

Submission from Comann nam Pàrant (Nàiseanta) on the draft National Gaelic Language Plan 2017-22

Comann nam Pàrant welcomes the publication of the Draft National Plan for Gaelic and the opportunity to participate in the consultation process.

As an organisation primarily involved with parents of children in Gaelic medium education we are in full agreement with the aim for Gaelic ‘...to increase the number of people speaking, using and learning Gaelic in Scotland and the number of situations in which it is used.’

The plan format seems repetitive and consequently it is not a particularly easy read. Although we appreciate that the plan may be high level we feel it could be more ambitious and contain more specific action points and targets. It may be that there is an intention to have an implementation plan as an appendix to the document and if this is the case we are disappointed that we have not had an opportunity to comment on this explicitly but hope that our comments will be a useful contribution towards this nonetheless.

Promoting Gaelic

We agree that it is important for Gaelic to have a positive image and that this will depend on several initiatives. Regarding Gaelic medium education (GME) families, their perception of Gaelic will usually be dependent on their child’s experience of GME and the outcomes for their child resulting from that experience. If the quality of GME is maintained, with resulting good educational and linguistic outcomes for pupils, both the young people who are the product of the system and their families will be very positive about Gaelic and promote it as such. However, if the opposite is the case and families and young people become disaffected they will promote a negative image of Gaelic. As we risk a staffing crisis for GME within the lifetime of this plan this a significant danger and must be addressed.

Additionally if Gaelic usage is restricted to the classroom, particularly in the case of the majority of children who do not come from Gaelic speaking homes, there is a risk that they develop a negative attitude towards the language. This is often expressed by their reluctance or refusal to speak Gaelic as soon as they leave the school environment. It is therefore essential that these young people are given opportunities to use Gaelic in social, fun and challenging activities both in and out with school. We are somewhat concerned that the areas chosen through which to raise awareness and promote a positive image of Gaelic are restricted to ‘Gaelic media; Gaelic education at all levels, and; Gaelic arts’ as we feel this is not as inclusive as it could be, in particular the absence of sport and other extracurricular activities that could be key areas for language

promotion, in particular at the crucial age point of early secondary where we see the greatest degree of attrition in speaker numbers.

‘Positive messages about Gaelic and diversity and inclusion’. More needs to be done to ensure that Gaelic is truly inclusive, particularly with regard to provision of additional support in GME.

Learning Gaelic

If the main aim of the national plan to increase the number of Gaelic speakers is to be met, there is no doubt that Gaelic medium education must remain a priority. Although we have had GME as part of the Scottish education system for over 30 years now it is still relatively new with governance and resources still being developed and improved. We are now starting to see the first generation of GME pupils reaching parenthood and enrolling their own children in GME. This is very encouraging. Although research has shown that many of the initial cohort of GME pupils no longer have the confidence to use their Gaelic, we believe that increased availability of GME at secondary level, more activities in Gaelic outside school and more support for families, will improve this situation. Increasing provision in all these areas should therefore be a priority.

We would like to see more focus on the outcomes of GME, i.e. the number of confident fluent Gaelic speakers that the system produces, rather than solely the number of entrants at P1 as has been in previous national plans. Research has shown that a large number of speakers are lost between S1 and S4 and this stage should be a key priority within the plan. We are concerned that the focus is currently upon quantity rather than quality and although growth in numbers entering P1 is encouraging if these pupils are not being adequately supported and encouraged to maintain their Gaelic speaking into adulthood, as the research indicates, then the desired outcome of an increase in the number of people using Gaelic and maintenance of Gaelic as a language of the community will not be achieved.

Gaelic in Early Learning and Childcare

Provision for 0-3 year olds

This is the age when families are most likely to have initial engagement with Gaelic and when they are also most likely to make decisions regarding their children’s education. Most provision for the 0-3 age group is in the voluntary sector and supporting provision at this stage should be a priority for Bòrd na Gàidhlig. Currently, no national voluntary body has overarching responsibility for the 0-3 groups and we would expect to see a commitment to developing a clear national strategy in support of the 0-3 sector within the plan.

Statutory provision

The proposed expansion of entitlement to provision by Scottish Government for early years will present challenges as well as opportunities for Gaelic. We welcome the commitment in the plan to increase GM ELC and ensure GM ELC benefits from the expansion in hours. However, we would like to see more specific actions listed here, not only to protect current provision but also to develop the sector. At an absolute minimum all GMPE should have adequate early learning provision attached. Failure to ensure this will result in increasingly larger numbers of children starting GMPE with no prior knowledge of Gaelic which puts the children at a disadvantage and increases the workload of teachers in P1 classrooms, which may have a negative knock on effect on teacher recruitment. We are aware that the Education Act may be amended by Scottish Government to allow parental requests for GM early learning and we would like to see a commitment from Bòrd na Gàidhlig to the principle of such an amendment in the plan.

