



Response to consultation on Scottish Government Gaelic Language Plan 2021-2026

Introduction

As the Gaelic Language Plan for the Scottish Government, this document contains the key proposals for supporting the language nationally over the next five years. We would argue that the document contains sentiments that we broadly agree with, however the document has almost no new policy proposals and lacks the required boldness of vision needed to increase the numbers of speakers. With this in mind, we propose the following key principles.

Key Principles

Ensuring the Rights of Gaelic Speakers

In the Key Principles section, it outlines that Bord na Gaidhlig, *'works with a view to securing the status as an official language of Scotland commanding equal respect to the English language'*. After nearly twenty years we would argue that the time has come for new legislation to ensure that Gaelic has official status as conferred through the Scottish Parliament.

We consider that extending the range of language rights in a new Language Act would fit in to the Scottish Government's move to a fundamental human rights-based approach in policy making. Gaelic is part of the equalities agenda but is not treated seriously in comparison to race, gender, sexual orientation, or disability. New legislation is required that enshrines the basic rights of Gaelic speakers in law in Scotland.

A Bold Vision for the Future of the Language?

We would strongly support the Scottish Government setting out bold targets for increasing the numbers of Gaelic speakers. One that is similar in approach to the 'Cymraeg 2050 Strategy' in Wales, which has a vision of one million Welsh speakers by 2050. Setting a target would signal the commitment of the Scottish Parliament to the language and would allow both the Government and stakeholders to measure the success of language policies going forward.

We believe that both these measures would strengthen the legislative framework around Gaelic and are critical for the future of the language.

General comments

The introduction to the Gaelic Language Plan lists important manifesto commitments as well as the key statement "We recognise that Gaelic education is key to the future of the language".

It would strengthen the plan greatly if actions and targets relating to the manifesto commitments as well as additional support for Gaelic education were included in the High-level aims and commitments in the plan. The plan is lacking a coherent strategy regarding timescales and targets. Accountability for steering the plan needs to be in place from the outset to ensure that accurate evaluation is possible to ensure that targets are met.

More decisive language is required and would further strengthen this plan. For example, changing “Scottish Government will seek to embed Gaelic in all new education policy initiatives” to “Scottish Government will embed Gaelic in all new education policy initiatives.” Ambiguously worded proposals serve no purpose within policy documents and are prone to misinterpretation. This will be detrimental for Gaelic on many levels and will contribute to a general malaise amongst stakeholders when trying to assess practicalities at local authority level.

The plan does not detail how progress will be made with current initiatives. For example, there is a commitment to continue the Faster Rate of Progress initiative which has been in place for three years, but no indication of evaluation of the initiative or targets set. It is essential that evaluation criteria are clear and concise. With a strong framework in place, it becomes easier to measure “success” and consequently then to assess whether key targets are being achieved.

The main commitments in the plan focus on corporate matters and communication, both internal and external. Whilst these are worthy of consideration, and it is important that SG show leadership in giving Gaelic equal respect to English within its organisation, these are not commitments which reflect the Scottish Government’s role in taking forward legislative and manifesto commitments to Gaelic development out with the organisation.

Commitments in the plan (relevant to Gaelic education)

It is disappointing to note that there is only one High-level aim which refers to Gaelic education in the plan. “Scottish Government will seek to embed Gaelic in all new education policy initiatives”

Given the importance of Gaelic education to the revitalisation of the Gaelic language which SG has committed to, it would be appropriate if SG included specific commitments to Gaelic education including manifesto commitments under the High-level aims.

Our recommendations for additional commitments are listed below.

Budgets:

A commitment to increase budgets.

Gaelic education is a priority for Scottish Government and the plan states that “In recognition of this priority, the Scottish Government has maintained budgets.” Although there has been substantial growth in GME there has been no equivalent growth in Specific Grant funding. If GME is to continue to grow, expand into new areas and increase the offer at secondary level, an increase in funding is required from SG.

Scottish Languages Bill:

A commitment to strengthen legislation on Gaelic within the Scottish Languages Bill, including access to GME for all families who wish it.

The Education (Scotland) Act 2016 gives parents the right to ask their Local Authority to provide Gaelic Medium Education for their child. This is a complicated process for parents and after a period of 4 years since the legislation was enacted the full process remains untested. Under Statutory Guidance on Gaelic Education local authorities have a duty to promote and support GME. Local authorities frequently have no regard to this duty. Glasgow City Council this year has refused admission to GME P1 to 7 families. In this situation parents have no rights and there is no equal status between GME and EME.

This must be addressed by legislation. Local authorities must be legally required to plan for Gaelic education. See reference below to 'Welsh in Education' Strategic Plans. For these plans all local authorities are grouped according to current % of children in Welsh medium education and very specific targets are set for growth. Similar local authority plans for Gaelic would support the growth and development of GME, both in local authorities who currently do not provide any GME and those who currently have provision required to show a growth %.

