

## **CONSULTATION MEETING – GAELIC MEDIUM CATCHMENT AREA FOR ACHARACLE PRIMARY SCHOOL**

**HELD ON TEAMS – 29 September 2021 – 6.30pm**

### **MINUTES OF MEETING**

#### **Panel**

Cllr. Andrew Baxter - Chairperson  
Ian Jackson, Education Officer, Resources  
Don Esson, Area Education Manager  
Lena Walker, Gaelic Education Support Officer

#### **Also Attending**

Chris-Millar-Craig, HT, Ardnamurchan HS  
Lyndsay Bradley, HT, Acharacle and Kilchoan Primaries  
Louise MacLean, HT, Ardgour and Lochaline Primaries  
Maggie Mulholland, Community Learning Officer  
Joan Esson, Education Scotland  
Jim Whannel, BnaG  
Ann Mhoireasdan, BnaG  
Magaidh Wentworth, CnamP  
Riona Whyte, CALA  
Patricia Kennedy, Ardgour CC  
Joanne Matheson  
Jamie McIntyre  
Sarah Traynor  
Margaret Ford  
Michael Foxley  
Margaret Jane MacDonald  
Izzy Buchan  
Angus MacKay  
Hollie Taylor

**Apologies:** None.

**Chair - Cllr. Andrew Baxter** introduced himself as Chair of the Lochaber Area Committee. He welcomed everyone to the public meeting on the Proposal for a GM catchment for Acharacle Primary School and explained the protocol for Teams meetings.

**Cllr. Baxter** - The purpose of the meeting is to discuss the proposal to formally establish a Gaelic Medium catchment area for Acharacle Primary School, as set out in the recommendation to the Proposal Paper.

The Proposal has been issued as a result of statutory guidance on Gaelic Education, produced by Bòrd na Gàidhlig. The Council officials present tonight are Don Esson, Area Education Manager; Ian Jackson, Education Officer, (Resources); and Lena Walker, Gaelic Development Manager.

Ian Jackson will now describe the consultation process and the detailed reasons for issuing the Proposal.

### **Ian Jackson**

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 is part. We are currently in the initial phase of that consultation, which is due to end on Friday 8 October, and I would urge anyone who wants to submit views in writing to do so by that date. The purpose of tonight's meeting is to gather views, and we will 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 8 October, 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 contact Acharacle Primary, and they will be keen to hear from 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 prepare a Report reviewing the consultation exercise and present it to the Council's Education Committee. The Review 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.

Because of the Statutory Guidance we mentioned earlier, the Council has to set up a Gaelic Medium catchment. What is up for debate is its extent of that catchment. The GM catchment we are proposing covers the catchments of Acharacle PS, Strontian PS and Kilchoan PS. We do not propose to include the Ardgour and Lochaline catchments, the reasons for that being set out in the Proposal Paper. Up to now there has been a "custom and practice" arrangement in respect of any children who wanted to attend Gaelic Medium education from outwith the Acharacle Primary catchment itself, and at the present time we do have children from outwith Acharacle attending GME at the school. To an extent this Proposal is simply formalising arrangements which have already been operating in practice.

In summary, the benefit of the Proposal is that we're giving clarity to parents in respect of GME, making clear where entitlement exists and where it doesn't exist,

and that's an improvement on the existing arrangements based on custom and practice.

**Cllr. Baxter** - Lena Walker will now speak about the Gaelic educational issues set out in the Proposal Paper.

### **Lena Walker**

Gaelic Medium Education is about offering children the opportunity of bilingualism. Bilingualism is about a lot more than two languages. There are 3 main advantages we can speak to, social, linguistic and cognitive. By giving families the choice of choosing a Gaelic Medium Education for their children, they are offering them new opportunities. Socially, children have access to two cultures which in turn leads to more tolerance to and more interest in other cultures. Linguistically, total immersion can lead to an earlier awareness of sounds and words with an enhanced language learning ability impacting on improved literacy skills. Cognitively, there are many benefits which are widely published and all 3 advantages are backed by research. Therefore, total immersion learning in Gaelic is a wonderful opportunity to provide children with the benefits of bilingualism. Bilingualism is essential to both enhancing Gaelic and for the survival of Gaelic in many of Highland's communities.

