

**THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL**  
**GAELIC COMMITTEE - 13<sup>th</sup> November 2008**

Agenda Item	4.
Report No	G/28/08

**STAFF SURVEY ON GAELIC USE AND ABILITIES**

**Report by Director of Education, Culture and Sport Service**

**Summary**

This report provides a summary and analysis of the findings of the survey carried out by the Council on Gaelic language use and abilities amongst its staff. This survey was carried out during the month of August 2008.

A presentation to Committee will accompany the report. This will be given by Chris Thornton of Craigforth HACS Ltd., the survey company who carried out the exercise and analysis of findings on behalf of the Council.

The survey provides useful information for the Council on staff attitudes and abilities towards Gaelic, reflecting a range of opinions, and overall providing a strong platform for further implementation of the Council's Gaelic Language Plan.

**1. Background**

- 1.1 As a commitment under the Gaelic Language Plan, Highland Council carried out a Gaelic Skills and Abilities Survey across its workforce during the month of August.
- 1.2 Survey forms were posted out to the home addresses of nearly 12,500 Council staff. In addition an electronic version of the questionnaire was made available during the final stages of the exercise. The information accompanying the questionnaire was also intended to begin the process of preparing staff for the implementation of the Council's Gaelic Plan.
- 1.3 The survey mailing and response collation and analysis was carried out by a third-party contractor, Stirling-based Craigforth HACS Ltd, following a competitive tender exercise.

**2. Key data**

- 2.1 A copy of the 'Key Findings' section of the final report has been placed in the members' library. Details of the principle facts, figures and conclusions are highlighted in this report for ease of reference and consideration.
- 2.2 12,467 questionnaires were issued to the home addresses of all core Highland Council staff. 4,360 responses were received representing a return rate of 35%. This compares favourably with staff surveys undertaken in other authorities. Highland Council's own 'all staff' survey achieved a 40% response rate when last undertaken.

2.2 This level of response is well above what is required to allow statistically accurate analysis to be carried out on the findings.

### 3. Survey Findings – Spoken and Literacy skills

3.1 Around three in five survey respondents (61%) worked in the ECS service with the remainder working across all other Council services. This profile is nearly identical to that of all Council staff, suggesting that the survey is equally representative of ECS and other Council staff.

3.2 The distribution of survey responses closely reflected the geographic distribution of Council staff as shown in the following table:

#### Area of Residence

	Respondents		Staff
	Num	%	
Caithness, Sutherland & Easter Ross	919	27%	25%
Ross, Skye & Lochaber	1113	32%	34%
Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch & Strathspey	1363	40%	40%
Outwith Highland	55	2%	1%
<b>BASE</b>	3450		100%

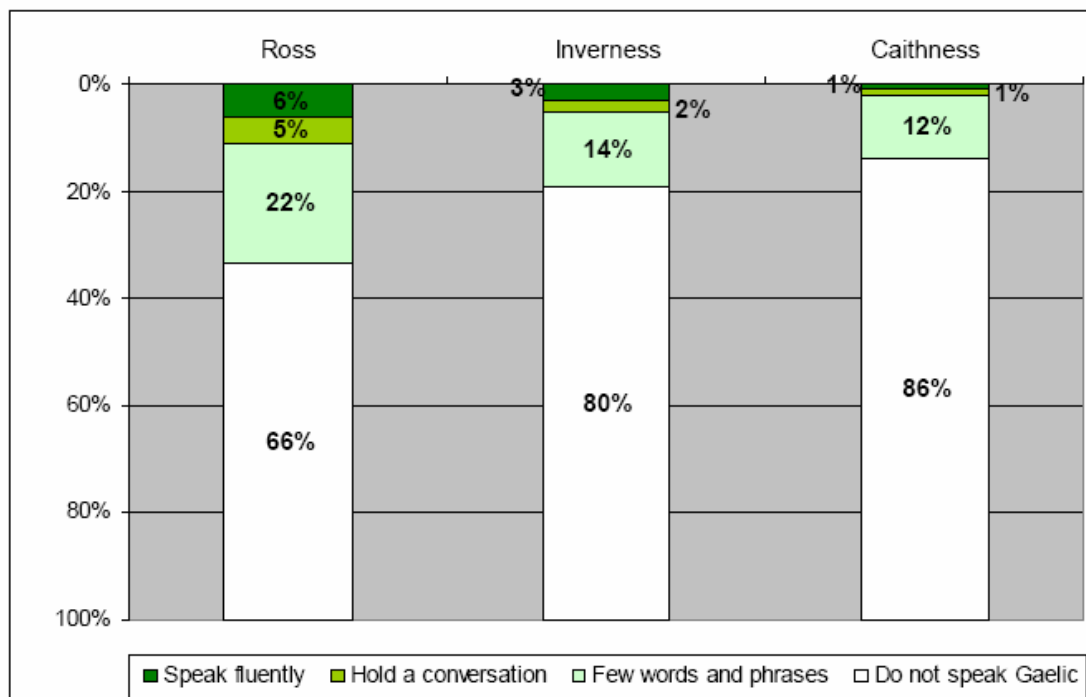
3.3 The slight under-representation of staff living in the Ross, Skye and Lochaber area is insufficient to significantly affect the representativeness of the survey findings overall.

