



Gaelic Secondary School – Feasibility Study and Preliminary Consultation

Report by Chief Officer, Education and Children's Services

PURPOSE

- 1.1 The purpose of the Report is to provide the Comhairle with information in respect of the commitment in the Comhairle's Gaelic Plan 2023-2028 to examine the merits of Gaelic standalone schools and to consider a proposal to conduct a feasibility study and preliminary consultation.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 2.1 Consideration of the establishment of a dedicated secondary Gaelic school is in line with the strategic priorities identified in the Comhairle's Gaelic Language Plan for 2023-28 in which it states that the Comhairle will continue to examine the merits of standalone Gaelic schools. Such work also aligns strongly with the Comhairle's Corporate Strategy 2022-27 in terms of at least five of the strategic priorities.
- 2.2 Gaelic Medium Education is well established in the Western Isles, especially in the primary sector, with comprehensive provision serving every community across the islands in almost all primary schools. Analysis indicates that provision is less well embedded, consistent and comprehensive in secondary education, although there is continuing recognition of excellent work in Gaelic education that is happening across our four secondary schools.
- 2.3 Initial considerations indicate that the development of a dedicated secondary school has the potential to increase enrolment, improve attainment and achievement, strengthen vocational and post school opportunities, improve community and business partnerships and increase opportunity for culture and arts. It is also recognised that such a development could bring challenges and issues through changes to existing policies and current provisions, all of which require systematic analysis.
- 2.4 To ensure a full and robust exploration of the opportunities, options, challenges and difficulties, it is proposed to undertake a feasibility study that will examine options and consider viability of proposals. It will then provide information to support early engagement and informal preliminary consultation with stakeholders about what the study has established.
- 2.5 It is recognised that costs will be incurred in conducting the proposed feasibility study and, in recognition of that, an initial funding application has been submitted to Scottish Government seeking financial support to undertake this work. The commencement of the feasibility study and consultation is subject to both the approval of members through this Report and the successful receipt of grant funding.
- 2.6 Should both approval and funding be received, it is expected to be able to commence the study in March 2025, with an aim to submit a Report to the Committee in September 2025. This may be adjusted when the conditions of funding are confirmed and the full scope and terms of reference for the study have been documented and agreed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 It is recommended that the Comhairle approve the commencement of a feasibility study and preliminary consultation with stakeholders about the establishment of a Gaelic secondary school in the Western Isles, subject to successful application for funding from Scottish Government.**

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

Appendix:

Background Papers: [Comhairle Gaelic Language Plan 2023-28](#)
[The National Gaelic Language Plan 2023-28](#)
[Statutory Guidance on Gaelic Education \(2017\)](#)
[Education Scotland Advice on Gaelic Medium Education \(Updated 2022\)](#)

IMPLICATIONS

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

Resource Implications	Implications/None
Financial	An application has been submitted to Scottish Government seeking funding for the full cost of the proposed feasibility study and consultation. The recommendation of the report is conditional upon receipt of this funding.
Legal	None relating to the proposed recommendation, but the feasibility study will consider any statutory obligations relating to future proposals identified from the study.
Staffing	Subject to successful application, full funding will be available to provide staffing to undertake the feasibility study and consultation and to prepare a findings report.
Assets and Property	None relating to the proposed recommendation, but the feasibility study will consider any future implications on the Comhairle's assets and estates in the context of any proposals made.
Strategic Implications	Implications/None
Risk	Strategic Risk Register: None
Equalities	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>Support Children, Families and Young People:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Raise ambition and attainment, in particular to address inequalities. - Continue to invest in schools which are the heart of our communities. - Support children and their families to be health and active. <p>Support Resilient Communities and Quality of Life:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Gaelic language, natural heritage and culture of our communities is supported and promoted. <p>Strengthen the Local Economy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support our small and medium-sized businesses to be established and grow, in part through greater use of Gaelic as an asset. <p>Gaelic Language Plan Strategic Priorities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 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.

Environmental Impact	None
Consultation	It is proposed that the feasibility study will inherently incorporate a preliminary non-statutory consultation with relevant stakeholders.

