

CONSULTATION MEETING – PROPOSAL TO ESTABLISH GAELIC MEDIUM CATCHMENT AREAS FOR BUN-SGOIL GHÀIDHLIG INBHIR NIS, INVERNESS ROYAL ACADEMY, DINGWALL PRIMARY SCHOOL, DINGWALL ACADEMY, MILLBANK PRIMARY SCHOOL, AND NAIRN ACADEMY

HELD AT DINGWALL PRIMARY SCHOOL – 19 SEPTEMBER 2023 – 6.30pm

MINUTES OF MEETING

Panel

Cllr. Graham MacKenzie - Chairperson
Ian Jackson, Education Officer, Resources
Derek Martin, Area Education Manager
Lena Walker, Gaelic Education Support Officer
Hayley Brown, Senior Manager Early Years

In Attendance

Cllr. Margaret Paterson - Highland Council
Dolina Grant, Gaelic Community Officer, Highland Council
Sara MacAskill, Head Teacher, Dingwall Primary School
Rachel Hutcheson, Acting Depute Head Teacher, Dingwall Primary School
Lesley Allan, Education Scotland
3 members of the public

The Chairperson – Cllr. Graham MacKenzie introduced himself as Chair of the Local Area Committee and welcomed everyone to the consultation meeting. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the proposal to formally establish a Gaelic Medium catchment area for Dingwall Primary School, Dingwall Academy, and other schools, 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 were Ian Jackson, Education Officer, (Resources); Lena Walker, Gaelic Education Support Officer; Hayley Brown, Senior Manager Early Years. Derek Martin, Area Education Manager, joined the meeting a few minutes later.

The Chairperson then invited Ian Jackson to describe the consultation process and the detailed reasons for issuing the Proposal.

Mr 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 currently in the initial phase of that consultation, which was due to end on Friday 27 October, and he urged anyone who wanted to submit views in writing to do so by that date. The purpose of tonight's meeting was to gather views, and we would try to answer any questions that are raised.

Mr Jackson added that 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 27 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 Dingwall 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 Gaelic Medium catchments. What is up for debate is its extent of that catchment. The GM catchment we are proposing for Dingwall Primary and Dingwall Academy covers all the primary schools within the catchments of Dingwall Academy and Alness Academy. It would also cover the majority of the schools within the Fortrose Academy area. Up to now there has been a "custom and practice" arrangement in respect of any children who wanted to attend Gaelic Medium education. To an extent therefore, this Proposal is simply formalising arrangements which have already been operating in practice.

In respect of BSGI/IRA, the proposed GM catchment covers all the primary schools within the catchments of IRA, Charleston, Culloden, IHS, and Millburn. We also propose to include two primary school catchments in the Fortrose ASG - North Kessock and Avoch. The Millbank Primary/Nairn Academy catchment will cover the Nairn ASG.

Although we are making this Proposal primarily in response to the statutory guidance on Gaelic Education, we also feel that the Proposal has educational benefits in promoting the Gaelic language and bilingualism. My colleague Lena Walker will talk more about that in a few moments.

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.

The Chairperson commented that the Dingwall Academy catchment covered a wide area, and asked for clarification on how far west the proposed GM catchment extended. Mr Jackson advised that the proposed catchment extends as far west as Achanalt, and also includes Strathconon, travelling in a slightly different direction.

The Chairperson also asked about capacity within Dingwall Primary. Were officials confident about the capacity of Dingwall PS to absorb GM pupils travelling from elsewhere?

Mr Jackson commented that the proposal was largely formalising existing custom and practice arrangements, and therefore was not expected to cause capacity issues. The Council does however continually monitor school rolls for any potential capacity issues.

Rachel Hutcheson advised that the GM roll at the school, was 74, so they were just into 4 GM classes. There was capacity in all four classes.

Cllr. Paterson asked if there was a "Plan B" in the event of capacity issues arising?

Mr Jackson advised that if the Council defines a catchment for GM pupils, the normal presumption would be that any children living within that catchment would be admitted to the school, assuming of course they were seeking to access GME. If a situation arose that the school had no space for catchment pupils, then the Estates Team would look at a Plan B, which might involve a demountable building being installed. At present however, we were not anticipating that as an issue.

The Chairperson then invited Lena Walker to outline the educational benefits of GME

Mrs Walker advised that bilingualism was about a lot more than two languages. There were social and cognitive benefits as well as linguistic ones. Children gain access to two cultures, and the opportunity to develop an interest in different cultures. Linguistically, total immersion leads to earlier awareness of stylings and words and to language improvement, abilities which have a wider impact.

GME provision in Highland follows demand from parents, and is vital for the growth and indeed the survival of Gaelic. Highland Council has a Gaelic Language Plan, and has made a clear commitment to increase the number of Gaelic speakers and increase

the profile of the language. We have a strong focus on GME, and the creation of catchment areas will enhance the status of the language across Highland communities.

