

Bòrd na Gàidhlig : Scotland's route map through and out of the crisis

Executive Summary

Gaelic is central to Scottish identity. It is a generator of cultural, social, economic and creative wealth, maintains and strengthens communities, has an international reach and is a language of home, learning, care, culture and work.

While it is right that priority is given to tackling the COVID-19 crisis, it is important to ensure that Gaelic, which is endangered, is supported to grow.

The main challenges caused by the current situation are:

- Ensuring that the Gaelic medium education (GME), the main route to creating new Gaelic speakers, provides language immersion for children with no Gaelic in the home;
- The lack of Gaelic early years' provision leading to reduced uptake of GME;
- protecting the people in the islands where Gaelic is still a community language because of the greater impact of Covid-19 on older people and the impact of the downturn in the economy;
- the already fragile nature of much of the support structure for Gaelic.

Gaelic language and culture offers pathways to strengthening the country as it comes out of lockdown and beyond. These centre around:

- diversity, inclusion and equality – Gaelic is one of the languages of Scotland with its own rich culture which increases Scotland's diversity; by ensuring its inclusion in plans for the future, Scottish Government can increase inclusivity and equality;
- increasing skills and attainment through Gaelic education and adult learning;
- engaging adults in learning by continuing to increase the numbers learning Gaelic through online resources such as Duolingo and LearnGaelic.scot;
- a rich and strong culture which supports creativity, wellbeing, social inclusion and economic activity;
- a growing tourism market which can access authentic experiences virtually as well as building demand for the future; and
- investment in new and emerging businesses that utilise a skilled speaker and learner base in island and rural areas which would support economic growth.

In this way, Gaelic can support the wider national agenda for re-building communities and the economy and bring us into a more diverse and inclusive society which offers all its citizens greater wellbeing through a culture recognised internationally for its richness and value.

1. Context

The Scottish Government published *Covid-19 – A Framework for Decision Making* in April 2020 and *Scotland's route map through and out of the crisis* in May 2020. Both seek views from the Scottish people on their proposals.

Bòrd na Gàidhlig, as the NDPB responsible for the promotion of Gaelic language and culture, wishes to respond to the documents and support Scottish Government in addressing the main challenges and opportunities for the Gaelic community in Scotland.

The Government's strategic document for the support and growth of Gaelic language and culture¹ sets out its policies for Gaelic and this paper draws from that document.

2. Background

Gaelic is one of the languages of the United Kingdom and its status is recognised in a number of statutory documents, European and Scottish² and government and regional strategies³. The language has been spoken in Scotland for longer than English and its geographical spread can be traced through placenames from Aberdeenshire to the Western Isles, and from Caithness to Dumfries and Galloway.

Gaelic is central to Scottish identity. It is a generator of cultural and creative wealth, creates and strengthens communities, has an international reach and is a language of home, learning, care and culture.

It is also endangered. Progress has been made and continued momentum is essential. The current pandemic is exacerbating the challenges to its maintenance and growth. However, Gaelic offers opportunities for Scotland to deliver new approaches as the country comes out of lockdown and looks to build new ways of being.

3. Areas of concern

3.1 Ensuring that Gaelic is considered

Whilst it is right that priority is given to tackling the COVID-19 crisis, it is important to ensure that the progress made by public authorities to grow Gaelic is continued.

3.2 Young people

Many families choose Gaelic medium education (GME) for their children⁴. This starts in the early years, very often in community-organised playgroups providing language immersion, and continues into statutory pre-school, primary and secondary provision.

¹ National Gaelic Language Plan 2018-23

² European Charter for Minority Languages, Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005, Education (Scotland) Act 2016

³ National Gaelic Language Plan 2018-23; The National Islands Plan Gaelic language plans

⁴ <https://www.gaidhlig.scot/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Dàta-Foghlaim-AM-FOLLAIS-2018-19-egn-3-PUBLIC-Education-Data-8.pdf>

This is supported by out-of-school activities which offer young people sports, music tuition and other activities through the medium of Gaelic.

Since the closure of the school estate, education has been delivered online by a committed cohort of teachers and support services. However, for families who do not speak Gaelic in the home, the language immersion benefits are currently much more difficult to achieve and children's fluency in the language is at risk. This may result in families moving existing GME pupils to English medium education, thereby losing the benefits of a bilingual education and the positive impact on attainment delivered by the Gaelic-medium sector.

A further potential impact is the reduction in numbers of new Gaelic speakers, an essential development to sustain the language. The provision and uptake of Gaelic medium education is one of the central policies for language revitalisation so it is necessary to ensure families are encouraged and supported continue to make use of that provision.

3.3 Communities (island and rural)

Research published by St Andrews University⁵ in April 2020 stated that *Death rates from Covid-19 could be between 50% and 80% higher in rural communities and remote small towns than in large urban areas..* The fact that the Western Isles has an ageing population and contains the majority of communities where Gaelic is spoken on a daily basis, it is absolutely essential to ensure that any reduction in lockdown is introduced without any increase in risk to those living in the islands.

The economies of the islands and rural areas, which are increasingly dependent on tourism, have also been adversely affected. Many other businesses have been adversely affected, eg markets have been lost for the high-quality shellfish exported from the islands which sustain processing jobs as well as fishing boats.

The demographic projections for these areas are already of concern⁶ and the loss of income and employment is likely to further increase depopulation, another difficulty to maintaining the Gaelic language.

3.4 Infrastructure

The organisations which support Gaelic language and culture range from Local Authorities to individual poets, musicians and other creative artists. Although wide-ranging, the infrastructure is fragile and vulnerable to changes in public policy and budgets, the third sector's capacity to deliver and individuals' choices.

