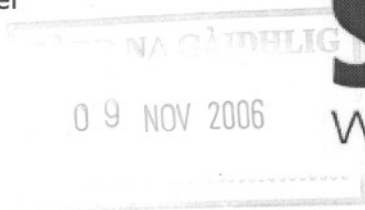


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**SNP**   
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Dear Sir/Madam,

The SNP welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation on the National Plan for Gaelic, and indeed welcomes the efforts which have gone into producing so extensive a set of proposals.

We also warmly welcome the fact that the Plan is taking seriously the need to redress the decline of Gaelic, a decline which has in large part been the product of very deliberate government policy until recent years, not least through the policy of the education system.

There is a clear need in any language plan to recognise where it is we start from. Gaelic is in a precarious state of health. While the SNP would strongly applaud the many efforts which have been made in the field of the Gaelic arts, broadcasting and education, we believe it equally important that we start out by staring some uncomfortable facts squarely in the face. Take one example: If you stand at a bus stop in rural Lewis you will now virtually *never* hear pupils on their way to secondary school speaking to each other in Gaelic. If we are to succeed in bringing Gaelic back from the brink, we have to be very careful not to be seduced by our own publicity – we must not allow ourselves to imagine there has been a genuine Gaelic revival, as yet.

That said, one of the heartening things in the Plan is the existence of targets in terms of numbers of people who we should aim to hear speaking Gaelic. Interestingly, the SNP asked a number of parliamentary questions around 2000, asking how many Gaelic speakers the Executive wanted there to be in Scotland by the censuses of 2011 and 2022, and got the disappointing reply that the Executive had no particular numbers in mind. The SNP would hope that the Executive has changed its position on this question in light of the aims set out in the Plan.

These aims are modest, however, to say the least. The target of 1% of Scots speaking Gaelic by 2011 actually represents a *decline* on the proportion speaking the language in 2001. This meagre target would cause the SNP less anxiety were the Plan also to specify a figure for the 2021 census, a target which at the very least should seek to bring the proportion back up to 2001 levels. That would be a very modest ambition indeed.

The structure of the plan is very helpful in setting out the areas of language planning which need to be undertaken, though the extent to which these plans prove meaningful will depend on the extent to which the Executive itself is willing to commit resources to back them up.

Rightly, the Plan acknowledges the central role of education, and the great success of Gaelic medium education to date. However, the numbers of children in Gaelic medium education at the moment are – bluntly – too small for any language to survive on in the long term. Provision is patchy to put it mildly. In Islay, for instance, there is only one primary school on the whole island with a

Gaelic medium unit.

The SNP welcomes the frank acknowledgement that a shortage of Gaelic teachers has halted growth, and now calls on the Executive to commit resources to rectifying this problem.

The SNP would welcome the Plan's call for steady growth in Gaelic medium education, but it is up to the Executive to say what that means in terms of its commitment to achieving such growth. Again, an indication of the kind of numbers we want to aim for in the medium term would be helpful.

There are some questions about the provision of Gaelic medium primary education which are, in a sense, easier for local authorities in cities to answer than in the Gaidhealtachd itself. The SNP would endorse the view that the ideal way of ensuring children actually *use* Gaelic is by setting up dedicated Gaelic schools, where the lingua franca is Gaelic (Gaelic is obviously not the language of the playground or even the school assembly in a school which has some pupils being taught in Gaelic and others in English). Local authorities now need some help and support to ensure that the growing demand for dedicated Gaelic primaries is met in ways which are properly planned and which avoid the unfortunate stand off which took place in Sleat in Skye (a dispute which did not, in the end, result in a fully Gaelic medium school being established).

There is also anecdotal evidence that not all education authorities evangelise for Gaelic or even promote it very actively to parents as an option.

There are large questions to be answered – the report goes a long way to acknowledging this – about whether Gaelic is to be genuinely “mainstreamed” in to the experience of children growing up in what have till very recent years been overwhelmingly Gaelic-speaking communities. If it is, then we face questions about why virtually every sports club, virtually every after school club (with a few exceptions), and large numbers of playgroups, in Gaelic speaking communities are conducted entirely in English.

Adult learners are also crucial to the future of Gaelic. At present the number of adults in Scotland who have learned Gaelic to fluency is not high – in fact it is miniscule, though institutions like Sabhal Mor Ostaig have helped to encourage growth in very recent years. Learners, even those living within Gaelic speaking communities face a painfully difficult task to achieve fluency, sometimes requiring almost eccentric levels of perseverance. For instance, if you study Italian at a Scottish University, you are expected to spend a year in Italy. If you study Gaelic at University, there is no such expectation to live in the islands for a year, unless you are prepared to do so entirely at your own expense and then explain to a sceptical advisor of studies why you are dropping out for a year.

We welcome the emphasis on implementing the Gaelic Language Act 2005, (though we note that this is less far reaching than a previous Gaelic Bill which the Executive declined to support). The SNP would call on the Executive to speed up the process of ensuring compliance by public bodies.

Regarding Gaelic broadcasting, the SNP would welcome an increase in the hours broadcast, though it may also be worth considering that, in the case of radio, a choice of programmes at peak time might be welcomed more by listeners than a mere increase of Gaelic hours on one frequency. For instance, not everyone wants to listen to the same type of news programme on the way to work. Some audience research here may be necessary. The SNP supports the creation of a Gaelic digital TV channel, though would like assurances that this would be set up

in such a way that direct economic benefits would accrue to Gaelic speaking communities in particular. It is worth remembering all the time that Gaelic speaking communities cannot survive without jobs.

One essential aspect of Gaelic's future is promoting a much stronger sense in Gaelic speaking communities that Gaelic is valuable, and part of both a local and national identity. That means that Gaelic speaking families will have to be convinced that people outside the highlands and islands actually value Gaelic, as opposed to deride it – as all too many people still do. That in turn implies that people throughout Scotland will have, at the very least, to be aware through their own education that Gaelic exists and is of consequence.

The SNP intends to contribute to the success of the plan by forming a Scottish government in May which is committed to saving Gaelic. There is nothing in the plan itself which we would find unacceptable in government, and indeed we warmly welcome its broad aims. However, we will be setting out our own Gaelic policy in the near future, and this will identify areas where we believe we can expand on the Plan or go beyond it.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Stewart Maxwell', with a horizontal line underneath it.

**Stewart Maxwell MSP**  
Shadow Minister for Sport, Culture & Media