The Chairperson opened the meeting to the floor.

Q1 – I have 3 questions. The first is about the Dingwall catchment boundary. What do you envisage for Beauly? Is it potentially the case that it could be part of the Dingwall GM catchment?

A1 (Ian Jackson) – The proposal suggests that children in Beauly go to BSGI and Inverness Royal Academy. We have put that forward because the old County boundary between Inverness-shire and Ross-shire ran between Beauly and Muir of Ord. We have followed that by suggesting that Beauly goes to Inverness and Muir of Ord to Dingwall. Also because Beauly is part of the Charleston ASG for English Medium and we felt they looked more towards Inverness. We are aware that there has been a history of children in Beauly opting for either BSGI or Dingwall for GME. If there are any children from Beauly currently attending GME at Dingwall, that would continue in the event the GM catchments were confirmed as currently drafted. I would add though, that this is a consultation. If people have views on the catchment boundaries, we want to hear about that and we will consider the views put forward.

Q2 - My second question is how close to capacity is BSGI, and how would that affect placing requests? If someone put in a placing request to go from Beauly to Dingwall, would that be seen more favourably than someone from Culbokie wanting to go to BSGI/IRA? Which type of placing request would be more likely to be successful?

A2 (Ian Jackson) – Placing requests are governed by national legislation. The default position is that we grant placing requests. There are certain circumstances where we refuse them. In fact, where those circumstances apply we are obliged to refuse them. One is where the school does not have the capacity to take the placing request without employing an extra teacher. The teacher staffing for primary schools is set in bands that correspond to the number of pupils. For example, 20-47 pupils in a school results in two teachers, 48-71 is three teachers, 72-96 is four teachers, and so on. If admitting the child would require an additional teacher, we would refuse the request as it is judged to be an unreasonable cost to the taxpayer. There are other specified circumstances where we would refuse a request, but all requests would be judged against the same criteria, no matter where they were from or which schools were involved.

(Derek Martin) – The Education Act is very clear that children should be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents, provided there are no additional costs to the taxpayer. The default position is very much “If we have the space, why wouldn’t we?”

(Ian Jackson) – The only other thing I will add about placing request is that the Council does not provide school transport to children on placing requests. However, with the national scheme of free bus travel for U-22s, if there is a public bus on the route, then children can take advantage of that.

Q3 – My third question is about nursery provision. Once these catchments are defined, does that mean that nursery provision has the same catchment, and is that statutory?

(Ian Jackson) – I'll make a comment and then hand over to Hayley, who is the expert on this subject. We don't have catchments for pre-school provision, because the Scottish Government see flexibility for parents as the priority in terms of pre-school provision. It's what parents need in terms of hours and days and locations that is the priority. I know that, broadly speaking, many parents tend to place their children in the school nursery where they plan to send their children to school, but there are no formal defined catchments.

(Hayley Brown) – I agree with Ian's comments. There are no defined catchments for nursery.

Q4 (follow-up) – So if someone from Culbokie wanted to send a child to Gaelic pre-school in Dingwall, is that dependent upon the same sort of staffing issues you outlined for school provision?

(Derek Martin) – It's more about transport at that stage. Again however, our position would be "Why wouldn't we?"

(Ian Jackson) – Something which occasionally arises, and this is quite understandable from the parent's perspective, is where a child is enrolled in a school nursery that is not their child's designated catchment school, parents sometimes assume that their child will then be automatically enrolled for the school. Because however, there is a difference between the admission procedures, a child enrolled in a school nursery would still have to put in a placing request for P1, if the school was not the catchment school.

Q5 – I have a question about the Croileagan. Obviously it is closed at the moment. I have a 2-year-old, and would like to know whether the Croileagan will be there next August.

(Hayley Brown) – Highland Council are in the process of registering a new GM nursery provision in Dingwall. There are some building works to do. Because it is classed as a new registration, there are some things that were accepted under the previous registration because they were historic, but for us to get a new registration, we need to do some works. I don't see that taking a long time. We have already put the application for registration into the Care Inspectorate, and we should be able to compete that as soon as the building works are done. We will obviously have to recruit staff as well. We will do that concurrently. It's a priority for us.

Q6 – Do you have a target date for all that? Would it be by Christmas, or by next Easter?

(Hayley Brown) – Certainly before Christmas.

Q7 – Will all the staff have Gaelic?

(Hayley Brown) – Yes. We intend for it to be a facility offering Gaelic immersion.

Q8 - What will be the maximum number of children?

(Hayley Brown) – We anticipate it will be the same as previously. If the Care Inspectorate have set that figure, it's based on the number of toilets, the floor space etc. Given that they were registered previously, we are anticipating the same.

There being no further questions, the Chairperson thanked everyone for coming, and reminded everyone that representations should be sent to Ian Jackson, email Education.Consultations@highland.gov.uk (address circulated in the letter), or via the online form, to arrive **no later than Friday 27 October 2023**. He also advised 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.