



PLANNING &  
DEVELOPMENT SERVICE

# THE GAELIC LANGUAGE IN HIGHLAND (a Summary of the Census 2001 Report)

November 2005

## Policy & Information Briefing Note No. 5

### SUMMARY

#### Between 1991 and 2001:

- Over Scotland as a whole, the number of people with a knowledge of Gaelic fell, but the number with deeper knowledge (who could read or write Gaelic) increased.
- Highland mirrored this national trend.
- The proportion of Gaelic speakers in Highland rose in some age groups under the age of 24, but fell in all other age groups.

- The other main Gaelic areas: the Islands of North Ayrshire, the north of Perth and Kinross and the north of Stirling Council Areas (4.5 per cent).
- The rest of Scotland (1.1 per cent).

The 1991 Census asked whether people could speak, read or write Gaelic (or any combination of these). The 2001 Census also included understanding spoken Gaelic in the categories with the effect that people were more likely to report some Gaelic language ability in 2001.

### Introduction

A report issued in October 2005 by the General Register Office for Scotland contains a full analysis of the answers to questions about Gaelic in the 2001 census. It compares the results with those obtained in 1991 and reveals a continued decline in the percentage of the Scottish population who can read, speak or write Gaelic: for people aged 3 and over, this fell from 1.45 per cent of the population in 1991 (7.8 per cent in Highland) to 1.34 per cent in 2001 (6.7 per cent in Highland). Despite the overall decrease there is some improvement in Gaelic language skills among people aged less than 16.

The report divides Scotland into 6 "Gaelic Areas":

- Eilean Siar, the main Gaelic speaking area, where 72 per cent of people aged 3 and over had some Gaelic language ability, more than in any other local authority area or Gaelic area.
- Skye & Lochalsh, 43 per cent, more than any other Gaelic area except Eilean Siar.
- The rest of Highland excluding Skye & Lochalsh (7 per cent).
- Argyll & Bute (7 per cent)

### Summary for Scotland Overall

- 92,400 people (1.9 per cent of the population) had some Gaelic language ability in 2001.
- The number of people able to speak Gaelic declined by 11 per cent between 1991 and 2001. The number who could read Gaelic increased by 7.5 per cent and the number able to write Gaelic increased by 10.0 per cent over the same period.
- The number of people who could speak, read or write Gaelic fell by 6.0 per cent between 1991 and 2001. However, within this group, the number with more extensive Gaelic ability, who could speak, read and write the language, rose by 6.0 per cent over the same period.
- There was a slight increase in the proportion of people aged under 24 speaking Gaelic between 1991 and 2001. This was helped by the fact that, for each of the ages 5 to 9, both the number and proportion speaking Gaelic increased.
- In 2001, a Gaelic speaker was approximately 5 years 8 months older (7 years 3 months in 1991) than an average member of the population.

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- A higher percentage of Gaelic speakers report that they suffer from a long term limiting illness (reflecting their older average age).
- A higher percentage of people with some Gaelic ability were carers than in the general population (probably reflecting the social fabric of Gaelic speaking areas, with stable extended families).
- People with some Gaelic knowledge had better levels of qualifications in 2001 than people without Gaelic knowledge.

### **Summary for Highland**

#### **Highland Overall**

Map 1 shows the net gain or loss in people with some Gaelic language ability, by settlement zone, between 1991 and 2001. It shows a mixed picture with a general decline in rural areas but some increase in the wider Moray Firth Area, albeit with small numbers with the exception of Culloden:

- The largest increases are in Wick, Dingwall and Culloden (the latter in terms of both numbers and percentage).
- The largest decreases are in Bettyhill/Farr, Dornoch, Aultbea, Gairloch, Glendale, Broadford, Fort William, Alness, Invergordon and Inverness.
- A general decline in traditional Gaelic speaking areas in the west, but with modest increases in Ullapool, Lochcarron, Sleat and Acharacle.

#### **Skye & Lochalsh**

- 43 per cent of people had some Gaelic language ability in 2001 – more than any other Gaelic area except Eilean Siar.
- The number of Gaelic speakers fell by 15 per cent between 1991 and 2001 and the number who could read Gaelic fell slightly, but the number able to write Gaelic rose by 8 per cent.
- In 2001, 47 per cent of those with

speak, read and write it, only slightly lower than in Eilean Siar.

- The proportion of 10-14 and 15-24 year olds who spoke Gaelic rose between 1991 and 2001, while, the proportion fell in all other age groups.
- In 2001, 78 per cent (the same proportion as for Eilean Siar) of children in married couple families where both the husband and the wife spoke Gaelic also spoke the language.
- It was the Kilmuir parish which had the largest proportion of speakers in Skye & Lochalsh in both 2001 and 1991 – 57 and 73 per cent, respectively.

#### **Rest of Highland (excluding Skye & Lochalsh)**

- 7 per cent of people had some Gaelic language ability in 2001.
- The number of Gaelic speakers fell by 13 per cent between 1991 and 2001. However, the number who could read Gaelic and those able to write the language increased by 11 and 17 per cent, respectively.
- The proportion of 3-4, 5-9 and 15-24 year olds who spoke Gaelic rose between 1991 and 2001, while falls took place for all other age groups.
- It was the Applecross parish which had the largest proportion of speakers in the Rest of Highland in both 2001 and 1991, although this fell sharply during that period, from 31 per cent to 19 per cent.

#### **Further Information**

The full GROS Gaelic Report and tables are available to download from:

[www.gro-scotland.gov.uk/statistics/census/censushm/scotcen/scotcen2/scotcen-gaelic/index.html](http://www.gro-scotland.gov.uk/statistics/census/censushm/scotcen/scotcen2/scotcen-gaelic/index.html)

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**Change in number of people who can speak, read or write Gaelic**