The Statutory Guidance recommends that Catchment Area be developed to provide clarity for parents about the entitlement to GME for their children and it is important to note that provision of GME in an area follows a demand lead by parental request. The Highland Council Gaelic Language Plan is a statutory document, following the requirements of the Gaelic Language Act, where Highland Council makes a clear commitment to increasing Gaelic usage, increasing the number of Gaelic speakers, enhancing the profile of Gaelic and generating a positive image of the language. For that reason, the Highland Council has a strong focus on Gaelic Medium Education.

**The Chairperson** then explained that Mr Esson, Mr Jackson and Mrs Walker were available to answer questions.

### **Q1 - Riona Whyte**

CALA are responsible for the Gaelic Parent and Toddler groups. Ardgour and Lochaline are not included. Are there any plans for GME provision in these areas?

### **A1 – Ian Jackson**

Up until recently, we were not aware of parental demand. I have heard in the last few days that pre-school pupils are interested in Lochaline. Given the travel distances involved, I speculate that they will be more interested in GME at Lochaline itself rather than in travelling to Acharacle. There is a set process for this and any formal request for GMPE will be assessed by the Council. If there was a requirement, we would follow this process.

**Q2 – Riona Whyte**

There is a resurgence in interest in GME in Lochaline. Eight pre-school children are identified as interested and there is a meeting tomorrow about changing the local toddler group to a Gaelic Medium toddler group.

**Chair** – For the benefit of those who are unaware, can I ask Ian to outline the process for requesting provision?

**A2 - Ian Jackson**

This is a Scottish Government process. There is a form called Gaelic Medium in Primary Education that parents must complete. On receipt of one of those forms, there is a set process that the Council is obliged to go through to assess the need for GME. We would assess a range of factors such as the capacity of the school, number of parents, availability of staff etc. It's a reactive process for the Council as parents are expected to submit the request in the first instance.

**Q3 - Jamie Macintyre**

My interest is no longer as a parent as my children have all left primary school, but perhaps as a grandparent one day. I also have an interest as Chair of Strontian Community School Building, although tonight I am speaking in a private capacity. I have a brief question based on the end of page 1 of the Paper. On the process Ian has just explained for identified parental demand for GME, will this also apply to Kilchoan and Strontian, so that the setting up of this catchment will not have any adverse impact on the ability of parents to request GME in Strontian itself?

**A3 - Ian Jackson**

That is correct. The legislation applies to all schools. It would be open to Strontian and Kilchoan parents to make the same sort of request as we have just discussed. In designating a catchment for Acharacle we are trying to allow access to GME over as wide an area as we think is reasonable, but that does not preclude parents in Strontian or Kilchoan seeking their own provision within their own school.

**Q4 - Jamie Macintyre**

I would like to share some observations. Firstly, I have concerns about the process set out as part of the Education Act 2016. To request a GMPE Assessment requires 5 pupils, although pupil numbers can be relaxed to 4 for example, at the discretion of Highland Council. This is structurally biased against small rural primary schools, because it is absolutely impossible in many years to get 4 pupils of any kind, let alone 4 GM pupils. I feel strongly about this and call on councillors and MSPs to say that this legislation is flawed and discriminates against small rural schools.

Secondly, the Act places a duty on local authorities to promote Gaelic. I've had children in nursery and primary school over a period of 17 years and my experience, as a parent, is that on no single occasion has Highland Council promoted Gaelic to my children or to myself as a parent. By that I mean no information in school bags,

no guest speakers, nothing at all. It is only because of my own interest that I know of Gaelic education. Highland Council needs to promote Gaelic for every single parent and let them know what they should do to access GME if they have an interest.

#### **A4 - Cllr Baxter**

I will find a mechanism to feed this back, via the Council, to Scottish Government and relevant Ministers. I will also find a way of feeding back your more general points about the promotion of Gaelic via our schools to the Gaelic Committee. I am pleased to say that we have a standalone Gaelic Committee again, whereas it had previously been subsumed within other Committees.

