



EDUCATION, SPORT AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES COMMITTEE  
COMATAIDH NA GÀIDHLIG

23 SEPTEMBER 2025  
23 AN T-SULTAIN 2025

## **GAELIC SECONDARY SCHOOL – FEASIBILITY STUDY UPDATE**

Report by Chief Officer, Education and Children's Services

### **PURPOSE**

- 1.1 The purpose of the Report is to provide an update to the Comhairle about progress made in the undertaking of a feasibility study into the establishment of dedicated Gaelic Medium secondary education in the Western Isles.

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 2.1 In respect of an action in the Comhairle's Gaelic Language Plan for 2023-28, it agreed at the meeting of Education, Sport and Children's Services Committee in February 2025 to recommend approval of the commencement of a feasibility study into the establishment of a Gaelic secondary school in the Western Isles.
- 2.2 Approval at the time was conditional on securing funding to undertake the study. Shortly after the February 2025 series of meetings, funding was secured from Scottish Government via the Gaelic Capital Fund to cover the costs.
- 2.3 Since securing funding, the Comhairle has identified a partnership with a research team from Edinburgh University to undertake the initial phase of the Feasibility Study. Scoping and planning have been completed and a consultancy agreement has been reached to permit commencement of the study.
- 2.4 This stage of the study will primarily focus on the legal standing, business case, demand, views of stakeholders, economic needs and initial delivery considerations. The research will involve a combination of on-site fieldwork, questionnaires, surveys, online meetings and off-site research and review. The fieldwork phase is expected to commence on 22 September 2025.
- 2.5 Given the scope of work required and upon advice received from the research team, it is expected that a report will be complete in time to present to the Comhairle in time for the February 2026 committee series.
- 2.6 Subsequent elements of the study will consider matters relating to governance structures, location, operations and estates.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 3.1 **It is recommended that the Comhairle note the Report.**

Contact Officer: Donald Macleod, Chief Officer, Education and Children's Services

Appendix:

Background Papers: ESCS Committee Report: Gaelic Secondary School 04 February 2025



## IMPLICATIONS

4.1 The following implications are applicable in terms of the Report.

| Resource Implications   | Implications/None  |
|-------------------------|--|
| Financial               | The feasibility study has been fully funded through a grant from Scottish Government Gaelic capital Fund. A proportion of the funds have been allocated to the first stage study with Edinburgh University   |
| Legal                   | None in relation to the recommendation of the report.  |
| Staffing                | None in relation to the recommendation of the report.  |
| Assets and Property     | None in relation to the recommendation of the report.  |
|                         |  |
| Strategic Implications  | Implications/None  |
| Risk                    | <b>Strategic Risk Register:</b> None   |
| Equalities/Child Rights | None relating to the proposed recommendation, but the study will consider the need for any equality impact assessments and which articles of the UNCRC that may be applicable.   |
| Corporate Strategy      | <p><b>Support Children, Families and Young People:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Raise ambition and attainment, in particular to address inequalities.</li> <li>- Continue to invest in schools which are the heart of our communities.</li> <li>- Support children and their families to be health and active.</li> </ul> <p><b>Support Resilient Communities and Quality of Life:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The Gaelic language, natural heritage and culture of our communities is supported and promoted.</li> </ul> <p><b>Strengthen the Local Economy:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Support our small and medium-sized businesses to be established and grow, in part through greater use of Gaelic as an asset.</li> </ul> <p><b>Gaelic Language Plan Strategic Priorities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Continue to examine the merits of Gaelic standalone schools in the Western Isles in line with Government Policy and the National Gaelic Language Plan.</li> <li>- Extend the GM secondary curriculum offer equitably across all schools in line with national developments linked to the OECD Review.</li> </ul> |
| Environmental Impact    | None   |
| Consultation            | Consultation with stakeholders in included within the study and findings will be included in the subsequent report to the committee.   |



