

Dear Ian

I write to formally re-iterate and expand on my comments made at the public meeting on the above held on 29 September. I do so as a parent of 4 children, all of whom have been through pre-school and primary education in Strontian.

I support the establishment of the catchment as proposed subject to the following qualifications:

- That, as stated on page 1 of the proposal paper, it remains open for other primary schools in the area to receive Gaelic Medium Education (GME) in the future - and that the presence of the catchment area is not used subsequently to argue against this;
- That flexibility is shown to pupils outwith the proposed catchment area to ensure they are assisted in accessing GME within the peninsulas, rather than being 'lost' to Fort William or Mull (and subsequently from Ardnamurchan High School);
- That it is recognised that a catchment area for Acharacle is only an acceptable solution short-term, and that the real opportunity lies in expanding GME provision to other primary schools within the Associated School Group.

With respect to the last of these, I would make the following further observations:

- The Education Scotland Act (2016) – and the slightly more flexible Highland Council policy deriving from it – are fundamentally flawed, in respect of assessment requests for GME. Setting a threshold of 4 or 5 pupils before an assessment can be made discriminates against small, rural primary schools, where this annual number of pupils overall is rarely if ever achieved. Thus the very areas with the closest links to Gaelic as a community language are being prevented from accessing GME. Highland Council, through both officers and elected members, needs to address this issue and also raise it with Scottish Government.
- Paragraph 1.1 of the proposal references the statutory duty “to promote and support Gaelic Medium education and learning” of education authorities. This is welcome and it is hoped will be adhered to. However, it is important to contrast this with the reality, through my own ‘lived experience’ in Strontian:  
During the 17 year period when I had children in nursery and/or primary school, I cannot recall a single instance of such promotion of GME – and as a strong supporter, it is most unlikely I would have forgotten. Not once did Highland Council provide information to parents, through distribution of leaflets, letters home in school bags, organising parent or community meetings etc  
It is hard not to conclude from this that HC is not in fact committed to expanding the geographical coverage of GME, and indeed the evidence on the ground seems to bear this out – there are actually fewer GME primary schools in the HC area now than there were 10 years ago (2011-12). [*Bòrd na Gàidhlig data*]

Regards

Jamie