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Dear Peadar

Comments on the draft National Plan for Gaelic: Education – Early Years

I am writing on behalf of the Working Group on Pre-5 Provision set up by Comann nam Pàrant Ghlaschu in September of this year. The Working Group was established in response to the changes in GME nursery provision in the city which resulted from the opening of Sgoil Gàidhlig Ghlaschu in August. It has been charged with assessing the current provision, identifying strengths and problem areas, and devising a strategy for tackling these issues in partnership with Glasgow City Council and others. Our work is still at a preliminary stage—we have held meetings with the staff of all the GME nurseries in the city, and with local officers of CNSA, and are about to launch a consultation with parents—yet, already we have been able to identify a number of key issues which keep recurring. We are aware that our perspective reflects the particular circumstances of GME in Glasgow where the majority of children are coming from non-Gaelic-speaking homes (c.70% of those at Sgoil Gàidhlig). This presents a particular set of challenges which may differ from those faced elsewhere in the country, where a greater proportion of parents and children are likely to be fully or partially Gaelic-speaking.

In the light of our work thus far we would like to offer the following comments on the ‘Education: Early Years’ sections of the draft National Plan for Gaelic.

Firstly, we welcome the prominence given to Early Years education within the overall plan. As you acknowledge, this stage is of vital importance in the language acquisition of the individual child, and as preparation for school, but also it constitutes a key opportunity to promote the use of Gaelic within the family. The pre-five sector in general has undergone radical expansion in the last decade, and there have been made major changes in legislation, for instance with the creation of the Care Commission. It is clear that we are only just beginning to come to terms with this in the Gaelic-sector and while there is much to celebrate about pre-5 Gaelic provision, there are still fundamental issues to address and major obstacles to overcome. While we would agree with the objectives, priorities and key tasks identified in the plan, we note that they are general and aspirational rather than concrete and specific. Clearly ‘Early Years’ lags behind other areas of Gaelic-language planning.

‘Childcare’ vs ‘Education’

We welcome the Plan’s acknowledgement that there is a child-care, as well as an education aspect, to Early Years provision. We felt that the wording of some of the

priorities (p.26) should be made more explicit to reflect the reality and diversity of the pre-5 sector which encompasses nurseries (both private and local-authority run), professional child-minders/nannies, voluntary sector play-groups and other more-or-less formal parent-run provision. It is not clear what distinction you are making in your use of the phrases 'GM pre-school education' and '0-3 GM provision'. Does the former relate only to nursery schools? Only to the age-group 3-5? Or are you referring to the 'educational' component of child-care in general? Also, there are a number of references to GME 'teachers' meaning only primary and secondary teachers (p.47 'Teacher recruitment and supply'; p.48 'Teacher education', p.49 'CPD'). In most instances these statements apply equally to nursery teachers and we would like to see them rephrased/extended to explicitly include nursery teachers, as appropriate.

Accessibility

We welcome the Plan's acknowledgement that there are problems of availability and access, as well as uptake. The experience in Glasgow has been that where provision is made, demand increases to fill and exceed it. Despite the lack of publicity for, and widespread ignorance of, the available provision in the city, demand *for accessible places* greatly outstrips provision: only one nursery in the city offers full-day places and for every child currently attending it, there are two on the waiting list. Families are being turned away from GME and diverted into the English-language sector due to a simple lack of places. The two local authority GME nurseries/units are well-attended, despite the recent shake-up, but it is clear that uptake is depressed by the fact that they are able to offer only half-day places (2½ hour sessions). Given the considerable distances that many families have to travel to access this provision—often by public transport and with younger children—it is simply not feasible to do so for such a short period of time. And, of course, such provision is impossible for working parents. The situation in Glasgow has been exacerbated by the closure of the only local authority GM nursery unit on the south side of the city (which, in fact, *did* offer full-day places) in pursuit of a policy of centralisation of provision at a single central site. We believe this policy is a totally wrong-headed for pre-5s.