#### **A4 (continued) - Don Esson**

These are two very valid points and observations to feed back to Scottish Government and councillors. I am disappointed with your observation about the promotion of Gaelic education by the Council. With the new Gaelic Committee, there has been a resurgence of Gaelic support within the Council. We will need to ensure that the situation Jamie describes does not happen in the future.

#### **Q5 - Patricia Kennedy**

I am representing Ardgour Community Council who have had a discussion about the Proposal. I have since circulated some thoughts which none of the other CC members have disagreed with. I would like to share those thoughts and ask a question. The question from the Community Council is - what would happen if a parent/child from Ardgour wished to access Gaelic Medium education and there is no transport provision to Acharacle?

#### **A5 - Don Esson**

If there is demand for one child, this would follow placing request procedures, although we know that transport is not provided to children on placing requests. Historically in Ardgour, children accessing GME used the Corran ferry to catch a bus to Fort William, and today we have provision available in Bun-sgoil Ghàidhlig Loch Abar (BSGLA). The point which Jamie made about the numbers necessary for local provision of GME is acknowledged as a challenge.

#### **Q6 - Patricia Kennedy**

Would the council consider providing travel to GME in Acharacle as well as to BSGLA? From the perspective of the cultural ethos of Gaelic within the Ardnamurchan Peninsula, I think parents would like the option of attending Acharacle. At a point in the past, when Norma Young was Area Manager, there was a consultation about linking Ardgour and Lochaline schools under a single HT. During that consultation a question arose about possibly linking Ardgour with St. Bride's PS, and Norma was very, very clear that children should not be taken away from a rural area where Gaelic is strong.

**A6 - Don Esson**

Highland Council will consider the representation being made.

**Q7 - Patricia Kennedy**

My only other observation is on the 15-mile travel limit for travelling to another primary school. Previously when Achaphubuil School was mothballed due to parental movement in favour of Banavie Primary School, there was no problem with providing transport between those communities. That practice seems to have been contrary to the suggested 15-mile limit which prevents transport from Ardgour to Acharacle Primary School.

**A7 - Ian Jackson**

The 15-mile limit is an informal rule that we have in place at the moment to determine transport to GME. We are proposing to replace this rule with GM catchment areas, and clearly some of the areas that we are proposing to include within the new catchment – such as Kilchoan, and the further reaches of the Strontian catchment, if I can put that way - are further than 15 miles from Acharacle. We are moving away from the “15-mile rule”. In terms of the travel distance between Ardgour and Acharacle, it’s really a judgment call as to whether to include Ardgour or leave it out. Don has already spoken about this, and the proposal as it stands will leave Ardgour outwith any GM catchment. The Statutory Guidance is that any GME catchment should involve reasonable travel. It’s 26 miles between the two schools, and much of it is on single track roads, once you leave Strontian. However as Don said, we are here tonight to set out our proposal and to hear views, and all views expressed here will be taken away and considered in full before a final decision is reached.

**Patricia Kennedy**

We will be submitting a written response and we will include these comments within that.

**Q8 - Michael Foxley**

Like others I have a question and some observations. I am surprised to see this reference to the Statutory Guidance and GM catchment areas. I spoke with Bruce Robertson, past Director of Education for Highland Council, who chaired the group that produced this legislation. He said that the Guidance only applies to new GME provisions and not to those already established - so that’s my question.

**A8 - Ian Jackson**

I don’t have the relevant paragraph of the Statutory Guidance in front of me at the moment, but as I recall it says that local authorities should create GM catchments for all of their schools that offer GM education. There is separate legislation, The Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010, which specifies that the creation of a new catchment area, or a change to a catchment area, is subject to statutory

consultation. This is clearly a matter of interpretation, but reading the two pieces of legislation together, I would have to disagree with Bruce Robertson on this. Even if this Proposal did not require statutory consultation, it would be good practice to have these sorts of discussions anyway, prior to setting up a GM catchment. I will though, send you an email with a bit more explanation on the relevant paragraphs from the Statutory Guidance on Gaelic Education.

### **Chair**

This isn't the first statutory consultation we have undertaken to establish a GM catchment area in Highland. Has this issue been raised previously?

