

MINUTE OF PUBLIC MEETING HELD AT GAIRLOCH HIGH SCHOOL
22 JANUARY 2020

CONSULTATION ON A PROPOSAL TO CREATE A GAELIC MEDIUM CATCHMENT AREA FOR GAIRLOCH PRIMARY SCHOOL

Panel

Biz Campbell, Councillor (Chair)
Norma Young, Area Care and Learning Manager (West)
Don Esson, Area Quality Improvement Manager (West)
Ian Jackson, Education Officer, Highland Council

8 members of the public attended.

The Chairperson began by welcoming everyone to the meeting, and by introducing herself and the officials present. The meeting had originally been called to discuss the proposed creation of a Gàidhlig Medium (GM) catchment area for Gairloch Primary School. Copies of the Proposal Paper and appendices were distributed. The Proposal Paper had been issued as a result of statutory guidance issued by Bòrd na Gàidhlig (BnaG).

Q1 – Is this something that is being done Highland-wide?

A1 (Norma Young) - Yes, and we will speak about that a bit later.

The Chairperson then asked Ian Jackson to describe the consultation process.

Ian Jackson advised that, as indicated by the Chairperson, the Council is required to introduce GM catchment areas under the terms of Statutory Guidance issued by BnaG. The setting up of a catchment area involves a statutory consultation, of which this meeting was part. We were in the initial phase of that consultation, which was due to end on 31 January 2020. The purpose of tonight's meeting is to gather views, and we would try to answer any questions that are raised.

The formal process has a number of stages and gives ample opportunity for views to be expressed to the Council before any final decision is made. Once the public consultation ends on 31 January, Education Scotland becomes involved. They will look at the Proposal Paper, the note of the meeting tonight, and any written representations, and will form a view on the educational benefits of the proposal. Education Scotland will visit Gairloch Primary, and they will be keen to meet with any parents who wish to make their views known. The Council has to take account of Education Scotland's view on the educational benefits and respond to any points raised by their report, as well as any representations received as a result of the

consultation process. Following the completion of that stage, the Council will take a Final Report to the Education Committee of the Council. As part of the inclusive process, the Final Report will be published at least 3 weeks before it is submitted to Committee, and anyone who responded in writing to the initial consultation will be invited to make “further representations” during those 3 weeks. Any further representations that are made are submitted to the members of the Committee, either in advance or tabled on the day, so that members are fully informed of any issues that may have arisen. Members will also see copies of the original responses and the note of this meeting. After considering the outcome of consultation, members will then create a catchment, either as set out in this proposal, or in an amended form.

The Chairperson then asked Norma Young to explain the educational aspects of the proposal.

Norma Young referred to the Statutory Guidance on Gaelic Medium Education, mentioned earlier. When the Guidance was produced it suited Highland Council quite well, as we were looking at the provision of transport to GME even before the Guidance was issued. The current consultation was part of a rolling programme of creating GM catchments for all schools in Highland that offered GME. We had already covered areas such as Mallaig, Lochaber and Ullapool

The Proposal Paper sets out how Highland Council is seeking to make GME as accessible for as many parents as possible in the Gairloch area. In the context of tonight’s discussion, the references to the proposed GM catchment were references to the Gairloch ASG – the combined catchment areas of all the individual primary schools. We would like all the children within the ASG to be able to come to GME, if their parents want that. This approach is similar to that we have advanced in other catchments. The process has to take place over an extended period due to resourcing issues, not just in Highland but also in Education Scotland. We have existing transport that comes into our secondary schools, which can be used by those looking to access GME in the primary school.

One of the key features is providing clarity on entitlement to transport to GME. The educational benefits around the Proposal are set out in paragraphs 7.1 and 7.2, and we consider that the Proposal will help consolidate the existing GME provision. The clarification around transport will assist the Head Teacher in advising parents who are considering enrolling in GME.

Mrs Young asked Maggie Wentworth, from Comann nam Pàrant, whether she wished to add anything.

Ms Wentworth replied that it was up to individual parents to ask specific questions. CnamP would of course put in their own submission. There had always been a history of Gairloch PS being open to children from the other catchments who wanted GME. Given the small numbers attending Kinlochewe and Shieldaig schools, it was probably

unrealistic to offer GME in these schools unless all the P1s in a given year expressed a wish to access GME – that situation did arise in Bunessan (Argyll and Bute).

The other possibility for parents, who did not want to send their children long distances to GME, is via the 1 + 2 languages provision in the local primary school, and thereafter at Garioch High School, which has very good Gaelic provision.

Norma Young said that led nicely into the Council's aim of expanding Gaelic Medium provision at Gairloch High School. Currently the provision of Gàidhlig as a language is very good, but it would be good to offer other subjects through the medium of Gàidhlig. We are hoping to create a better pathway towards offering certificated subjects through the language.

The Chairperson then opened the meeting to the Q and A session.

Q2 – I'm the Secretary of the Bualnaluib PS Parent Council and also the Aultbea Community Council. I just wondered whether the Council had given any consideration to the potential negative impact. A school like Bualnaluib really feels the loss of a single family, which can tip the roll so that the school loses a 0.5 FTE teaching post. I feel it would be better if everybody got some Gaelic rather than a few people getting it all. Bualnaluib currently has zero provision for Gaelic and I think the Council should consider employing roving teachers who could provide a day a week of Gaelic.

