

# Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2021

## Public Attitudes to Gaelic in Scotland – Executive Summary



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THE UNIVERSITY  
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# 1 Executive Summary

## 1.1 Sample

The Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (SSA) is run annually by ScotCen Social Research, with the aim of collecting objective data about public attitudes on issues relevant to Scotland. In 2021, 1,365 randomly selected people aged 18+ were interviewed. The data has been weighted to be representative of Scotland in terms of age, sex, region and other socio-economic characteristics<sup>1</sup>

## 1.2 Summary of findings

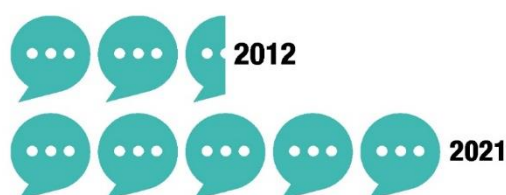
Overall, in the last decade there has been an increase in the proportion of adults in Scotland with some knowledge of the Gaelic language and in exposure to Gaelic public signage. The proportion of adults reporting exposure to Gaelic during childhood and recently in the media/online has remained stable since 2012, as has level of comfort with hearing the language spoken, views on bilingual signage and perceptions of the importance of Gaelic to the heritage of Scotland and the Highlands and Islands.

There has been a shift towards more positive attitudes regarding the language in a range of areas, including views on Gaelic education, the importance of Gaelic to one's own cultural heritage, public spending on Gaelic, and the future of Gaelic. The details of these are summarised below by topic.

### 1.2.1 Key findings by topic

#### Knowledge of Gaelic

In 2012 and 2021 respondents were asked about their proficiency in speaking and understanding Gaelic. Although the proportion who claim to be fluent speakers appears not to have changed between 2012 and 2021.



The proportion who say they can speak at least the odd word of Gaelic has **doubled from 15% to 30%**.

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<sup>1</sup> Weighting was applied to the data to adjust for non-response using the following variables: age and sex, region of Scotland, household type, household income, education level, ethnicity, tenure, social class group, economic activity, political party identification and interest in politics. Further detail is provided in the *SSA 2021 Public Attitudes to Gaelic in Scotland – Technical Information*.

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Similarly, the proportion who say they can understand at least a little Gaelic has increased from 25% to 41%.

Respondents were also asked whether they were interested in being able to speak Gaelic better than they do now, and nearly two thirds (65%) said that they would like to improve their Gaelic skills.



## Exposure to Gaelic

In 2021, as in 2012, respondents were asked if they ever heard Gaelic being spoken when they were a child, either at home or among their wider family or community. They were also asked how often, in the last 12 months, they have been exposed to Gaelic in the media or via apps/online<sup>2</sup> and how often they have seen Gaelic on road, street or other public signs.



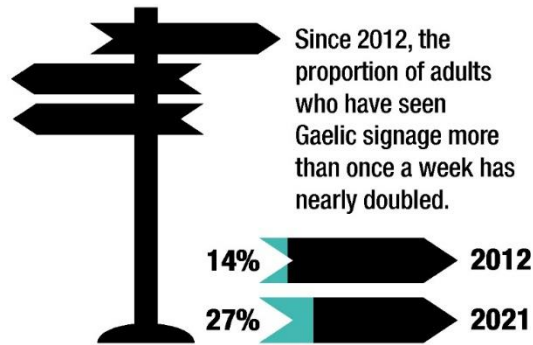
Just under a fifth of adults (19%) say they heard Gaelic spoken when they were a child, little changed from 2012.



Seven in ten (70%) adults have heard, read or seen Gaelic in the media or via apps/online over the last 12 months.