A recognised Gàidhealtachd:

A commitment to prioritise GME in all schools in any Gàidhealtachd areas.

Schools in these areas should follow the "Gaelic First" principle as set out by CNES, making all schools either Gaelic schools with English Medium classes or dedicated stand-alone Gaelic schools.

A new national strategic approach for GME:

A commitment to progress a national strategy for GME provision.

("Edinburgh City Council has taken forward important engagement on GME provision, but we will ensure that this is now incorporated within a new national strategic approach.")

We welcome the commitment in the manifesto to a new national strategic approach and we await further detail on this and how it is to be taken forward.

A national strategy could, for example, follow the example of the Welsh Government who as part of their national strategy for Welsh in education requires every local authority to prepare a 'Welsh in education' strategic plan. <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2021-02/guidance-welsh-in-education-strategic-plan.pdf>

All of the outcomes for these plans could be applied to Gaelic medium education and targets set within the plan for each of these outcomes.

- Outcome 1: More nursery children/ three year olds receive their education through the medium of Gaelic

- Outcome 2: More reception class children/ five year olds receive their education through the medium of Gaelic
- Outcome 3: More children continue to improve their Gaelic language skills when transferring from one stage of their statutory education to another
- Outcome 4: More learners study for assessed qualifications in Gaelic (as a subject) and subjects through the medium of Gaelic
- Outcome 5: More opportunities for learners to use Gaelic in different contexts in school
- Outcome 6: An increase in the provision of Gaelic-medium education for pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) in accordance with the duties imposed by the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018
- Outcome 7: Increase the number of teaching staff able to teach Gaelic (as a subject) and teach through the medium of Gaelic

Gaelic education in SG educational policies and education reform:

A commitment that any educational reform considers the impact on GME as well as EME.

Although learners in GME are following the same 3-18 curriculum as EME learners there are specific requirements which only apply to GME. Educational reform in a broad sense takes little note of the needs of GME and policy needs to be cognisant of these when making decisions. A recent example has been the impact of Curriculum for Excellence on the uptake of Gaelic in the Senior Phase. We raised our concerns on falling numbers studying Gaelic in the senior phase as part of the senior phase review, as did other stakeholders.

A commitment to inclusion of GME in all educational policies.

It is disappointing to note that while this should be current practice, it simply does not happen. The most recent example which illustrates the issue of lack of inclusion by policy makers is the statutory entitlement of 1140 hours of funded early learning and childcare for all three- and four-year-olds and eligible two-year-olds as guidance associated with the legislation makes it very clear that local authorities have no obligation to provide early learning and childcare in Gaelic, *“Early learning and childcare can be provided through the medium of Gaelic. There are no duties on education authorities to provide Gaelic early learning and childcare but they may do so.”*

This falls far short of including Gaelic. Guidance to authorities in this instance is confirming that they may include Gaelic but are no under obligation to do so. GME is a 3-18 curriculum and parents should have equal rights with families accessing EME early learning and childcare, especially given the importance of the pre-school years for language acquisition.

Gaelic learner education has also been neglected. The 1 + 2 approach to language learning presents opportunities for learning Gaelic as a modern language but there has been little uptake of Gaelic as part of the initiative. Gaelic at L3 could provide an opportunity for all pupils in Scotland who otherwise would have no exposure to Gaelic to gain some insight into the language and culture.

Conclusion

The Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 was passed by the Scottish Parliament with a view to securing the status of the Gaelic language as an official language of Scotland commanding equal respect to the English language.

Scottish Government has made a manifest commitment to review the functions and structures of Bòrd na Gàidhlig and this should be widened to include a review of legislation on Gaelic status and Gaelic education.

Whilst the successful expansion of GME continues to introduce the language to a new generation there is no doubt that it has not been without issue. Parents have led the charge and continue to battle for the right to have access to GME for their children. If legislation is not robust and fails in its very wording to direct and guide, the problems which face Gaelic will only be exacerbated.

It is clear from a brief assessment of the past 16 years that more funding must be made available for Gaelic, particularly within the education sector. The particular demands of GME require careful management if the language is to thrive once again. Investment now will pay dividends later at many levels.

Targets for growth and timescales need to be set, both for the 5-year duration of this plan and longer-term aspirations for the language similar to the Welsh Governments aim of one million speakers by 2050.

The proposed Gaelic plan offers nothing tangible in the way of leadership or accountability. Scottish Government must insist upon exceeding its basic requirements so that it may provide a clear pathway for Gaelic.

Comann nam Pàrant (Nàiseanta)

9 Dàmhair 2021