A2 (Norma Young) – There are two things there. I know what you mean by the potential loss of a family from the school, but Highland Council is very clear that if parents wish to enrol their child in GME and they live within reasonable distance of provision, we have an obligation to assist with that. Your second point is important. There is money available to train teachers up for the 1 + 2 language programme, and the next step is making sure every school is included. The Gairloch area is a good case in point since there is provision for Gaelic learners at the High School, so there is a clear pathway available for progression.

I hear what you say about having someone going into a school one day a week to deliver Gaelic, but it is acknowledged that educationally it is better to have full immersion in Gaelic, with the same class teacher every day

Q3 (follow-up) – But that is putting all of the resource into a very small number of pupils.

A3 (Norma Young) – We are working towards a situation where all the youngsters in Bualnaluib would be able to do Gaelic, and then when they come into the High School there is a pathway there that will enable them to continue with learners' Gaelic, that they could continue up to certificate level.

(Ian Jackson) – We had similar comments during the consultation for the Ullapool ASG, where small schools like Achiltibuie were concerned about the possible impact on their roll, so we do recognise the issue.

Q4 (follow-up) – It causes a huge split in the community.

A4 (Norma Young) – It is the case though, that any parent can make a request for their child to attend a school other than their catchment school. That applies to any parent, not just those that are seeking GME

Q5 – Is there a timescale on the introduction of L2 in the local primary schools?

A5 (Norma Young) – We are working on that at present, and staff are doing the training. Later this evening we'll be looking at the management of schools, which should settle the staffing overall. Where there is Gaelic in the secondary school it's really important that all the local primary schools can offer L2. It makes sense, because it is another SQA qualification that young people might be able to obtain relatively easily, because they will have been studying it for a long time.

(Don Esson) – There is a comprehensive programme underway in Highland to train staff in delivering L2, because what tends to happen with the turnover of staff, is that a member of staff who has been trained moves on, and then there can be gap. There's ongoing training for staff to ensure that we've got that coverage all the time. There's a lot of work gone into preparing materials, and a lot of material is online, so parents can access them as well.

(Norma Young) – If parents are interested in having Gaelic, but they don't want to leave their own communities to come to Gaelic Medium they can still access it that way.

Q6 – Can I ask a question about the transport at paragraphs 6.7 and 6.8? Is paragraph 6.7 implying that although the catchment area is going to be open to all 6 primary schools, parents in Kinlochewe, Torridon and Shieldaig will have to arrange their own transport?

A6 (Norma Young) – No. They would be allowed to go on the bus, but we recognise it is a long distance.

Q7 (follow-up) – It's just that the text talks about an unacceptable cost to the taxpayer.

A7 (Ian Jackson) – That would be for dedicated transport. Children could travel on the High School bus. Some parents, and I mean generally and not particularly in this area, are unhappy with the suggestion that a P1 pupil should travel on the High School bus. We understand the reasons for that of course, but what we were trying to convey is that we may not accept an enrolment in GM on the basis of a pupil travelling in a taxi from Shieldaig to Gairloch. We are though here tonight to listen to the points that are being made, so if there is a lack of clarity there then we will take that away and look at it.

Q8 – What about the fact that at the moment it's a very small minibus. What happens if because of GM enrolments you require a bigger bus at additional cost?

A8 (Norma Young) – If there was an influx of pupils into GME then we might need to look at a bigger bus. Our Transport Unit would look at how best that might be done. What the Paper is saying is that there is transport available and parents can use it. Some of the worries that parents have had in other areas have not materialised. Often the pupils travelling on the High School bus are neighbours or even siblings of the primary school pupils. They are not the monsters that some parents fear!

(Ian Jackson) – I think the number of children who will enrol in GME from Shieldaig or Kinlochewe will be small, if any. There are only 4 children in Kinlochewe in total, and 9 in Shieldaig, albeit that latter number will go up a bit in years to come. It takes a lot of commitment to Gaelic to send a small child those kinds of distances, and given the very small numbers we have even for EM, I can't see there being many add-ons to the bus, if any. At present, I believe the only pupils attending GME at Gairloch who are not from the Gairloch catchment are from Poolewe, which is obviously the school most accessible to Gairloch.

(Norma Young) – This proposal is about clarity. Up to now parents have never been sure whether they would be granted to transport to GME. Defining the catchment will resolve that.

Q9 – I definitely think the section in the paper on transport arrangements needs to be clarified.

A9 (Ian Jackson) – OK, thanks for the comment, we'll have a look at that.

Q10 – My next question is about the numbers in GME now, and the teaching ratios. What happens if a family move into say, Kinlochewe, and decide they want GME, and suddenly we need an extra 0.5 teacher?

A10 – (Norma Young) – You can only enrol into GME in P1, due to the immersion issue. The only exceptions are where you have come from another GME setting or you are a native speaker.

Q11 (follow-up) – OK, but what would happen if new enrolments pushed the number up so that we required extra staff. Would they be told no?