Many of the organisations which deliver Gaelic services operate in the third sector, with most relying on earned income in addition to grant-funding. These third-sector organisations in turn support a range of companies and a wide range of individuals who

⁵ http://www.cpc.ac.uk/docs/2020_PB51_Covid-19_in_remote_and_rural_communities.pdf

⁶ <https://www.cne-siar.gov.uk/strategy-performance-and-research/outer-hebrides-factfile/population/population-projections/>

create cultural content as well as providing tuition so that others can acquire skills and knowledge.

Although a number of activities have moved online, the current situation has significantly reduced the opportunities to earn that income. Without earned income, the infrastructure which is necessary to maintain the creative content which enables Scotland to present a unique perspective to the world, whether that be through Gaelic music, literature, television or other arts, is at risk of collapse and dispersal.

4. Opportunities

4.1 Diversity, inclusion and equality

Gaelic language and culture are a rich and intrinsic part of Scotland's identity. Ensuring that the communities of speakers, learners and supporters of the language are visibly included in route maps for our progress out of lockdown will support the diversity of identity and provide inclusivity for a small but extremely important part of Scottish society. It will also further demonstrate Scottish Government's commitment to equality. The inclusion of the following opportunities in the roadmap will support delivery of this aim.

4.2 Gaelic learning and skills

Bilingualism has been demonstrated to benefit children's development in many ways⁷. GME is a major route to developing bilingualism in Scotland. Although not a substitute for teaching in class - vital to support language transmission - the need to support GME pupils learning in the home has led to the adoption of innovative approaches such as e-sgoil national curriculum, learning resources sites for families, individuals creating padlets and many other initiatives. These have been an immediate response to an extreme situation.

There is significant scope for developing and co-ordinating these resources further to support all those involved in GME provision (teachers, pupils, support staff and families) for the future. Furthermore we are encouraged that the Education Recovery Group has identified a range of workstreams and we would strongly recommend that each of the workstreams deliberate on strategic development in both the English-medium and Gaelic-medium sectors.

4.2.1 On-line learning

Demand for services such as LearnGaelic.scot and Duolingo have grown during the pandemic and its important that we capitalise on this in terms of on-going learning and, when safe to do so, encouraging people to visit Gaelic speaking communities

4.2.2 Continuing services on-line

⁷ <https://www.bilingualism-matters.ppls.ed.ac.uk/>

Despite the obvious and tragic challenges that the COVID-19 crisis has created, it has also forced the Gaelic community to move on-line. This has increased innovation and skills across the community. It presents opportunities for greater connections across the Gaelic community in Scotland and internationally post-lockdown. The demonstrates the need to ensure that all homes in Scotland can access on-line services and the drive towards this should continue, with even greater urgency.

4.3 Culture

Since the country went into lockdown, the importance of the creative and cultural sector in supporting and maintaining a healthy society, and in particular good mental health, has become increasingly apparent. Efforts have been made to support freelance artists working in Gaelic and increased support for the artists and those who facilitate access to culture would build a healthier society. This is true in schools, in communities and in the economy and as part of the roadmap it is recommended that a renewed focus is given to supporting and delivering opportunities for all to participate, no matter their level of skill. The benefit of a rich culture is clear to see in the level of appreciation and demand for Gaelic culture throughout the world.

4.4 Economy

Gaelic has been demonstrated to have the potential to add growth to the Scottish economy⁸. There are two sectors where Gaelic is particularly important – Digital and Tourism.

4.4.1 Tourism

VisitScotland published the first Gaelic Tourism Strategy in 2018⁹. This sets out how the industry can respond to the clear interest by domestic and overseas visitors in Gaelic language and culture¹⁰. Since its publication, the growing interest in learning Gaelic has been demonstrated by the uptake for Scottish Gaelic in Duolingo (c.344k learners registered in 6 months¹¹), strengthens the view that there is significant and growing interest in the language and that this can generate economic opportunities.

As stated earlier, we are of the view that the restrictions on travel which protect the island and rural communities are of the utmost importance and so further tourism development which is dependent on physical travel is not an immediate opportunity. However, the access to services such as language learning, participating in online ceilidhs and other services and products which are authentically Gaelic can be increased particularly through the next opportunity.

⁸ <https://www.hie.co.uk/research-and-reports/our-reports/2014/november/12/gaelic-research-ar-stòras-gàidhlig/>

⁹ <https://www.visitscotland.org/about-us/what-we-do/working-in-partnership/gaelic-tourism-strategy>

¹⁰ <https://www.visitscotland.org/binaries/content/assets/dot-org/pdf/research-papers/the-lure-of-gaelic.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.duolingo.com/enroll/gd/en/Learn-Scottish-Gaelic>

4.4.2 Digital Economy

The recent rapid growth in Gaelic digital media creation and engagement provides increasing evidence of a digitally skilled speaker and learner base. Investment in new and emerging business models with a strong Gaelic digital footprint could help build successful and sustainable businesses, particularly in communities where distance from urban areas was previously seen as a disadvantage.

5. Conclusion

By engaging with the needs and aspirations of the diverse Gaelic community in Scotland as articulated above, Scottish Government can ensure that these members of Scottish society will be not be forgotten or left behind.

The opportunities for growth in learning, in culture and in the economy through developments which are based in, and take account of, Gaelic language and culture and help to ensure, that as far as we can, our children are educated, that businesses can reopen, and that society can function.

They will help to rebuild Scotland's economy, overcoming inequality and advancing human wellbeing and will be achieved through working with Scotland's Gaelic communities to build cohesion and mutual support.