

Gaelic For All

Edinburgh

Guidance on Gaelic Language Plans – consultation response
plana@bord-na-gaidhlig.org.uk

9th November 2006

We are an organisation representing Families of Gaelic Learners with an emphasis on children and parents learning Gaelic through Gaelic Language in the Primary Schools (GLPS), and also Gaelic Language in Secondary Schools (GLSS). As such, we are very pleased that the National Plan for Gaelic gives weight to learners of Gaelic both through Gaelic Medium Education (GME) and GLPS, as well as adult learners. It is very valuable to have GLPS supported as this will be a fundamental component in saving the language and normalising Gaelic as well as increasing the numbers of Gaelic speakers to help achieve the critical mass needed for survival.

The document seems to comply with regulations and legislation as set up by the Scottish Executive and the Gaelic Act so in general it seems very useful, however there are several points that are unclear, mainly to do with seeking clarity and definition.

Equal Respect

This seems to cover eventualities although we feel it would be useful to have a glossary or definition of what you mean by 'Gaelic-medium services' because it is rather vague. We also had different interpretations on what is meant by '*where Gaelic –medium services are available, public authorities act proactively to inform the public of such services and encourage the public to use them*' because this would seem to imply that it might be easier not to have Gaelic-medium services in order to achieve cost effectiveness. Perhaps it would be better to emphasise the spirit of the language plan is to encourage use of Gaelic as much as possible wherever possible, especially in the first few years when many of the population have not had the opportunity of accessing learning Gaelic. This would have to be a very long term vision so that it could encompass the majority of the population to make it viable and endorsed by the populace as a whole. Up until such time as the majority of Scottish people are fluent in Gaelic it would seem more in keeping to try to encourage Gaelic use as much as possible but to ensure cost effectiveness for a population who are all able to speak English as well as Gaelic, that resources may be better spent on increasing access to Gaelic learning for everyone rather than creating bilingual forms and materials proactively when only a small percentage of the population would actually benefit from this at this time. As in Ireland and Wales, where most of the population are bilingual then it becomes of vital importance. So perhaps this could be phased in to encourage more confidence in use of Gaelic, and to develop greater access to learning for the population in preparation for when the majority of people are Gaelic / English bilingual in Scotland.

Level of Provision

We have certain concerns about the definition of 'Gaelic community' because it appears to be locked into location rather than the more general use of shared interest communities. There needs to be some clarification for the key urban areas where the Gaelic community is very different in its make up than the islands. There needs to be some statement to clarify that the concentration of numbers can be taken in absolute numbers rather than as a percentage or proportionally. This refers to macro and micro management – so that in an island situation

there may be a high percentage of people but this may only be a very small actual number, whereas in the urban areas there may be low percentages of people but this could be actual high numbers. Due to the dramatically changing profile of Gaelic speakers as more and more are now urban based, this must be clarified to assist council regions. It would also be beneficial to have some form of investigation or audit to determine demand or interest in Gaelic in local areas so that provision can be appropriate to local needs. The census information can be misleading or out of date and it may well be worth encouraging the investment of undertaking surveys in each area to establish what is required locally and the optimum provision for each area.

Confidence building

We are very pleased to see that non-fluent Gaelic learners are recognised as playing an important part in the Gaelic community and should be accorded equal respect; but it would be helpful to be more explicit and have a follow on sentence to state that these learners, consequently, should be provided with support and encouragement.

Structure

We have concerns about the open interpretation of someone requesting Gaelic provision who may not even be able to understand the Gaelic written documents and how this could result in antagonism when councils everywhere are trying to save money, yet may be obligated to produce forms in Gaelic either for very small numbers of people or even for people who request the form without appropriate knowledge of Gaelic. This would have to be set as an inspirational target in the future but with a longer time span to allow councils to allocate funding for learning and accessing Gaelic so that more of the population find Gaelic documentation relevant in their lives.

There is confusion within the clause: *The potential for the development of the language in different localities or client groups, or across the sphere of operation. Not only should demand be met and functions increased, but also demand and use must be encouraged and the possibility of new functions being employed in support of Gaelic should be explored. When determining cost-effectiveness, in many cases it will be more appropriate to compare the number of Gaelic users in an area with the number of people nationally who have one or more Gaelic abilities (as listed in the census), rather than comparing the number of Gaelic users to the number of people in an area unable to use Gaelic. The potential for development should also be borne in mind.* This section needs to be clarified because it is very vague and open to completely different interpretations. We feel that so long as 'reasonable adjustments' can be seen to be made, as with the Disability Discrimination Act, then this is a better spirit to try to encourage greater access and use of Gaelic in public bodies – and this offers flexibility needed for responding to the users.