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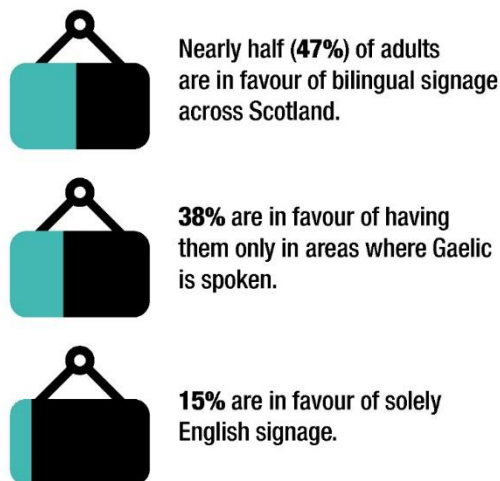
<sup>2</sup> The question in 2012 did not include reference to online or apps but was otherwise worded the same as in 2021 'During the last 12 months, how often have you heard Gaelic on television or radio?'



## Attitudes to Gaelic signage and Gaelic speaking

Respondents were asked how they feel when they hear people in Scotland speaking to each other in Gaelic. People are more likely to report feeling comfortable (44%) than uncomfortable (5%) with hearing Gaelic spoken, with little change since 2012.

They were also asked what they thought about having road, street, or other public signs in Scotland in both Gaelic and English. Attitudes to this have remained relatively stable since 2012.



This compared to 50%, 36% and 14% respectively in 2012.

Those who have seen Gaelic signage more than once a week in the previous 12 months are more likely than those who have not seen it to think that signage should be bilingual across Scotland (54% and 38% respectively). A similar pattern was seen in 2012 although the difference was less pronounced (55% of those who saw Gaelic signage more than once a week thought this compared with 45% who had never seen it).

## Views on learning Gaelic

In 2021 respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed 'that learning Gaelic gives someone a sense of achievement' and 'that learning Gaelic improves someone's chances of getting a job.' Most (70%) adults believe that learning Gaelic gives someone a sense of achievement. Attitudes on whether learning Gaelic

improves someone's chances of getting a job are more varied, with 10% agreeing, 28% disagreeing and 45% neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

## Gaelic and cultural heritage

Respondents were asked how important Gaelic is to their own cultural heritage, to the cultural heritage of the Highlands and Islands and to that of Scotland.

More respondents feel now that Gaelic is very or fairly important to their own cultural heritage than did so in 2012.



Most people think that Gaelic is important to the Highlands and Islands (**88%**) and to Scotland (**79%**), proportions similar to the 2012 findings (**91%** and **78%**).

## Gaelic in education

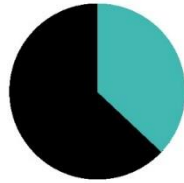
Respondents were asked how much they agree or disagree that all children in Scotland aged 5 to 15 should be taught Gaelic as a school subject for an hour or two a week. There has been a shift in favour of this to **55%** in agreement in 2021 from **38%** in agreement in 2012.



Additionally, in 2021 70% think that Gaelic history should be taught in all schools.

Following the launch of the 1+2 Languages Policy in Scotland in 2012, all pupils in Scotland learn two additional languages between the ages of 5 and 15. We thus asked survey respondents which language, from a list of seven<sup>3</sup>, they felt was most important for children in Scotland to learn, and which was the second most important.

<sup>3</sup> The list of languages included: French, Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, Russian, Gaelic, Polish, German. There was also an option of specifying a language not on the list under 'Other.'



Over a third (**37%**) place Gaelic in the top two languages that should be learnt.

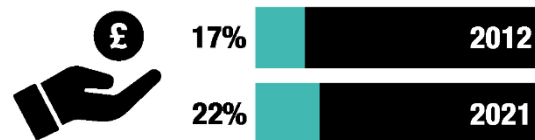
This makes Gaelic the third most popular language after Spanish (53%) and French (51%).

We asked respondents whether they were in favour of Gaelic-medium schools in Scotland, and if so, whether these should be everywhere in Scotland or only in places where Gaelic is widely spoken. Thirty-seven percent are in favour of Gaelic-medium schools, 38% are neither in favour nor against and 25% are against. Of those in favour 75% feel they should be everywhere in Scotland.

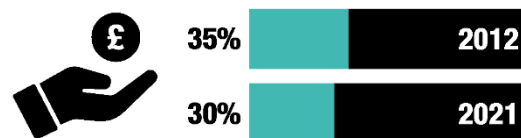
## Public spending on Gaelic

The Scottish Government currently spends £29m every year (around £5.20 for each person in Scotland) on promoting the use of Gaelic, for example in TV, education and publishing. Respondents were asked whether they thought this amount is too much, too little or about the right amount.