The lack of full-day places is also unsatisfactory from a language-acquisition perspective, especially where, as in Glasgow, the majority of children are starting out with little or no Gaelic. Proper recognition is not given to the fact that the vital period for language acquisition occurs *before* the child starts primary school. In our experience sufficient effective immersion is not possible in half-day sessions. We note that Glasgow City Council pre-5 admission policy states that children with English as an additional language at age 3 are given priority for full-time places, but this is not applied to Gaelic-speaking children.

Staffing

One of the over-riding concerns expressed by nursery providers is staffing. We welcome the Plan's statement (p.29) concerning the 'recruitment, training and career development' of GME staff, but would urge you to fully include pre-5 providers in this. One specific problem which we have identified is the great difficulty encountered in finding Gaelic-speaking cover for staff absence (obviously the presence of English-speaking staff destroys the immersion environment). Both this and permanent recruitment would be greatly eased if there was some central point of contact who would co-ordinate provision of supply staff on a regional/national basis.

Special circumstances of Gaelic ‘Early Years’

For instance, our general sense is that, to a large extent, GME nurseries are regarded as essentially the same as English-language nurseries, but just with staff and children who speak Gaelic. Insufficient allowance is made for the special needs of GME, on a variety of levels, and this needs to change. We note merely two examples: Firstly, Gaelic-speaking nursery staff are, in effect, at a disadvantage if they opt to work in GME. They must shoulder an additional work-load, for instance, producing teaching materials, translating documentation, etc, yet this is not acknowledged in their terms and conditions. Unlike their English-medium colleagues they have limited opportunities for CPD, and promotion (e.g. the post of ‘child development team leader’ which brings with it a modest additional salary, doesn’t seem to exist in GM).

Secondly, children are being prepared for GM primary education by following the standard nursery curriculum but through the medium of Gaelic. We question the appropriateness of this when the majority of the children in the room have little or no Gaelic. General education is hindered by lack of language skills, and language acquisition is hindered due to the requirements of the general curriculum. We believe that more effective use of the two pre-school years would be made by following a curriculum tailored to the special circumstances of Gaelic-acquisition. This must take into account the fact that for many children, their only exposure to the language comes at nursery (which, of course, is not the case for children who are acquiring English as an additional language at this age).

Co-ordination

If we have identified one over-arching requirement, however, it is for far greater co-ordination at a national level within the pre-5 sector. Inspiring work is being done on the ground by parents, children and staff but we are failing to capitalize on it due to lack of communication and co-ordination. Most obviously this leads to duplication of effort in the production of resources, and a lack of opportunity for sharing of best practice. There is widespread ignorance of the resources and support that is already available. Individuals and groups attempt to solve at a local level problems which need to be addressed at a regional or national scale and battles are needlessly fought and re-fought around the country. We readily acknowledge the sterling work done by CNSA but the level of co-ordination required is beyond the scope of a self-funding charitable organisation, however energetic.

Greater support at a national level could have a major impact on all aspects of the sector, not least on staff morale. For a start, a single point of contact could ease existing difficulties, such as those of recruitment and temporary staff mentioned above. It would allow even a simple thing like the maintenance of a register of Gaelic-speaking child-minders, for whom there is significant and largely unmet demand. A single national co-ordinator could facilitate the provision of things which can only be organised on a regional (or national) basis, for instance, peripatetic specialist staff (music, PE, etc.) for nurseries, and peripatetic play-leaders for play-groups, thereby creating viable employment opportunities. Most pressingly, however, a national co-ordinator could address the urgent need for a coherent Gaelic strategy for the pre-5 sector in all its complexity.

We therefore urge you to include as a 'key task' the creation of the post of national Gaelic co-ordinator for pre-fives.

In conclusion, we have highlighted what we see as three key areas:

- accessibility (specifically, full-day nursery places)
- staffing

and, above all

- a dedicated national co-ordinator for the pre-five sector.

We have further more specific suggestions, and would be happy to discuss these at a future point, if appropriate. In the meantime we will continue our work as it relates to improving nursery provision in Glasgow.

We are confident that the formulation and adoption of the National Plan will greatly assist us in this task.

Yours sincerely

Katherine Forsyth, Muireann Kelly, Elaine Michie, Catriona Murray
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