

Foghlam Gàidhlig ann an Dùn Èideann – An Ath Cheum
Gaelic Education in Edinburgh – The Next Step

COINNEAMH FHOSGAILTE
OPEN MEETING

29 An t-Sultain 2008
29 September 2008

Summary

1. Following an initial meeting of parents on 1 September 2008, a second open meeting was convened by Comann nam Pàrant on 29 September to discuss options for the future of Gaelic-medium education in Edinburgh and the Lothians. The meeting was attended by 31 parents, representing 41 children in P1-P7 and 15 children currently in nursery.
2. **The clear and unanimous conclusion of the meeting was that a dedicated Gaelic School should now be established in Edinburgh.**
3. The meeting felt strongly that action should now be taken to ensure that Gaelic-medium education provision in the Edinburgh area can respond to the challenges posed by growing demand and meets the needs and aspirations of parents, children and the Gaelic community.
4. Of particular importance were continuity of Gaelic-medium provision from pre-school to S6, enhancement and retention of fluency in Gaelic and the role of a dedicated school as a focus for the resurgent Gaelic community in Edinburgh.
5. It was decided that a letter setting out the consensus view of the meeting should be circulated to Gaelic-medium parents, and copied to teaching staff and to relevant officials within City of Edinburgh Council. Parents who had not been able to attend the meeting would be invited to contribute their views.
6. The Council would be asked to ensure that its forthcoming feasibility study is consistent with the decision reached by the meeting.
7. The agreed next step was for a group of parents to proceed with work on a detailed proposal for a dedicated Gaelic School. All Gaelic-medium parents would be kept fully informed of progress, and their views would continue to be sought.

Report of Meeting

Purpose

8. The purpose of the meeting was to enable an open discussion to take place amongst parents of children in Gaelic-medium education, leading to firm conclusions about the future of Gaelic-medium education in Edinburgh. In particular, the meeting sought to identify potential criteria against which development proposals or options might be judged. In the light of the criteria identified, the meeting would then reach a view on the best way forward for Gaelic-medium education in Edinburgh.

Method

9. The meeting was structured around group workshops, a report-back session and plenary discussion. Five separate groups were established for the workshop session and membership of each group was allocated randomly. Group members received a written brief and each group was supported by a facilitator. The role of facilitators was to focus debate on criteria and parental requirements for future Gaelic-medium provision. Proposals for change should attempt to satisfy three high-level strategic tests – that is, they should be good for children and parents, good for Gaelic and good value for money.
10. The format of the meeting, with an initial focus on identifying general criteria/requirements rather than debating the merits of specific options, was designed to avoid pre-supposing support for any particular option. Following the workshop session, outputs (see Annex A) were collated and debated in a plenary session. In the light of the ideas and criteria emerging from the workshop session, the meeting considered possible options for the future.

Principal Workshop Findings

11. The principal messages to emerge from the workshops were:

Continuity and Integration

- The importance of continuity of provision from pre-school through to S6 and beyond. This included requirements for nursery, Cròileagan, Gaelic-medium after-school provision as well as clear links to further/higher education and to the world of work.

Fluency and Language Retention

- The need to further enhance fluency through the use of Gaelic in a whole-school setting and outwith the classroom. Broadening linguistic experience through “non-academic” subjects and extra-curricular activity was seen as important. There were significant challenges (and dissatisfaction) associated with the loss of fluency at secondary school and action was needed to ensure language retention.

Secondary Provision

- Action to significantly enhance provision at secondary level was a major issue. There were different potential routes, but a dedicated Gaelic School with provision from Nursery to S6 was the preferred solution.

Equity of Access

- There was recognition that distance from Gaelic provision was an issue that seriously affects accessibility, and consequently there was a need to provide feeder nurseries around the catchment, and encourage provision in surrounding Local Authority areas.

Focus for the Community

- The idea of a Gaelic community and cultural centre associated with a dedicated school emerged as a central requirement.

Flagship for Gaelic and Edinburgh/Scotland

- Phrases such as “centre of excellence”, “showcase”, “high standards”, “vision and ambition”, “confidence” set the tone of the discussion. Parents are aspirational and want to build on existing success to put Gaelic in Edinburgh “on the map”.

A Dedicated Gaelic School

- The desire for a dedicated Gaelic School emerged very early in the discussion as the central demand. Delivery of provision covering S1-S6 was essential but presented some challenges. However, there was no reason why the large and successful P1-P7 Gaelic-medium unit should not now become a fully-fledged school. The examples of Glasgow, Inverness and now Portree and Fort William demonstrated a clear direction of travel and provided benchmarks.

Options

12. It was evident from the group workshops and the open discussion held during the report-back session that the meeting was in favour of the establishment of a dedicated Gaelic School.

