

Place-based approaches to growing Gaelic and the economy - CoHI

Island and rural communities

Island communities contain the highest percentages of Gaelic speakers, and Gaelic is still in regular use across a wide range of work and social activities as well as in the home. However, it is well recognised that this daily use is in decline and that transmission from one generation to the next has diminished and that both confidence about the language and its visibility and use need to be increased.

Alongside the language context, there are also the wider issues of retaining/growing population that are regularly discussed in CoHI – economic challenges, lack of housing, travel constraints, connectivity gaps.

Growth in demand

Nationally and internationally the last 3 years have seen a phenomenal growth in demand for learning Gaelic. Duolingo has had 1.5million people engaged in learning since November 2019; SpeakGaelic and LearnGaelic, the BBC/MG ALBA/Sabhal Mòr Ostaig language learning initiative, with funding from Scottish Government and Bòrd na Gàidhlig, had almost 500,000 users in 12 months to Feb 2023, and provides a structured learning route based on a recognised framework for language learning.

In Scotland, the number of families choosing Gaelic-medium education for their children is growing though constricted by factors such as school estate and availability of teachers, both primary and secondary, and early-years staff.

Changing attitudes

Last year's report from the Scottish Social Attitudes' Survey demonstrated that public attitudes in Scotland to Gaelic are growing more positive and young people particularly, want to learn, and increase their use of Gaelic. Contributing factors for change include visibility of Gaelic (media, signage, etc) and its increasing popularity among young people.

Economic impact

The importance of Gaelic language and culture in creating local, regional and national impact has been demonstrated through a number of reports.

Locally, developments such as Cnoc Soilleir (partnership between Ceòlas Ltd and UHI Outer Hebrides) create economic opportunities through direct and indirect employment, provide educational and skills development for the local community and attract people to Uist to participate in Gaelic learning and activities.

MG ALBA and BBC commission programmes for BBC ALBA which promote and drawn on the linguistic and cultural heritage of Scotland. Many of the production companies are based in, or film in, the Western Isles thereby contributing to economic growth. This includes

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international commissions and co-productions, extending the reach and positive image of Scotland across the globe.

VisitScotland and partners have demonstrated the demand from visitors for authentic Gaelic experiences. While these exist, greater support is required to encourage and advise businesses how to deliver these confidently and consistently.

The opportunities

- Strengthening confidence in the communities themselves and in the worth of Gaelic language and identity
- Increasing the use of Gaelic by fluent speakers and learners
- Increasing the sense of place, identity and uniqueness of these communities
- Increasing economic growth in island and rural communities through expanding creative industries, educational tourism and place-based products and services
- Expanding this into a regional transformational opportunity for skills development and economic growth

Next steps

- **Public bodies** to ensure that they **regularly promote Gaelic** as part of the work that they do (eg, asking about opportunities for Gaelic in community surveys; ensuring that funding in the islands and rural communities specifically supports Gaelic as part of any development) and CoHI workstreams sustain and enhance Gaelic
- **Public bodies** ensuring that **staff recruitment recognises Gaelic** as a desirable skill regardless of the role
- **Local Authorities** and **Tertiary education providers** creating more opportunities for pupils and students to develop their Gaelic skills; and increasing retention of the skilled Gaelic workforce that exists
- **Funding streams from Scottish Government** to include a requirement to address Gaelic needs and opportunities as was delivered by Natural and Cultural Heritage Fund. This could be developed in eg Scottish Futures Trust funding, Levelling Up Funds, Islands Deals, or other future development funds.
- **Dedicated officer(s)** who work with businesses (private and third-sector) to develop increased use of Gaelic through building confidence, providing good practice examples, expanding networks plus access to specialist advice on how to develop products which use the language in authentic and high-quality ways
- **Creating routes to purchase** products and/or services for those engaged in learning Gaelic or with an interest in Gaelic.

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