Since 2012, there has been an increase in the proportion who feel too little is being spent on promoting the use of the Gaelic language (from **17%** in 2012 to **22%** in 2021).



There has been a decline in the proportion that feel too much is being spent on this (**35%** in 2012 to **30%** in 2021). While about half of people (**48%** in both 2012 and 2021) feel that about the right amount of money is spent on Gaelic.



## The future of Gaelic

Respondents were asked whether they thought Gaelic would be spoken by more, fewer or about the same number of people in Scotland in 50 years' time compared with now. They were also asked if they would like Gaelic to be spoken more widely in 50 years' time. Eighteen percent of adults think Gaelic will be spoken by more people in 50 years' time (a slight increase from 14% in 2012), 55% think it will be spoken by fewer people and 28% think it will remain about the same.



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56% would like the number of Gaelic speakers to rise in the future.



An increase from 46% in 2012.



## 1.2.2 Factors associated with positive attitudes

There were three key factors associated with positive attitudes towards Gaelic – younger people, those with greater knowledge of Gaelic and those who have experienced greater exposure to the language are all more likely to hold positive views.

### Age

Younger adults (those aged 18-29) are more supportive of Gaelic in several ways. They are more likely to be in favour of bilingual signs, to believe learning Gaelic gives someone a sense of achievement and improves someone's chances of getting a job, to want more people to be speaking Gaelic in the future, and to be keen to learn more Gaelic themselves. In contrast, those in the oldest age group (70+) are less likely to hold these views. They are also more likely to feel that too much public money is being spent on Gaelic and are less in favour of the teaching of Gaelic history and cultural heritage in schools.

### Knowledge of Gaelic

Having a greater level of knowledge of Gaelic<sup>4</sup> is associated with holding more favourable attitudes towards Gaelic. For example, those with greater knowledge of Gaelic are more likely to agree that learning Gaelic gives someone a sense of achievement and that it improves someone's chances of getting a job. They are also more likely to agree that Gaelic language, culture and history should be taught in schools, to be in favour of primary schools where the main teaching is in Gaelic, and to believe that Gaelic is one of the two most important languages for children in Scotland to study. Furthermore, they are more likely to believe that too little public money is being spent on Gaelic and that more people will be speaking Gaelic in the future.

It is not possible to ascertain, within the scope of this survey, the extent to which knowledge of Gaelic enhances positive attitudes towards Gaelic and/or the extent to which positive attitudes leads to increased learning and knowledge of the language. This is likely to vary depending on the age that people learn Gaelic as well as on a number of other personal factors.

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<sup>4</sup> Knowledge of Gaelic is a combined measure of respondents' self-reported level of speaking and understanding of Gaelic



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## Exposure

Exposure to Gaelic during childhood and in the last 12 months through the media (TV or radio) or online (via the internet or apps) is associated with more supportive attitudes towards Gaelic in a range of areas. Those exposed to Gaelic in childhood and regularly in the media/online in the last year are more likely to be in favour of bilingual signage and of primary schools where all teaching is in Gaelic, to agree that Gaelic should be taught to all school children aged 5 to 15, and to feel comfortable with hearing Gaelic being spoken. They are also more likely to want to speak Gaelic better than they do now, to believe that learning Gaelic gives someone a sense of achievement and that it improves their job prospects, and to regard Gaelic as important to their own culture heritage and that of Scotland.

Those exposed often to Gaelic signs in the last 12 months are more likely than those who are not to think that signs should be bilingual across Scotland.

As with knowledge of Gaelic, it is unclear to what extent greater exposure to Gaelic results in feeling more positive about the language and/or to what extent holding positive attitudes leads to increased exposure to the language. Again, this would likely depend on how and when in their lifetime people are exposed to the language and on personal circumstances.

Further detail of the methodology and findings of the survey can be found in the full report which also contains conclusions and recommendations for future research.