

Consultation on Comhairle nan Eilean Siar Gaelic Language Plan 2022-27

Comann nam Pàrant welcomes the commitments in this draft Gaelic Language Plan, the 4th iteration from Comhairle nan Eilean Siar. We recognise the importance of the Gaelic speaking communities in the Western Isles to the future survival of Gaelic and support all efforts to maintain these communities.

We are pleased to read that the recently introduced 'Gaelic first' policy for enrolment in education has had a positive impact. We hope that this 'Gaelic first' policy will now be extended to all council services.

An emphasis on creating a stronger Gaelic ethos in all schools offering Gaelic provision in the new Gaelic policy for the Education, Skills and Children's Services Department is welcome, but Gaelic surely should have a presence in **all** schools in the Western Isles. We recommend a review of the policy and an amendment to create some degree of Gaelic ethos in all schools.

We have a number of comments and suggestions below which in our opinion would strengthen the plan.

"High Level Aim

Continue to examine the merits of Gaelic standalone schools in the Western Isles in line with Government policy and the National Gaelic Language Plan

Actions Required:

Discuss at Member Officer Working Group level the merits of: standalone Gaelic schools; the Comhairle's current approach to Gaelic education; and any other alternatives to promote and secure the future of Gaelic in schools."

Whilst the inclusion in the draft plan of a high-level aim which refers to standalone schools is welcome, it is very disappointing not to see further reference to Gaelic schools in the draft plan.

The proposed outcome – *"Conclusion as to the best way forward for Gaelic in Western Isles schools"* may not support the aim in the draft National Gaelic Plan to increase the number of Gaelic schools to 16 within the lifetime of the plan, if the conclusion is not to deliver any dedicated Gaelic schools.

According to Joshua Fishman's well established Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) for threatened languages, schools play a significant role in extending the use of language into all domains. This, in combination with consolidation of Gaelic within the local community would ensure successful language maintenance. Therefore, we strongly support the aspiration for standalone schools as the gold standard for GME, and believe that actions relating to schools should be added to this draft plan.

Comann nam Pàrant is aware of parental support for a standalone Gaelic school in Stornoway. We believe that the council should include an action in the Gaelic Language Plan to consult on the option for a Gaelic school, putting the merits of such a development to parents. All evidence from other local authorities such as Highland, Glasgow and Edinburgh demonstrates that standalone GME primary schools promote growth in GME and instil confidence in parents considering GME as an option for their child. A school in Stornoway is an opportunity to improve the uptake of GME in the town, in the same way as the schools have done in other locations. A Gaelic school in Stornoway would not mean the closure of any Gaelic provision in rural areas.

E-sgoil - We recognise the role of e-sgoil as a curriculum enhancing tool which has a role to play in certain elements of education. E-sgoil may work most efficiently when used alongside existing teaching and must not be the catalyst to reduce the physical classroom environment.

3.2 Home, 0-3 and Early Years

The focus on Gaelic in the Home and the Early Years in the plan is to be commended. Inter-generational transmission of the language must be nurtured and protected if Gaelic is to flourish as a language in the communities of the Western Isles. The proposals for supporting parents to learn Gaelic and enrol their children in GME are important, but actions to support and encourage Gaelic speaking parents and extended families to make Gaelic the language of homes are also needed. There needs to be more collaboration with the NHS to ensure that parents are correctly advised on bilingualism and the advantages of speaking Gaelic and encouraged to use Gaelic with their children. Full-time childcare through the medium of Gaelic must be easily accessible with a target set to identify any gaps in services, and action taken to address these gaps. The council must engage with families to identify any barriers that families feel there are to raising children as Gaelic speakers. Comann nam Pàrant will be happy to continue to work collaboratively with the council in providing activities for the early years, and with providing advice to parents.

3.3 Education, Primary, Secondary and Post -school

It would be useful to survey parents on an annual basis on their reasons for opting out of GME and choosing EME for their children.

In the 1 + 2 learning approach all L2 provision for children in EME should be Gaelic. This will encourage a bilingual ethos in all schools and improve the uptake of Gaelic learners at secondary.

The commitment to pilot an immersion course to allow pupils late entry to GME is much needed and we look forward to seeing this work develop.

All staffing posts in the Western Isles should be advertised either as Gaelic essential or Gaelic desirable. This will deliver a strong message from Comhairle nan Eilean Siar that Gaelic is a priority in all services delivered by the council.

M. Wentworth
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