

Bòrd na Gàidhlig's Response on the Highland Council Consultation on GME Catchment Area for Gairloch

1. Introduction

Bòrd na Gàidhlig welcomes the initiative to establish a school catchment area for Gaelic Medium Education (GME) in the Gairloch area. The Bòrd recognises that Highland Council is moving to the establishment of catchment areas where there is existing GME provision in the Council's area.

The Statutory Guidance on Gaelic Education and the National Gaelic Language Plan 2018-23 form the basis for the Bòrd's response to this consultation. The Statutory Guidance, where there is further detail on the steps involved, has as its basis that GME should develop and grow.

2. Consultation Information

The Highland Council says they want to establish a catchment area for the following reasons:

- The Statutory Guidance recommends that one be developed;
- There is lack of clarity for parents about the entitlement to GME for their children; and
- The Council has used the practice of providing transport within a reasonable travelling distance and generally this has been understood to mean within 15 miles of the school.

3. Council Recommendation

There are 5 primary schools within the ASG. Gairloch Primary is the only one to offer GME at the primary stage.

The Council proposes that the GM catchment for Gairloch Primary will overlay the English Medium catchments of all 5 of the primary schools within the ASG, but with restrictions on transport as set out below.

Approximate travel distances and times to Gairloch Primary from the other schools are set out below:

- Bualnaluib Primary – Gairloch Primary – 13.3 miles, 24 minutes travel time.
- Kinlochewe Primary – Gairloch Primary – 20.7 miles, 30 minutes travel time.
- Poolewe Primary – Gairloch Primary – 5.7 miles, 10 minutes travel time.

- Shieldaig Primary – Gairloch Primary – 36.6 miles, 61 minutes travel time.
- Torridon Primary – Gairloch Primary – 30.1 miles, 50 minutes travel time.

6.7 In considering the principles of Best Value Highland Council has noted that to provide dedicated transport from the areas covered by the Kinlochewe, Shieldaig and Torridon catchments could result in an unacceptably high level of additional cost to the taxpayer.

6.8 The Council therefore proposes that school transport to GME at Gairloch Primary from the Poolewe and Baulnaluib catchments will normally be on the basis of utilising the existing transport for Gairloch High School. Dedicated school transport will not be provided.

4. Statutory Guidance on Gaelic Education

The Statutory Guidance on Gaelic Education recommends that catchment areas are established for schools where Gaelic-medium education (GME) is provided (Section 2.53 & 2.54).

GME Catchment Areas and Placing Guidelines

Education authorities should establish catchment areas for GME provision and may wish to consider demand for GME when setting guidelines for placing pupils in GME provision.

2.54 states:

A catchment area of GME provision should be an area in which the education authority thinks it is reasonable for pupils wishing to receive GME provision to travel to school and should have the potential to attract parents to choose GME provision for their children.

Therefore, Bòrd na Gàidhlig welcomes the recommendation that a catchment area will be established for Gairloch Primary School where there is GME provision.

However, the Guidance also says: 2.54 *A catchment area for GME provision should be an area in which the education authority thinks it is reasonable for pupils wishing to receive GME provision to travel to school, and should have the potential to attract parents to choose GME provision for their children. Catchment areas for GME provision will normally overlay a number of school catchment areas.*

There are two points within this section that are important:

- a) For children within the area, travel to school should be reasonable, and
- b) There is an opportunity to attract parents to choose GME provision for their children.

The Highland Council has provided information on distance and travel time for each of the primary schools within the proposed catchment area. The Bòrd considers that these distances from Shieldaig and Torridon and times are not 'reasonable' for primary-age children. However, the Bòrd would not wish any pupils who currently travel to Bun-sgoil Gheàrrloch to be disadvantaged and so recommend that the opportunity to enter GME is retained until alternative provision is available locally.

The Bòrd is further of the view that the proposal is contrary to the Guidance in that it reduces the opportunity to attract parents to choose GME provision for their children in their communities.

The suggestion that catchment areas will normally overlay a number of school catchment areas applies particularly to urban areas.

5. The National Gaelic Language Plan 2018-23

One of the three priorities within National Gaelic Language Plan 2018-23 is to increase the learning of Gaelic and GME is highlighted as an area for growth. In the Bòrd's view the proposed catchment area for Gairloch Primary School would not support the availability and growth of GME. The Bòrd will be happy to engage with the Council, as a partner, in further reflection on the proposals to ensure a solution is found which delivers the Council's aims of both creating reasonable catchments and catchment structures which continue to attract an increasing uptake of GME.