It is very useful to have the clarification that: *the body's Gaelic plan should be designed to produce a shift in operational culture so that service and support are provided for Gaelic users and learners. Therefore commitments should be clear, unequivocal, precise and quantifiable...should engender a sense of goodwill towards the language community and seek to accommodate its needs in practical ways.* We feel the most practical way would be through expanding education and making it accessible for everyone, especially in responding to the changing profile of Gaelic speakers as increased numbers now live in the central belt and therefore merit having a Gaelic immersion college in the central belt.

We are slightly unclear as to which 'aims' the Operational Culture section is referring to when stating that *Individual Gaelic plans should seek to reflect the relevance of these aims to the body, and to contribute to the objectives of the National Plan, which includes the National Gaelic Education Strategy.* Could these 'aims' be written out clearly to avoid confusion?

Content

The content of this section is very vague and clarification is needed to ensure that all learners come into this category whether from native speaker backgrounds or urban areas with children learning through GLPS/ GLSS and with language transmission at home (from children to parents). The '*potential demand*' is very likely to be created from new learners of the language, and these may well be the households which require that the '*aim should be to provide full support to any household wishing to use Gaelic in the home, wherever that may be.*' It would be helpful for this to be clear in the guidance documents so that all families feel included and welcomed and encouraged to develop their learning – and a key part of this is to have a long term and effective strategy for adult learners, with Gaelic learning available to support GLPS / GLSS families at home, and for adults wishing to progress their learning to fluency whilst still able to stay at home in urban areas.

It is helpful in the last paragraph to identify and clarify that: *the location of Gaelic education (as a subject or as a medium of tuition) should be dictated by reasonable demand, whatever that may be. However, the more significant Gaelic is locally in the community, the greater the expectation should be that demand for Gaelic (as a subject or as a medium of tuition) will be encouraged.* Children learning through GLPS and GLSS are clearly seen to be given recognition of their Gaelic learning and merit support as a result and many councils have been confused about this before so this is a very helpful statement.

The examples given are obviously of a wish list for the future and therefore cannot be expected to be implemented for some time, particularly until such time as the majority of the population have competency in Gaelic to make these scenarios valid and viable (as in Ireland and Wales where all the children learn the language in local schools and so are all competent to some level).

There are concerns about exclusion and discrimination for people who have not had the opportunity to learn Gaelic or become fluent – and some of the statements must be clarified, to prevent resentment and a sense of 'us and them' and potential antagonism towards Gaelic. There are also some issues that may be perceived to over-rule basic equal opportunity legislation and the commitment of the Scottish Executive to ensure open and inclusive policies for all public bodies. Again, the spirit of the guidance may be better demonstrated by using terminology such as 'reasonable adjustment' and workplace strategic planning for training, and this offers greater flexibility and equal opportunity.

For example:

- *Use of Gaelic as the principal language where significant proportion of potential participants are Gaelic speakers (this could surely only happen if translation were to be provided so as to be seen to be open and inclusive)*
- *Gaelic-speaking staff always available and identified*
- *Indication on all forms, irrespective of language, that they may be completed in Gaelic*
- *All posts in Gaelic work environments to be designated Gaelic-essential*
- *All posts working specifically with or through the language to be designated Gaelic-essential*
- *Gaelic-only or Gaelic-predominant advertising of Gaelic-essential posts*
- *Staff development and redeployment to take account of family participation in, or intention to participate in, Gaelic-medium education*
- *Introduction of Gaelic-medium education as standard provision, where 40% of the local population by civil parish or a significant numerical concentration are shown by the latest census to have a Gaelic language skill (would probably be better to respond to demand in a more flexible manner to avoid antagonism)*

What seems to be missing is continuity in secondary school for children learning through GLPS and who need follow-on in exactly the same way to make best use of their learning. There should be triggers in place, and support, for GLPS learners requesting Gaelic as a language subject in secondary and it should be readily available as a national strategy from S1.

Workplace training is a fundamental aspect of the policies for employing Gaelic speakers (with literacy skills) and this should be embedded into this part of the document to encourage applicants to commit to learning Gaelic whilst employed as a part of the conditions of employment – particularly for those who have not had the opportunity of learning Gaelic whilst at school – to avoid possible direct discrimination (treating an individual, in an employment or service delivery situation, less favourably than members of another social group on grounds of sex, marital status, race etc and this could certainly be applied to not having been able to access learning Gaelic) or indirect discrimination (applying a condition or requirement in an employment or service delivery situation, which, whilst applied across the board, operates to the disadvantage of a particular group, for example who may not have had the advantage of learning Gaelic to fluency. - on the face of it, this could seem like treating people equally and everyone in exactly the same way, but if this treatment results in certain groups being disadvantaged compared to other groups, it's still discrimination). More clarification is required here to support learners who have all the other essential criteria for applying for jobs, and need only improve their Gaelic skills – as currently happens with BSL (British Sign Language) positions so that people can be trained appropriately whilst working in a position that requires BSL.