Children who progress to Gaelic medium primary education will gain maximum benefit from their early learning education if it is delivered through high quality total Gaelic immersion. The current situation is that some pre-school learners are being denied this opportunity. Some of the primary reasons for this include the following;

- Location of Gaelic medium provision; there is still relatively a very small number of centres providing Gaelic early learning and although parents are usually given support with transport to attend GMPE there is no such support for early learning with the result that many families will not be able to attend. Not all families have access to a car and costs of public transport may be prohibitive. As a result some families decide that their only option is to attend the English provision, often on their doorstep, and as such they are excluded from Gaelic provision.
- Availability of Gaelic medium provision; in some areas there is over-subscription for Gaelic medium nursery places and parents have to go on a waiting list. The poor availability of Gaelic early learning is due to factors such as inadequate infrastructure, lack of staffing and failures in governance.
- Lack of extended hours in Gaelic medium provision; most Gaelic early learning is only available for one 2½ hour session a day Monday to Friday. This does not meet the requirements of many working parents and children from these families are forced to go to an English medium provider with more flexible hours.

If the attainment gap is to be closed and children are ready for learning when starting education in GMPE, they must have access to high quality total immersion early learning. The majority of children in GME come from non-Gaelic speaking families and are reliant on early learning provision to prepare them linguistically for their education. There is an opportunity with the proposed additional hours to develop the Gaelic medium early learning sector. We are concerned that this opportunity may be missed if growth is not planned in a proper way and that this will lead to dilution of provision. For

example, some providers may have English and Gaelic provision together, which will not provide total immersion in Gaelic as advised by Education Scotland for GM early years.

We welcome the commitment to establishing an HNC course in Childhood Practice through the medium of Gaelic. We would also like to see the inclusion of an appropriate module in courses that are already widely available, covering topics such as language learning pedagogy, minority languages and the advantages of bilingualism. Such a module, which is urgently needed and should be prioritised, would ensure that students throughout Scotland would have access to training that would prepare them for working in the GM sector.

Any ELC practitioners who would benefit from upskilling of their Gaelic language skills thus enabling them to transfer from the English medium sector to Gaelic medium should be offered an opportunity to do so through courses similar to 'Gaelic immersion for teachers' which is currently available.

GME in primary and secondary schools

We welcome the commitment to 'excellent support in place for teachers and a continued emphasis on the quality of Gaelic learning'. However, in many GM classrooms the reality is that teachers are under-resourced and struggling to cope with large class sizes, particularly in the total immersion phase, or find themselves with large multi-composite classes. With increasing frequency classes of GM children are being taught by non-Gaelic speaking teachers. This is not a sustainable situation for GME and needs to be addressed as an absolute priority. If children are not being taught in GME in accordance with the National Guidance and Education Scotland Advice on Gaelic education, at what stage can it be said that they are no longer GM pupils but Gaelic learners? We would like to see a commitment from Bòrd na Gàidhlig to investigate the current crisis with teacher supply in some local authority areas and take action before the situation worsens.

We consider Gaelic medium education to be at a critical point due to the failure to address the teacher supply situation decisively. Although some actions have been taken to develop courses, such as the Gaelic Immersion for teachers' course, the response has so far been inadequate. Why, for example, has there not been a fast-track course similar to the one which has just been launched to address the shortage of science and maths teachers?

We would also suggest the following:

- More focus on and financial support to fluent Gaelic speakers which would allow them to manage change of career into teaching.
- Increase the number of Gaelic PGDE courses at Primary & Secondary level. Students on PGDE course should also receive more of their tuition through the

medium of Gaelic to ensure that they get enough experience in GME to ensure their competency to teach in an immersion classroom.

- Offer a variety of routes into teaching; for example by allowing some practitioners to build upon experience gained working in other employment. This would allow classroom assistants and others to build on the experience gained in schools.
- Provide Gaelic language learning opportunities as part of Career Long Professional Learning.
- Provide more incentives for teachers to take up posts in remote areas, including relocation packages.
- Progress the role of language assistants, and develop a suitable training course.
- Maintain and expand the post of teacher recruitment officer at Bòrd na Gàidhlig, given that we consider this a primary priority we would expect to see more resources invested here, perhaps in the form of an expansion of the single post to a team.
- More collaborative work between schools offering GME and centres offering PGDEs in GME, facilitated by BnaG, to ensure more suitable placements and probationary positions are given to students.
- More focus on supporting teachers through smaller class sizes and language assistants to ensure retention is high.

Comann nam Pàrant is concerned and disheartened at the continued lack of progress in GM delivery at secondary level. Although we welcome developments such as e-sgoil we feel that technology is not the whole solution and we would like to see more commitment to ensuring smoother transitions from primary to secondary. We are also increasingly concerned at the falling numbers taking GM examinations.

We would like to see a stronger commitment to supporting activities for GM pupils to use Gaelic in a variety of situations. For example, the Comann nam Pàrant Gaelic week in Edinburgh provides Gaelic activities in support of the curriculum; these are activities that are widely available to English medium pupils, but rarely offered to GM pupils. Activities such as these could be expanded, with support, to include a larger number of age groups and an incorporation of the curriculum.