## BACKGROUND

- 5.1 Since the first Gaelic Medium primary school provision was established in the Western Isles in 1986, with four pupils in Breasclete School, the Comhairle's commitment to Gaelic has seen that grow to nearly 50% of our primary pupils across the islands being educated through the medium of Gaelic. Over that time, provision for Gaelic Medium Education (GME) has also been made in our four secondary schools to permit continuation of immersive education beyond primary school.
- 5.2 2026 will mark forty years of Gaelic Medium Education in the Western Isles and, whilst much has been achieved in that time, there continues to be significant potential for growth and development of the provision, particularly in increasing the economic impact of Gaelic across the islands through strengthening of secondary education provision and its associated curricula.
- 5.3 The Comhairle's Gaelic Language Plan 2023-28 recognises the commitment to strengthen GME and includes two important strategic priorities that provide the context for continued focus on improvement in Gaelic Medium secondary education.
- 5.4 The Comhairle's Gaelic Language Plan 2023-28 sets out two important strategic priorities for the Education and Children's Services Department in terms of the development and progression of GME and it is in the interests of doing so that a secondary education feasibility study and consultation is progressing.
  - Continue to examine the merits of Gaelic standalone schools in the Western Isles in line with Government Policy and the National Gaelic Language Plan.
  - Extend the GM secondary curriculum offer equitably across all schools in line with national developments linked to the OECD Review.
- 5.5 The Comhairle agreed to proceed with a feasibility study into the creation of a dedicated Gaelic Secondary School at its meeting on 04 February 2025, and the committee decision was approved by the Comhairle on 12 February 2025.

## DETAIL

- 6.1 Whilst there has been important and significant progress in the delivery of GME in secondary schools, especially in the widening of the offer and number of subjects available, it is evident from school roll information and data from SQA results over recent years that the numbers of learners continuing to study through the medium of Gaelic and take qualifications in Gaelic language or subjects has been falling. As a result, there are increasing economic pressures, particularly locally, including challenges in recruitment to posts requiring degrees of Gaelic fluency. This, taken with commitments in the Gaelic Language Plan, provide the impetus to review our current methods of delivery of GME in secondary schools.
- 6.2 Furthermore, the recent enactment of the Scottish Languages Act (2025) places additional duties upon authorities and communities in relation to Gaelic Medium Education and community use of Gaelic language, including Areas of Linguistic Significance. This will be reflected in the work of the study.
- 6.3 In February 2025, the Comhairle committed to undertake a feasibility study subject to securing funding. This was secured from Scottish Government via the Gaelic Capital Fund and, subsequently,



Comhairle officers worked to identify a delivery partner to undertake the study. A partnership was made with researchers from Edinburgh University with considerable experience in conducting research into Gaelic language and education. A consultancy agreement was reached, and the final scoping of the initial feasibility study was agreed.

- 6.4 The first stage of the study will consider the following areas:
- Existing research – Review of research into multi-lingual education (Scotland and International)
  - Legal standing – the legislative considerations for establishing such a provision
  - Service business case – considering potential demand, views of stakeholders
  - Economic business case – economic demand for Gaelic, qualifications, employability, post-school education, etc.
  - Needs analysis – analysis of findings of service and economic business cases to consider what resource/provision is needed.
  - High-level delivery considerations – staffing, management structures etc.
  - Scalability – early consideration of potential for growth and future developments.
- 6.5 The study will involve a combination of review of evidence, desktop research and fieldwork. The fieldwork will focus on visiting schools, meeting staff pupils and parents, completing questionnaires and consulting with community and business stakeholders. The fieldwork stage will involve a two-week period of activity on-island commencing from 22 September 2025. Fieldwork in this phase will predominantly focus on Lewis and Harris.
- 6.6 Based on information from the research team about the time needed to undertake the above work and to produce a comprehensive report, it has been advised that a final report of findings will be available to present to the Education, Sport and Children's Services Committee in February 2026, rather than the initially planned November 2025.
- 6.7 When the findings of this stage of the study are known and considered, focus will move to other elements of the study such as potential buildings and estates.

## CONCLUSION

- 7.1 Following agreement to commence a feasibility study into the establishment of a dedicated Gaelic Medium Secondary School in the Western Isles, funding for the study has been received from Scottish Government and a research team from Edinburgh University has been commissioned to undertake the first stage. Fieldwork for the study commences on 22 September 2025 and a final report is expected in February 2026.

