a further 43% in favour in areas where Gaelic is spoken
- 25% of the sample said they would be likely (either ‘very likely’ or ‘fairly likely’ to send a child to Gaelic-medium education if there was provision in their local area

Gaelic in the future
- 81% of respondents hoped that there would be at least the same number of Gaelic speakers in 50 years time as there are today although only 45% anticipated that this would be the case
- People felt that ‘parents who speak Gaelic’, ‘local communities’, ‘nursery schools and schools’ and ‘the government’ have the main responsibilities for the maintenance of Gaelic.
- However, 68% of people also feel that the Gaelic media is essential for ensuring that some people speak Gaelic in the future.
Methods (4)

Language Rights
• Views of language rights for Gaelic-speakers:
  - Gaelic-medium education
  - Local Council
  - Public meeting
  - Witness in a court of law
  - When using the NHS
  - When writing to their bank

Gaelic in the future: expectations, preferences and views of language maintenance strategies
• Expectations for number of people speaking Gaelic in Scotland in 50 years time
• Preference for number of people speaking Gaelic in Scotland in 50 years time
• View about encouraging the value of encouraging the use of Gaelic in Scotland
Thinking about Scotland in 50 years time, how many people would you like to be speaking Gaelic? More, fewer, or about the same number of people as now?

- More people than now: 42%
- About the same number of people as now: 39%
- Fewer people than now: 10%
How often did you hear Gaelic being spoken when you were a child?

Sample size: 205
Summary of Gaelic language exposure of the sample in 2012

Home context

• 4% of our sample have heard Gaelic spoken in their home over the last 12 months
• 70% have been exposed to Gaelic by means of Gaelic media.

Community context

• 12% of our sample have heard Gaelic spoken in the street, a shop or other public place in the last 12 months
• 57% have been exposed to Gaelic by means of road signs or other public signs
References


Extra Slides
Components of Scottish identity

- Speak Gaelic: 14
- Speak Scots: 37
- Scottish ancestry: 65
- Lived in Scotland: 74
- Born in Scotland: 78
- Feel Scottish: 82

Very/fairly important