13. Suggestions for other potential options were nonetheless invited in order to test the suitability of alternative proposals against the needs and criteria identified in the workshops. The options considered were:

- A the status quo
- B a dedicated Gaelic School
- C establishing new Gaelic-medium units (at primary level) within English-medium (“mainstream”) schools elsewhere in Edinburgh
- D capping future intake to Gaelic-medium education
- E cutting off intake to English-medium classes at Tollcross to provide space for an expansion in Gaelic-medium numbers
- F closing the community centre at Tollcross to allow expansion

14. Of these, options D, E and F were rejected out of hand on the basis that they would contravene government policy and international commitments (Option D) or be detrimental to the local community in the Tollcross area (Options E and F). As well as harming the interests of the Gaelic and Tollcross communities, it was also clear that none of these three options could deliver the kind of qualitative and quantitative progress which parents clearly wished to see.

15. It was also evident that the status quo (i.e. a very large, and growing, specialist unit within an English-medium school) was no longer realistic or acceptable. As an option, it clearly failed in terms of practicality (e.g. lack of space to cope with future growth). It was also unable to meet the wider aspirations of parents and community satisfactorily, including in relation to broader linguistic experience, continuity and integration of provision and development of a community focus.

16. The strengths of Option B (a dedicated school) had been discussed at some length in the workshops and feedback session. In particular, a dedicated school would deliver enhanced fluency, a community focus and identity and would be consistent with key Gaelic and educational policy drivers.
17. In addition, it was noted that a dedicated school with sufficient capacity to accommodate growth would provide economies of scale and mean that Gaelic-medium would become increasingly cost-effective, with a funding model essentially no different to that for English-medium provision. The creation of a Gaelic School from the current specialist unit would also provide an impetus to address the clear demand for significant improvement to provision at secondary level and greater integration and continuity of provision.
18. Option C (new units elsewhere in Edinburgh) was looked at in some detail and compared with the preferred option of a dedicated Gaelic School. There were strong reasons not to go down the route of creating further Gaelic-medium units. These ranged from educational to practical, as follows.
19. On the educational front, it was felt that specialist units cannot deliver the enhanced levels of fluency and extra-classroom opportunities for language use which a dedicated Gaelic School would provide. Small units would feel the impact of English as the dominant language in the wider school environment.
20. In practical terms, multiple small units would also be expensive, lack cohesion, disperse staff and teaching expertise and be difficult to administer. There was a strong feeling that the existing quality of provision and the momentum for Gaelic which had been achieved with the current unit would be dissipated. A central focus for the community would not be delivered. The one potential benefit would be a potential decrease in travel distance and consequent gains in terms of accessibility. But this benefit was outweighed by negative factors.

Conclusion

21. The meeting concluded by considering next steps. It was agreed that:
 - A letter should be circulated by Comann nam Pàrant to Gaelic-medium parents informing them of the view reached by the meeting. The letter should be copied to staff and to relevant Council officials.
 - Parents who had not been able to attend the meeting would be invited to contribute their views. The Council would be asked to help facilitate distribution of information to parents to ensure that everyone would be fully informed. A short paper setting out the case for a dedicated school would also be drawn up.
 - The Council would be asked to ensure that its forthcoming feasibility study is consistent with the decision reached by the meeting and the parental proposal.
 - A detailed proposal for a dedicated Gaelic School should be drawn up by Comann nam Pàrant. Parents able and willing to contribute to this work were invited to notify the Comann nam Pàrant committee.

D Isles

1 October 2008

**WORKSHOP SESSION
SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK FROM GROUPS**

The issues and criteria raised by each group are noted below in the order in which each group reported to the meeting. Additional comments and views were contributed in the open discussion during the feedback session. For convenience this additional material has been included as part of the summary for each group.

Group 1

The group had discussed criteria and come to conclusion that what is needed is a dedicated Gaelic School.

The key requirement is for continuity of education – that is, integrated Gaelic-medium provision from pre-school through to S6. This should include pre-nursery provision (i.e. Cròileagan and crèche facilities) as well as support such as wraparound.

There was a recognition that there are challenges in developing secondary provision for S1 to S6 covering the full range of subjects in Gaelic. But it is important that systems are put in place to address and support need for expansion towards full secondary education in Gaelic.

The role of a dedicated school as a focus for the Gaelic community is important – school should act as a cultural centre for Gaelic.

Both parents and community are looking for a flagship for Gaelic and a showcase school which can put Gaelic (and Edinburgh) on the map.

Issues around the size and rationale of current Gaelic-medium catchment need to be addressed. It was noted that the current unit was set up by Lothian Regional Council and the Lothian-wide catchment still reflects the old local government structure. There is a strong case for new Gaelic-medium provision in adjacent areas, rather than forcing parents/children to travel from Fife or West and East Lothian, which is simply impractical for most families.

Criteria for a new school should include attention being paid to developing links beyond the integration and linkage of nursery, primary, secondary provision. Thought needs to be given to links to further/higher education (e.g. Sabhal Mòr Ostaig) and to business/workplace use of Gaelic.

Group 5

It is important that the future development of Gaelic education reflects key policy drivers. Thinking about what was important to parents/children, to Gaelic and the Gaelic community and to the Government, the group felt it was clear that the best way forward would be a dedicated school. The group stressed the importance of planning ahead (by the Council) to avoid ending up responding to pressures on an ad hoc or emergency basis.