3.4 Nearly one in four respondents (23%) said they had some kind of spoken ability . Most (17%) indicated that they only had a few basic words and phrases but 7% felt they were fluent speakers or able to hold a conversation. This is likely to represent the core of Gaelic speakers within the Council’s employ.

3.5 There were significant differences in spoken ability by respondent’s area of residence with those in the Ross, Skye and Lochaber being most likely (33%) to speak Gaelic. In contrast 19% of those in the ‘Inverness’ area and 14% in the ‘Caithness’ area reported some spoken ability.

#### Current Gaelic Ability - Spoken

	Num	%
I speak Gaelic fluently	152	4%
I can hold a conversation in Gaelic	121	3%
I know a few basic words and phrases	726	17%
I do not speak Gaelic	3286	77%
<b>BASE</b>	4285	



3.6 Overall the responses concerning writing and reading skills followed the same pattern and distribution although the numbers of staff indicating abilities in each of these categories was lower than for spoken abilities. This is likely to reflect the ‘oral tradition’ of the Gaelic language with some speakers having learnt the language at home and never having had any formal education in Gaelic. Other factors influencing this outcome will be the nature of the tuition courses which some Gaelic learners have followed – focussing more on spoken ability than reading/writing.

3.7 14% of all respondents said they had some writing/reading skills.

#### Current Gaelic Ability – Written/Reading

	Num	%
I read/write Gaelic fluently	121	3%
I can understand a text and write coherently	91	2%
I can read/write a few basic words and sentences	379	9%
I cannot read/write Gaelic	3695	86%
<b>BASE</b>	<b>4286</b>	

## 4. Survey Findings – Demand for Learning

4.1 Overall one in five (20%) of all survey respondents indicated that they were currently learning Gaelic or had done so in the past. Education, Culture and Sport service respondents were more likely to have done so than other staff.

4.2 Once again there was a higher response rate in the ‘Ross’ area in comparison to ‘Inverness’ and ‘Caithness’: 28%; 17%; and 12% respectively.

### Currently or Previously Learnt Gaelic

	ALL	Ross	Inverness	Caithness
Yes	19%	28%	17%	12%
No	81%	72%	83%	88%
<b>BASE</b>	3361	1098	1348	915

4.3 The Survey also asked employees about their interest in learning Gaelic, or improving their abilities in the language. The findings of this section are particularly important in terms of delivering on the Gaelic Plan commitment to increase Gaelic abilities amongst Council employees; and to manage the proposed 10% increase in clients accessing Council services through the medium of Gaelic.

4.4 As many as 38% of respondents indicated that they might be interested in improving or learning Gaelic. Of these 17% (707 individuals) were “very interested” in this.

4.5 Those with some existing Gaelic ability were much more likely to be interested in improving these skills than learning the language ‘from scratch’. 67% of those able to hold a conversation were “very interested” in improving. However even 28% of those with no professed Gaelic abilities were “very interested” in learning.

### Interest in learning/improving Gaelic

	Spoken		Written	
	Num	%	Num	%
Yes, very interested	686	17%	532	13%
Possibly interested	894	22%	782	19%
Not at all interested	2523	62%	2709	67%
<b>BASE</b>	4103		4023	

## 5. Survey findings – Use of Gaelic at work

5.1 Overall respondents tend to use Gaelic in their work fairly infrequently. 8% said they used spoken Gaelic occasionally or frequently, as few as 6% said they used written Gaelic this often. These same percentages reflect responses from those who are ‘comfortable’ using the language at work.