### **Ian Jackson**

It hasn't. We have now established 11 GM catchments, and this is 1 of 2 currently out to consultation, and this point has not been made before. I also understand from Lena that Aberdeenshire Council have recently started a consultation exercise on setting up a GM catchment for their GM provision.

### **Q9 - Michael Foxley**

I have a few more comments, which are meant kindly as we are all amongst friends here. The first point I would like to make is that GME at Acharacle Primary School has been a spectacular success. Two-thirds of the roll is now in GME and that's a tribute to staff, parents, children and the community. The second point is about this 15-mile limit which I think Ian would accept is arbitrary. My own children travelled 22 miles to GME in Fort William. The Strontian catchment extends to Inversanda which is only about 5 miles from Ardgour, so it doesn't seem a huge issue to extend the GM catchment that bit further. I think we need some flexibility over that. I'm delighted to hear about the enthusiasm for GME in Morvern – but as Jamie put it very eloquently, the big issue for Ardgour and Lochaline is that the intake at these small schools is tiny. They are down to 1 or 2 children a year. In the past Highland Council applied flexibility for smaller schools, but if we are insisting that there are 3 or 4 children in a year group before we would introduce GME – well, I would like to be proven wrong but I think it's next to impossible.

My next point is that in the Council's Gaelic Language Plan, there is a target to have 10% of pupils in GME by 2023. Where is the Council with this?

I would like to reinforce the point that Trish Kennedy made, about the rural ethos of the Peninsula. It's also the point that pupils from Ardgour PS transfer to Ardmamurchan High School for secondary education. Ardnamurchan High has far stronger GME provision than Lochaber High School despite having only a fraction of the numbers. My plea is that at this stage, Morvern and Ardgour should be left within the Acharacle GM catchment. For parity of access to GME, we should include all the peninsula primary schools.

### **A9 - Ian Jackson**

We will get the data on the proportion of pupils in GME sent to you.

**A9 (continued) - Don Esson**

We also echo the congratulations on the success of GME at both Acharacle Primary School and Ardnamurchan High School.

**A9 (continued) - Lena Walker**

There is an increase in the percentage of pupils in GME in Highland. We have not yet achieved the 10% target, but we will share more detail on what the breakdown of this looks like.

**Q10 - Riona Whyte**

I have a question from Sarah Traynor who was here but whose connection has dropped out. Can you clarify if transport will be provided for nursery aged children as well as primary aged children?

**A10 - Ian Jackson**

We do not provide transport for nursery aged children.

**Q11 - Christopher Millar-Craig**

Mòran taing agus feasgar math. My role as Head Teacher is to make an observation and not argue with Highland Council Policy. I guard the boundaries of my school jealously. I think the success of Ardnamurchan High School has created an identity amongst our young people. I guard that identity very jealously but also, from a more mercenary point of view, every child is important for the school's staffing quota. The question was well put by Ardgour CC – if children in Ardgour wish to access GME, where is the logical place for them to go? If the easier journey is to BSGLA, then they will go on to Lochaber High School. We have a fluctuating school roll, that rises and falls dramatically. If we leak pupils from Ardgour to Lochaber High, for the best of reasons - and becoming fluent in Gaelic is the best of reasons - it will nevertheless have an impact on our school.

**Chair**

There is a fragile school roll and we note the implications of this. Thank you for making that point. I wouldn't have expected anything less of you as Head Teacher.

Before I bring this meeting to a close, I would like to highlight that am heartened by the number of people taking an interest in this consultation, and I think it probably reflects the interest in Gaelic in this area. A useful discussion tonight that will be fed back to the Education Committee in the months ahead. Thank you for your attendance.

Can I remind everyone that representations should be sent to Ian Jackson, email [Education.Consultations@highland.gov.uk](mailto:Education.Consultations@highland.gov.uk) (address circulated in the letter), or via the online form, to arrive **no later than the 8<sup>th</sup> of October 2021**.

Finally, I am to advise you that the record of the meeting will be made available at least 3 weeks before the meeting of the Education Committee where it is intended that the report of the meeting, plus any submissions/representations and the view of Education Scotland on the proposal, will be considered.