The key criteria for the group could be summed up by the phrase “Gold Standard”. This meant an excellent school which would provide continuity of Gaelic provision from pre-school/nursery through to S6.

Creating a “centre of excellence” for Gaelic education in Edinburgh should be seen as a positive process, which would be good for Edinburgh and for Scotland.

Children need to be fully fluent in Gaelic and to maintain fluency throughout their education. Achieving this outcome was a key criterion.

There is a particular need for action at the secondary level, where children have choices and those choices are influenced by a variety of factors. S1-S6 educational provision for Gaelic-speaking children is not analogous to making a subject like French available. If Gaelic were available in secondary as a *means of learning*, not simply as a subject to be learned, children would maintain and extend the fluency they already possess. The nature of this challenge had not been properly understood by the education authority or the school.

An important challenge is to build confidence amongst young Gaelic speakers and ensure that they feel able to use Gaelic for a wide range of different purposes. One suggestion would be to pay particular attention to secondary provision which builds competence in new areas and involves practical use of Gaelic to examine topics of everyday relevance (e.g. Personal and Social Education) .

Extra-curricular activity and after-school provision are important for the same reasons. This should include close links with the wider Gaelic community and effectively means that a Gaelic community centre should be co-located with the school.

Group 3

Again the group had quickly come to view that dedicated school should be the way forward and that continuity of provision beyond P7, and retention of fluency, was one of the most important issues.

It was pointed out that children are bilingual in Gaelic and English in P7. It is therefore wrong to leave them largely unsupported as Gaelic speakers and to allow them to lose confidence and competence in a secondary school and teenage environment where there are very strong pressures disadvantaging Gaelic. In addition to the impact on children, families and the Gaelic community that represented very poor value for money for government and taxpayer which had already invested in Gaelic education at primary level. The future of Gaelic could not be secured if this issue was not addressed.

Supporting Gaelic outside the classroom is also important – for example through sport, music, art, drama. The language should be used in a wide variety of areas. The group also thought that links to careers and to the world of work would be important in emphasising the relevance of Gaelic and building confidence.

Nursery provision is a key factor. There are strong attractions in having a central campus for a dedicated school which accommodates a nursery as well as primary and potentially secondary. But it is also true that additional nursery provision could be located in other parts of Edinburgh and feed in to the school. This would alleviate some of the pressures on parents and children at the pre-school level, where factors such as travel are difficult and could be a significant obstacle preventing access.

Group 4

The group was looking for excellence and a system which would produce confident young Gaelic speakers and children with the skills required to succeed in life. It wanted to see future development building on existing strengths (like high standard of teaching, educational attainment and personal/social development).

Factors like cultural diversity were felt to be important and the group noted that Gaelic-medium education already draws in children from a wide variety of backgrounds. It was important to recognise that the strengths of the existing unit and school would be built on, not lost, by further developing Gaelic-medium education in Edinburgh.

A strong community ethos was seen as important and that should include wider links. Again this should go beyond the immediate cultural community and include aspects such as business and career opportunities. A need for a community centre as a focal point for the wider Gaelic community was identified. Support and wraparound provision, such as a crèche and after-school club was also important.

The feeling of the group was very much that it would be good for Gaelic to have a dedicated school which would showcase the language and the benefits of being bilingual.

The ideal would be to have not only a primary school, but full Gaelic-medium provision covering the entirety of S1 to S6.

The Gaelic community – and Edinburgh Council – should demonstrate vision and ambition and set their targets high. It was recognised that the ideal model – fully integrated Gaelic-medium provision from pre-school to S6 – might take time to achieve. But it was important to change the culture around Gaelic and Gaelic education and not to settle for second best. The future of Gaelic and the educational success of Gaelic-speaking children was bound up with personal and community confidence and a positive identity.

Group 2

The group endorsed what other groups had already said. Its top priority was that children should become and remain bilingual and that skills should not be lost.

Educational provision together with a strong Gaelic community will be fundamental to the survival of our heritage.

If these objectives were to be achieved it would be essential to have a dedicated school which was closely integrated with the Gaelic community – effectively a cultural centre as well as an educational one.

It was recognised that there are a variety of challenges in moving from the current very limited provision at S1-S6 to a more satisfactory situation and that there might be different possible routes to achieve the ideal outcome, which would be full Gaelic-medium provision at secondary. This might have to happen in stages. Ensuring teaching standards remained high was a priority.

For practical reasons any school would have to be located centrally, although the meeting agreed that the most important criterion was to ensure that obstacles to access are removed. If this could be assured at a non-central site, the particular location would probably be less of an issue.

The importance of expanded pre-school/nursery provision was emphasised. Because of the practical challenges facing parents with pre-school children this would need to result in new nursery units distributed across the city which would feed in to a single dedicated school.

The group also emphasised the importance of having good-quality wraparound care associated with the school, and that this should be Gaelic-medium.

D Isles
1 October 2008