There is concern amongst a number of CnP groups regarding the number of children who leave GME, and not only at transition stages. Much of our information is anecdotal and we realise that it may be difficult to monitor children who are lost to the system especially in the mid-stages of primary education but we suspect that there may be a significant number and would like to see more research on this issue.

We would also like to see longitudinal research on children as they progress through the GME system, similar to the 'Growing up in Scotland' study. Although on a smaller scale, it would be particularly useful to identify how children's attitudes to Gaelic change as they progress through GME and the extent to which they are influenced by parental attitude and other factors such as positive/negative role models and the presence of Gaelic in their lives outwith formal education. We feel that research such as this would allow for more evidenced based policy and intervention development which would prove beneficial in the long term, particularly in terms of developing GME pupils into adults who are confident to use Gaelic in all situations.

All developments in GME are of course dependant on local authorities who have responsibility for delivering education. Expansion and promotion of GME at all levels should have a strong presence in local authority Gaelic language plans with implementation rigorously monitored by BnaG. We feel that currently language plans are not being adhered to in a satisfactory manner by some local authorities and would welcome improved governance of these on the part of BnaG.

Key Commitments

Guidance on Gaelic Education

Does Bòrd na Gàidhlig have the capacity to properly monitor the implementation of the Guidance and how will it be clear to parents that Bòrd na Gàidhlig are the principal authority? Parents are already voicing concern in a number of areas where they feel the Guidance is not being adhered to and we would welcome more clarity on this issue, particularly in term of providing a straightforward guide for parents relating how best to raise issues with BnaG.

Gaelic medium education – Supporting Parents

In what way will Bòrd na Gàidhlig support groups of parents who request GME for their children? Does the organisation have the capacity to do this? How will it be made clear to parents wishing to pursue GME that BnaG are able and willing to provide support?

Gaelic Schools

It would useful for parents to see guidance on the mechanism for requesting provision in a standalone school from their local authority. It would also be helpful if there was information readily available to parents on the differences between GM in a Gaelic school as compared to an English school along with a description of what constitutes a Gaelic school. Does the commitment to have the number of Gaelic schools increase to 10 mean that Bòrd na Gàidhlig have identified areas which would be suitable for progression to a school? Although we welcome this commitment to an expansion of school numbers we remain concerned over the lack of detail in terms of how this

outcome might be achieved and are wary that this could lead to a failure to meet such targets.

Using Gaelic

In this section Comann nam Pàrant's main area of interest is, for obvious reasons, the use of Gaelic in homes and communities.

The acquisition of Gaelic in the home as children's first language is undoubtedly the most challenging but also the most important aspect in language revitalisation and Comann nam Pàrant are keen to promote and support any initiatives which enable more families to use Gaelic at home.

There are now a generation of potential parents who have been educated through the medium of Gaelic who have the ability to raise their children as L1 Gaelic speakers if there is a support structure in place.

Media support for Gaelic in the home has vastly improved over the last few years, mainly due to BBC Alba and online facilities but there is a continuing need for more resources such as games, books and online resources. There is, for example, a need for more books for home reading for readers in upper primary years in GME.

Comann nam Pàrant has recently developed resources in support of family Gaelic usage and piloted a course TASC (Teaghlaichean agus Sgoiltean Còmhla). We plan to launch our new website, which will include resources for this course, Gaelic for Families. In order to support the increasing number of families who have no prior knowledge of Gaelic we would like to see initiatives such as TASC prioritised in the plan and supported by Bòrd na Gàidhlig.

Initiatives which promote the use of Gaelic by young people are also very important to parents who appreciate the many benefits that having access to varied activities through the medium of Gaelic on offer to their children.

Key Commitments

'Gaelic use in families and those communities with a significant percentage of Gaelic speakers is critical'

We are in agreement that Gaelic use in families and communities is critical and that inter-generational transmission is the ultimate goal in language revival. However, we would hope that the large numbers of families in the Central Belt who have committed their children to GME will not be in anyway disadvantaged and be given any less support

than these families who are fortunate enough to still have access to a Gaelic speaking community.

Summary

Comann nam Pàrant key recommendations for the National Gaelic Plan are:

- Decisive actions to deal with the potential workforce crisis in GME.
- A national strategy for 0-3 age group.
- A national strategy for the expansion in ELC statutory provision.
- More initiatives in support of GME both within schools and out of school.
- Initiatives in support of family learning with a focus on intergenerational learning.
- Targets to focus on the outcomes of GME.
- Priority given to maintain Gaelic use throughout key transition stages for young people, particularly early secondary.

In conclusion Comann nam Pàrant is aware that we all share an obligation to progress the aim of this plan 'to increase the number of people speaking, using and learning Gaelic'. As main stakeholders, we hope that we will be able to continue to work collaboratively with Bòrd na Gàidhlig and other Gaelic organisations. As such, we would welcome opportunities for more dialogue between Comann nam Pàrant and Bòrd na Gàidhlig.

Comann nam Pàrant (Nàiseanta)
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