5.2 This slight difference in spoken vs. written usage is likely to reflect the demands of Council customers upon staff – for example staff may be more likely to encounter Gaelic users on the telephone or in person at a Service Point rather than via written correspondence.

5.3 A large majority of fluent Gaelic speakers and readers/writers use the language at work at least occasionally, over 80%.

### Comfort Using Gaelic

	Spoken		Written	
	Num	%	Num	%
Completely comfortable	168	4%	114	3%
Fairly comfortable	155	4%	119	3%
Not very comfortable	234	6%	188	5%
Not at all comfortable	1666	40%	1760	42%
Don't know/not applicable	1927	46%	1986	48%
<b>BASE</b>	4150		4167	

## 6. Survey Findings – Promotion of Gaelic by Highland Council.

- 6.1 The final element of the survey was a question asking employees how they felt the Council could better support and promote the Gaelic language – both for staff and members of the public. These answers were in the form of ‘free text’ box with respondents able to provide their views and comments in their own words.
- 6.2 Overall around 30% of respondents provided a response to this question. This is supplied in the main report as a substantial appendix running to over 70 pages.
- 6.3 The remainder (over 60%) offered positive comments to this question with the most common theme being the provision of better and more accessible Gaelic tuition. There was a strong response to the effect that some people wanted to learn the language but lacked the time, financial ability or means to do so.
- 6.4 10 % of all respondents indicated that they felt the Council should not further support or promote Gaelic. Some noted that they believed they lived in an area that “did not have a history of Gaelic use,” and there was significant opposition to bilingual signage.
- 6.5 A copy of the full report, including this appendix, can be circulated to interested Members. However the following are a brief selection representing the nature of the comments received:

*“Provide free classes for lunchtimes, evenings. Provide conversation group classes. Gaelic section on Intranet (with English version available). Worksheets etc could be posted on this. Pay enhancement for those who can speak Gaelic to a certain level. Which would give motivation to want to 'keep' Gaelic learnt.”*

*“Increase promotion in all primary schools - should have, at least, same place as French on the curriculum. Introduce signage in schools - this is already done for French and some other European languages, like Polish. Continue / increase provision of language classes for all levels, including immersion method.”*

*“The money spent on Gaelic is totally out of proportion to the need. The money would be far better spent on looking after the old and*

*needy. In the present financial difficulties in education the money would be better used to support areas short of money i.e. learning support.”*

## **7. Conclusions**

- 7.1 This survey provides important data for the Council with regard to the implementation of the Gaelic Language Plan. It provides a baseline against which future progress can be measured. Although it contains responses by those who do not support Gaelic language development, the substantial majority of responses are positive and supportive of such efforts.
- 7.2 The survey provides information on staff members who are “interested” or “very interested” in learning or developing their Gaelic language skills. The Council needs to consider what level of provision can be offered and on what basis, and the list itself will be invaluable in allowing such opportunities to be targeted to those employees.
- 7.3 One of the themes emerging is that staff interested in learning Gaelic would seek more support from the Council in doing so. This may include subsidised learning opportunities or classes being held during working time with staff allowed to attend.
- 7.4 4% of respondents to the Survey indicated that they were fluent Gaelic speakers, with 3% able to read and write fluently. If these figures are truly representative of the Council workforce as a whole then this equates to:
- 500 Gaelic speakers overall (300 in ECS, 200 in other Services)
  - 374 Gaelic readers/writers (224 in ECS; 150 in other Services)

It is unlikely that all of these Gaelic speakers are currently using these skills either at all, or to best effect in terms of implementing the Gaelic Plan and further consideration needs to be given to the best way in which this staff asset can be further identified and deployed.

## **8. Recommendations**

- 8.1 Members are invited to note and comment on the contents of this report and the associated presentation and to give initial views on actions that can be taken forward arising from the survey.
- 8.2 Members are invited to consider the principles of Council support for Gaelic learning opportunities. This can include provision of courses within work time.
- 8.3 Members are further invited to consider and comment on opportunities to better utilise the resource inherent in the number of Council staff who are Gaelic speaking or Gaelic literate. This might include recording and rewarding Gaelic speakers for using the language in a structured fashion during their work.

Signature:

Designation: Director, Education, Culture and Sport Service

Date: 21 October 2008

Author: Donald MacNeill, Gaelic Development Manager