Resource and Service Audit

This highlights the need for workplace training again and that a provision should be made to include workplace training for any positions which require Gaelic as part of the essential or desirable criteria. The paragraph that refers to : *When there are difficulties in filling a Gaelic-essential post, either a proven Gaelic learner can be appointed with the stated and supported objective of increasing his or her linguistic skills, or someone with the requisite Gaelic skills can be trained for the post.* It is vital that training always be offered, for improving fluency when in post, to ensure that the most talented applicants are given the posts to ensure high quality provision and delivery, and with their commitment to learn Gaelic and become fluent whilst in post. On a practical level, there cannot be sufficient numbers of people able to take up the increased posts if all the Gaelic essential and Gaelic desirable positions are created. An excellent fire officer should not be turned down for a position because his or her Gaelic is not absolutely fluent, in favour of someone who is a fluent Gaelic speaker but is not as experienced or demonstrated the same ability in interview – or else public safety and service provision could be gravely compromised. The only way to avoid discrimination and antagonism on these very important issues is for Gaelic language training on the job if required, for the candidate considered to be the best on other qualifications and criteria, and with a commitment to improve Gaelic skills. This would still be in the spirit of expanding Gaelic and making it viable in the workplace, but on a slightly longer term vision which will ultimately include most of the population and therefore make Gaelic a valid and viable national language.

The whole document seems to have omitted a crucial definition on what actually defines a Gaelic speaker. Due to the rapidly changing profile of Gaelic speakers, where most speakers are now learners through GME or at Sabhal Mor Ostaig, and who live in the central belt, there is no longer a typical Gaelic speaker and all Gaelic speakers are learners at some level. Therefore there needs to be an equal and fair benchmark to determine the level of fluency required for application for Gaelic essential and Gaelic desirable positions.

More guidance is needed to determine the level of fluency – and perhaps the SQA should be involved in this debate to offer clarification and gravitas. Due to the requirement for so many administrative, warden and general staff positions, it would be unrealistic to require tertiary education level Gaelic because these candidates would probably be seeking higher status positions. Therefore it is most likely that Standard grade or Higher level Gaelic should be considered a benchmark standard for meeting the essential criteria. If people are anxious in interview situation, they may prefer to conduct the interview in their native English language, but so long as they have achieved the Standard or Higher grade level, they should be considered equally with other candidates to ensure that equal opportunity legislation is being met, and there is no indirect discrimination (particularly if they have not been able to access learning Gaelic beyond a certain level of competence due to restrictions beyond their control). This also overcomes any difficulties with literacy and fluency as the national standard requirements will have been met.

Bòrd na Gàidhlig must define the Gaelic language skills qualification required for Gaelic essential criteria in jobs, to ensure fair and clear benchmarks are set out for employment; and that these criteria satisfy legislation provided by the Scottish Executive and which already exist within most public bodies. Indirect discrimination could result in a legal issue as people become aware of the potential inequity of the Gaelic Act if there is a significant increase in jobs for Gaelic speakers only, and people qualified in other criteria are rejected on the grounds of not being able to speak Gaelic and as a result there could be antagonism towards a perceived policy of ‘jobs for the boys’. It is important not to endanger the goodwill that exists towards Gaelic at the moment. In order for Gaelic to thrive it must be nurtured by the majority of the population. We are at a crossroads at the moment to determine the future of Gaelic and it will be the responsibility of Bòrd na Gàidhlig to act in the best interests of the language by maintaining goodwill and making the Gaelic Act a positive enhancement for the population, and to offer fair guidelines for the very contentious employment issues that are still unresolved. Lack of fluency in Gaelic can be overcome by workplace training and this in itself will boost the numbers of speakers and have far reaching family transmission value.

Public bodies could link up to offer Gaelic courses for combined numbers of staff and these courses could also possibly include adult learners hoping to increase their Gaelic skills, so as to most cost effective. For instance at the moment the Scottish Parliament offer their own staff Gaelic classes and these are for very small numbers whilst at the same time, adult learners in Edinburgh are unable to access progressive and appropriate Gaelic learning. With BSL learning, the Scottish Parliament staff attend open courses and this should be the same for Gaelic learning so that increased numbers reduce the tutor costs and benefit more people. This could form part of a national strategy encouraged by these guidelines.

There is also no indication of translation from Gaelic to other community languages – particularly BSL, which is another national Scottish language and this is of concern in media and education. In order to be inclusive there should be some mention of this to ensure a digital Gaelic channel would offer signing for translation to BSL.

There needs to be more emphasis on training teachers, especially GLPS teachers so that GLPS can be offered on a national scale to introduce every child and family to Gaelic in a positive way and therefore to increase awareness and create normalisation, as well as more speakers and therefore more fluent speakers and a real national language used by the all population. Again, this could be encouraged by these guidelines.

Many thanks for taking the time to read our response. We would be happy to meet to discuss any matters in more detail.