

RESPONSE FROM COMANN NAM PÀRANT PORT RÌGH TO THE CALL FOR EVIDENCE ON THE EDUCATION (SCOTLAND) BILL

SUMMARY OF VIEWS ON THE EDUCATION (SCOTLAND) BILL

The proposal that a statutory process should be put in place to enable authorities to assess and respond to parental requests for Gaelic Medium Education (GME) within a reasonable timescale is welcome. However, Comann nam Pàrant Port Rìgh feels this fails to live up to pre-election commitments in both 2007 and 2011 which seemed to be the impetus for the Gaelic provisions in this Bill, namely:

We will guarantee in law the right to a Gaelic medium education at primary level, where reasonable demand exists, and actively pursue the Gaelic teacher strategy

2007 SNP Manifesto

[We will] Support expansion of Gaelic medium education and examine entitlement to Gaelic- medium education "where reasonable demand exists.

2011 SNP Manifesto

Comann nam Pàrant Port Rìgh's view is that a clear entitlement to GME would come much closer to delivering the Scottish Government's commitment to grow and strengthen Gaelic Education.

Statutory Guidance is required that should address various matters, some of the most important of which are listed in 2.4 below.

We would urge the Education and Culture Committee to ensure the Bill reflects the pre-election commitments as well as consider the extent to which the provisions in the Bill would be delivered through the Guidance on which the Bill relies to a great extent. We would ask members to consider recommending amendments to the Bill to ensure an entitlement to GME for those parents who wish it for their children.

1 INTRODUCTION

Comann nam Pàrant Port Rìgh offers this response to the call for evidence on the Education (Scotland) Bill, particularly in relation to the proposed provisions in respect of GME.

Comann nam Pàrant Port Rìgh is a member of Comann nam Pàrant Nàiseanta. At a local level, in Skye, a voluntary group of parents supports all aspects of Gaelic education. It organises and runs the local Rionnagan Beaga, Cròileagan and Sradagan groups, supports parents of Gaelic pupils, runs events such as Gaelic Halloween and Christmas Parties and is working with The Highland Council on the establishment of the new Gaelic school due to open in Portree in August 2017.

The latter has been a protracted process that highlights the need to compel local authorities to deliver on proven demand for GME provision and developments. By the time it opens, it will have taken 9 years to get a Gaelic school established in Portree with many of the children whose parents campaigned for it having left secondary school never having benefitted from it.

2 RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS ON GAELIC IN THE BILL

Our particular interest is in the sections of the Bill that seek to strengthen GME and we offer answers to the following questions posed by the Committee.

2.1 How significant a change in Gaelic medium primary education will the Bill deliver? Do you agree these provisions should be limited to primary schooling?

We do not believe this Bill, as it stands, will have a significant positive effect on GME.

We would welcome a time-limited process being out in place for dealing with requests from parents for GME. But will the local authority act on the outcome of the process, or simply ignore it or delay making provision indefinitely?

This Bill could represent a missed opportunity and if it aims to increase the number of pupils in Gaelic education and contribute to increasing the number of Gaelic speakers in Scotland, considerable amendments will be required to strengthen it and, in particular, compel local authorities to make provision once reasonable demand has been demonstrated.

2.2 What are the most appropriate ways for education authorities, particularly those with low levels of Gaelic usage, to promote and support Gaelic medium education and Gaelic learner education? What impact is this promotional work likely to have on the Gaelic language and the number of Gaelic speakers?

Existing legislation and Statutory Guidance on Gaelic Language Plans allows for the promotion of Gaelic education, including the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005.

On a very local level, promotion of Gaelic education is most effective from parent to parent and Comann nam Pàrant Port Rìgh has people trained through Comann nam Pàrant Nàiseanta's Parental Advocacy Scheme to engage in that.

We believe, however, that individual schools and local authorities should do much more to promote the benefits of bilingualism, develop the availability of GME and increase the number of pupils.

By the time the Gaelic school opens in Portree, through our voluntary effort, we fully expect a 30-40% increase in those enrolling for GME rather than the English language education currently on offer in the existing Portree Primary School.

2.3 Do you agree that the Bill “will establish a clear process for authorities to follow in considering parental requests for an assessment of the need for Gaelic medium primary education”? Do you agree with the thresholds proposed in the Bill in relation to the assessment of parental requests?

A process already exists through the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 giving parents the ability to request GME. However, since the process is weak, we welcome a clearer, time-limited process being put in place as proposed in the Bill.

Both processes are based entirely on parental demand and that carries dangers in that it is very time consuming, often exhausting, for parents to have to engage with an inalcitrant local authority.