A11 (Norma Young) – We can't refuse GME because we can't find staff. As you know you currently have 1.5 FTE teachers in the GM classes at Gairloch PS. The extra 0.5 FTE was left because in a rural area like this it is very difficult to find a teacher willing to work 0.5 FTE. That would also be my plan going forward. If we ever needed to recruit a 0.5FTE Gaelic teacher we would advertise for 1FTE and allocate them to other things as well as Gàidhlig, because the likelihood of attracting a 0.5FTE teacher to an area like Gairloch is effectively zero. We would need to create a package around a post, with funding from different sources. If the roll then went up they could become full-time in Gàidhlig.

Q12 – I am the Secretary of Torridon and Kinlochewe CC and the former HT of Torridon PS. A decade or two ago all of the local Head Teachers were from a Gaelic speaking background or were trained in Gaelic as a second language, whereas now they aren't. That change has hampered the delivery of Gaelic in the smaller schools. The distances involved in travelling from the Torridon catchment to Gairloch are ridiculous. If you were in Diabaig you would have to leave at 7.00am to get to Torridon to meet the High School bus. Parental transport would be far more conducive than sending a P1 child unaccompanied on the bus. As a Community Council, we feel that the Shildaig PS catchment takes in the Applecross coast as far as Rubha, and the area has close links with Lochcarron. We feel it is important that people in the Shildaig area should have the choice of going to Lochcarron, as people do in Achnasheen, where you have a choice of going to Dingwall or Gairloch. The children from Torridon and Shildaig go to Lochcarron for after school activities such as shinty, Highland dancing, badminton, music lessons etc, so there are strong ties. Shildaig and Torridon used to be officially part of the Plockton HS catchment, and secondary school children stayed in the hostel in Plockton, before they built the new school here. We think it is important that people are still offered that choice.

A12 (Norma Young) – There is I think, only one area of “dual zoning” in Highland, and it is around the Invergarry area.

(Ian Jackson) – Yes, generally speaking we don't allow dual zoning, and after Achnasheen School was closed, Achnasheen village became part of the Gairloch HS catchment whereas Achanallt became part of the Dingwall Academy catchment, so that's where the dividing line is now. There's no dual zoning in that area.

We will consider the points the CC have made around parental transport as opposed to the bus, but we will also have to consider the potential cost to the Council. I also take the point about parts of the Shildaig catchment being closer to Lochcarron than it is to Gairloch, but as Norma says, I don't think we would offer a choice.

(Norma Young) – We don't do dual zoning, and dual zoning would also be very detrimental to a place like Gairloch, because people who live in places like Laide might well opt to go to Ullapool, which would be detrimental to Gairloch HS. You might also get drift going to Plockton.

Q13 (follow-up) – It's a bit like the situation the Council faced when they tried to close Edinbane School, and people said they wanted to go to Portree PS or Macdiarmid PS rather than Dunvegan PS. You will appreciate that if people in Shildaig work in Plockton, or people in Kinlochewe work in Dingwall, then it would be much easier for them to enrol their children in those schools.

A13 (Norma Young) – People in those circumstances have the option of a placing request, and if there is space in the school then we would have to grant it.

(Ian Jackson) – The only thing we don't do with placing requests is to provide transport. In effect, the Council is saying that, if we provide transport from say, Shieldaig to Gairloch, we are not going to also provide transport from Shieldaig to Plockton.

Q14 (follow-up) – So if somebody in Shieldaig wanted their child to attend Lochcarron PS, which is about 10 miles away, they wouldn't get transport?

A14 (Ian Jackson) – That's correct.

Q15 (follow-up) – And if they did want their child to attend GME in Gairloch they would have to get the bus? They wouldn't get private transport?

A15 (Ian Jackson) – That's what set out in our Proposal Paper. Part of the idea of tonight is that we have to consider all the points made, so we will take another look at that. I have to be honest though and say that we will also have to look at the potential cost to the Authority, and in effect to the taxpayer.

Q16 (follow-up) – If the children were arriving early at the Primary School as a result of traveling on the High School bus, would provision be made to ensure they were looked after?

A16 (Norma Young) – Yes, and at the end of the day. That's what we do at present. The children would be looked after by a teacher if possible or a PSA if they were not in class.

Comment from the floor - I don't think it's an issue in Gairloch as the primary school day aligns with the high school day. They have an extended lunchtime in the primary to make this work.

Q17 – Can I just ask whether the points raised tonight will be noted for the consultation, or do we have to put in a written submission?

A17 (Ian Jackson) – A note of the meeting will be produced and will be made available to all the members of the Education Committee. Anyone who also wants to also make a written submission is very welcome to do so.

There being no other comments on the Proposal Paper, the **Chairperson** reminded those present of the closing date for responses – 31 January 2020 – and of where responses should be sent, either via letter or via email, or by using the online form. A record of this meeting would be made available at least 3 weeks before the meeting of the Education Committee that considered the results of consultation. The members of the Committee would have a chance to see the note and all other representations before the meeting. Following the decision of the Committee, the minutes would be submitted to the full Council along with the decision for ratification.

MEETING CLOSED.