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. This has had varying, and potentially declining, degrees of success and has been highly dependent on the particular Gaelic-speaking staff available in the secondary schools at a particular time.
- 5.2 The Comhairle has taken steps over recent years to further strengthen GME, firstly through the adoption of six Gaelic Status primary schools in 2015 (Bernera, Breasclete, Castlebay, Iochdar, Leverhulme Memorial and Sgoil an Taobh Siar) followed by the adoption of the flagship 'Gaelic First' policy for primary enrolment in 2020. These policies have been beneficial in development and uptake in the primary sector but have had less impact to-date on secondary provision, giving rise to a need to focus future policy on strengthening and growing Gaelic in this sector, particularly in terms of its importance to the economy and local employability and the role that secondary schools play in supporting that.
- 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.

DETAIL

- 6.1 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 proposed.
- 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.
- 6.2 The Comhairle has had a policy for many years of establishing provision for GME in every community in the Western Isles and enrolment into primary GME is available in every island community and in almost every primary school. It has been long recognised that the stated will of communities is to retain Gaelic language and the provision of Gaelic education within their own local areas rather than to establish centralised dedicated Gaelic primary school provisions that may draw young children out of their own communities to attend school. As a result, there is a strong provision of Gaelic primary

education that is available in every island community and, thus, primary education is not currently the focus of the recommendations of this report.

- 6.3 Secondary GME has been developed following the footprint of associated cluster schools, involving primary pupils in moving on to their routine designated secondary school, with GME provision continuing depending on the curriculum offer and staffing available in that particular establishment. Whilst this has permitted some excellent work to take place in supporting and developing the language over many years, including achievement of national qualifications and awards across Gàidhlig and GME subjects and high levels of participation in national events, the provision has been inconsistent, fluctuating and heavily reliant on specific staff deployment in each secondary school.
- 6.4 Current data indicates a drop-off in GME uptake by pupils as they approach the senior phase (S4-6) of secondary school and the number continuing study Gàidhlig language as a subject or taking other subjects through the medium of Gaelic is reducing. Of the GME pupils that entered S1 in 2018, 44% achieved a Higher in Gàidhlig by S6 in 2024. Within the same cohort, 62% achieved English Higher. Whilst some courses are available at National 5 through the medium of Gaelic, there are none taken at Higher. Availability and uptake of vocational and applied learning courses, such as foundation apprenticeships through the medium of Gaelic has also reduced.
- 6.5 As well as the attainment of national qualifications, there is evidence that interest and uptake of Gaelic has been reducing as students progress through the Broad General Education (S1-3). This has a direct knock-on impact to progression through the Senior Phase, post-school destinations, employment and the local economy where the value of Gaelic and bilingualism is recognised but demand for Gaelic skills in the new workforce is not being fully met.
- 6.5 A survey of senior phase pupils (S4-6) across the four Western Isles schools conducted in the autumn of 2023 reported its findings to Comataidh na Gàidhlig in April 2024. The survey of 382 pupils reported the following key outcomes that provide further evidence of a need to investigate improvement in this policy area.
- 39% indicated that the Gaelic Senior Phase Curriculum was suited to their needs as learners;
 - 45% reported that enough was being done to emphasise the economic benefits of bilingualism;
 - 54% feel the school ethos was strong enough in terms of hearing and seeing Gaelic;
 - 66% supported development of dedicated Gaelic secondary schools.
- 6.6 To allow the Comhairle to progress the first of the strategic priorities listed above from the Gaelic Language Plan, an application for funding has been submitted to Scottish Government seeking support to undertake a feasibility study that will examine options and consider viability of proposals. It will then provide information to support early engagement and informal preliminary consultation with stakeholders about what the study has established.
- 6.7 Should it be agreed by the Comhairle to proceed with the feasibility study and preliminary consultation, and should funding be secured to conduct it, a detailed terms of reference and guidance document will be developed to inform and direct the study. Funding will be primarily used to appoint an officer to undertake the study, conduct consultations and provide a report of findings. It is important to note that consideration will be given to the critical importance of supporting Gaelic Learner Education (GLE) in our secondary schools as well as the stated focus on development of secondary GME.
- 6.8 Upon conclusion of the report of findings, it will be taken to a future meeting of the Education, Sport and Childrens Services committee, currently projected to be September 2025, to share outcomes and consider recommendations that members may wish to take forward.

CONCLUSION

- 7.1 Whilst the Comhairle has seen much success in its development of Gaelic Medium Education over the last forty years, it is now presented with an imperative to bring further change to secure the growth and development of the language with consideration of the role of Gaelic in secondary education and the subsequent impact on the economy. The recommendation in the Report provides a first step in taking action to do so.