We are happy with the suggestion in the Bill that a threshold of 5 pupils would be required to trigger the process for a full assessment of the demand for GME. But we also believe the Bill should go further and offer a right to GME in circumstances where parents of 5 or more pupils make such a request. Without such a right the Bill offers no more than a right to a process, rather than a right to GME.

2.4 Under existing legislation, education authorities must have regard to Bòrd na Gàidhlig's education guidance when they are producing their annual statement of improvement objectives. What will the requirement in this Bill add to this?

The Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 gives Bòrd na Gàidhlig the power to issue Guidance. It is very much needed - has been for years - and given that the Bòrd has not done so, we welcome the placing of a duty on the Bòrd to prepare and issue Guidance.

We believe the Guidance should address matters such as:

- A definition of what constitutes GME
- Assessment of a suitable immersion period to ensure maximum fluency
- The importance of favourable teacher/pupil ratios particularly at immersion stage
- A definition of a Gaelic medium school and what should trigger the transition from a unit to a school
- An appropriate Gaelic ethos in schools where there is both Gaelic and English medium education
- An appropriate Gaelic policy for schools that offer GME that outlines how the language should be used in the business of the school
- Parental involvement in their children's education and support to facilitate that
- Extra-curricular activities that could enhance fluency in Gaelic
- Additional support in the classroom
- Additional support needs in Gaelic
- Teacher training, CPD and recruitment

We also believe a review of the Scheme of Specific Grants for Gaelic Education could ensure existing funds could make more of an impact in developing GME.

Comann nam Pàrant Port Rìgh believes that CPD for Gaelic teachers should be aimed at building linguistic capacity through initiatives that help develop those skills in the community.

We note the recently launched Gaelic Enrichment course to be run by Ceòlas in South Uist. An example of a course already established in Skye is *Àrainneachd, Cànan is Dualchas* [www.acisd.wordpress.com], led by Roddy Maclean, which could help teachers build their language skills for the delivery of an important subject - the Gaelic view of the Scottish landscape. Several teachers have found this course useful, including one local teacher who has taught in GME for decades.

2.5 Overall, to what extent will the Bill help to deliver the Scottish Government's commitments to grow and strengthen Gaelic education?

Given the challenging target in the National Gaelic Language Plan to double the P1 intake in GME by 2017, local authorities need to play their part by expanding existing GME provision, making new provision, as well as employing and retaining teachers.

As it stands, the Bill has little prospect of helping to deliver the Scottish Government's commitments to grow and strengthen Gaelic education. It offers no more than the right to a process when it should be about offering a right to access GME.

Consequently, parents could make a request, an authority could respond having done a full assessment and, even in circumstances where the authority supports the request, there will be no duty on the authority to do anything about making the requested provision.

In this respect we would ask the Committee to consider how best local authorities could be required to respond to a request for GME where reasonable demand has been proven and the

authority has produced a report that confirms such within the time period specified in Section 11 of the Bill. The Bill places a duty on authorities to produce a report but no duty on authorities to do anything as a result of the report.

2.6 What potential impact on other educational services might arise from the local authority having to implement these new duties?

Comann nam Pàrant Port Rìgh believes that, in terms of finance, there should be no negative impact on other education services as a result of local authorities having to implement the new duties in this Bill.

In educational terms the implementation of the duties in the Bill, if strengthened, could see the expansion of an excellent example of bilingual education which has a proven record of pupils that perform, in general, better than their monolingual peers. Therefore, an increase in the numbers of pupils in GME would contribute to raised attainment in Scottish education - a topical subject.

All children have a legal right to education and once class sizes reach the stage where they are similar in size in both Gaelic and English, there are no additional costs in making GME provision. In any case the Scottish Government has a Scheme of Specific Grants for Gaelic Education, designed to ensure initial costs of making GME provision do not impact negatively on other local authority services. We believe the scheme should be enhanced and more money put towards it, if that is what is required to ensure expansion in GME.

Lack of senior management support for Gaelic teachers is a significant problem. Many local authorities do not offer specialist help from people with the requisite managerial, educational and linguistic skills. Guidance should address this matter.

3 CONCLUSION

It is Comann nam Pàrant Port Rìgh's view that nothing less than a clear entitlement to GME is required if there is to be step change in GME provision, development and expansion.

Strong, clear, Statutory Guidance is also a must along with a mechanism that will compel all those to whom it should apply to adhere to it.

Simply put, without some compulsion, Comann nam Pàrant Port Rìgh believes very little will be achieved and the commitments made by the Scottish Government prior to election will be rendered undeliverable, along with the targets in the National Gaelic Language Plan 2012-17.

It is our view that the Education and Culture Committee should focus particularly on strengthening Section 11 of the Bill to ensure that a right to GME is delivered, as promised.

Comann nam Pàrant Port Rìgh

May 2015