

The Highland Council

Education, Children and Adult Services – 27 August 2015

Agenda Item	4.
Report No	ECAS 50/15

Petition to reverse the decision to remove a Gaelic Medium teacher at Bun-Sgoil Shlèite, Isle of Skye

Report by Director of Care and Learning

Summary

This report introduces an on-line petition, regarding the application of the teacher/pupil ratio at Bun-Sgoil Shlèite, Isle of Skye.

1. Background

- 1.1 Bun-Sgoil Shlèite is a Gaelic medium Primary School in Sleat, Isle of Skye, which also includes an English Department. It generally has a roll of around 60. It is one of two Highland Schools designated as a Gaelic medium School with an English Medium Department; the other being Bun-Sgoil Stafainn, in Staffin, Isle of Skye.
- 1.2 In the last session, Bun-Sgoil Shlèite had additional staffing cover provided by a probationer, due to maternity leave requirements. This session, the school will operate as per the standard staffing allocation, based on the school roll.

2. Petition

- 2.1 The Parent Council of Bun-Sgoil Shlèite initiated an online petition in June, with regard to the application of the staffing formula, asking the Highland Council to change its position.
- 2.2 The petition states:

“Highland Council is to remove one of the three Gaelic-medium teachers from Bun-sgoil Shlèite in August due to teacher-pupil ratios. We wish to retain three Gaelic teachers at Bun-sgoil Shlèite to avoid having a composite class where P1-P4 would be taught together.

Total immersion is vital in GME and this would be lost as English is introduced in P4. Furthermore, Bun-sgoil Shlèite has a teaching head teacher, a role which in a Gaelic School with an English unit comes with a number of very specific duties and extra pressures. The loss of a teacher would add significantly to those pressures. There will also be no Gaelic Medium Support for learning teacher which will further increase the burden of the remaining staff.

Bun-sgoil Shlèite was the first school in Scotland to be designated a Gaelic School with an English Stream, and as such has been held up as an example of how this system can work and has maintained a very high standard of education. The projected school rolls for the year after next show that a third Gaelic teacher will

have to be re-employed, and so it does not seem logical to remove a teacher for one year only given the adverse impact it will have on the education of the children and the continuity of their education.

The additional requirements of GME mean that composite classes of 20-plus with three or four classes are very difficult to teach, and the key recommendation of total immersion for at least P1-P3 should not be ignored if at all possible. For all of the above reasons we would like Highland Council to retain the three Gaelic teachers at Bun-sgoil Shlèite for school year 2015-2016.”

2.3 In correspondence with the Council, the Parent Council has added that:

“We fully appreciate that it is the ratios that have caused us to lose a teacher but our point is that the loss of a teacher will break the immersion which is a key component of GME - this is why we think our case deserves looking at.

You will be aware that Bun-sgoil Shlèite has a teaching head and this change will also mean a larger class group for her - which will only result in added pressure.

The projected role for 2016/17 and 2017/18 indicate the need for a 3rd teacher. Sleat is a thriving community and the continuing trend is for the role to increase not decrease.

There has been a high turnover of staff in Bun-sgoil Shlèite in recent years - mainly a result of retirements and maternity leave. ... Children deserve stability and continuity in their education and they are not getting this at the moment.

In the long term we feel that Highland Council needs to look at their policy regarding ratios for GME - there are obviously additional needs regarding resources and time when it comes to teaching a 2nd language.”

2.4 The petition is available at: <https://www.change.org/p/highland-council-reverse-the-decision-to-remove-a-gaelic-medium-teacher-at-bun-sgoil-shlèite-in-the-isle-of-skye-02b9388d-a637-4c4f-9412-5a22c80e4c93>

2.5 At the time of writing, it has attracted 688 signatures, and over 100 supportive comments. As this is an online petition, the Parent Council does not have details of all of the signatories.

2.6 The petition has been followed up by correspondence from local MPs and MSPs.

3. Council Position

3.1 Officers have acknowledged the online petition, have considered the issues raised by it, and have had subsequent discussions with senior members. Officers have reaffirmed to Bun-Sgoil Shlèite Parent Council that the planned revision of teacher numbers and the application of the teacher/pupil ratio remains correct.

3.2 Highland Council has operated with standard Gaelic and English teacher/pupil ratios since August 2010. The number of teachers across all schools is adjusted

annually, to take account of fluctuations in pupil rolls.

- 3.3 The Council has taken the decision not to have different ratios where there are composite classes for Gaelic medium. Neither do we vary the ratio where there are high numbers of children whose first language is not English. There is no evidence that the class sizes and ratios that we operate compromise pupils' learning experiences or outcomes in Gaelic Education.
- 3.4 If we were to maintain a higher ratio of teachers to pupils at Bun-Sgoil Shlèite, we would inevitably have to consider comparable cases across the Highlands. The likely additional cost across the school estate could make Gaelic medium provision less viable. Also, given the inconsistent availability in the availability of Gaelic medium teachers across the authority, it would be likely to create greater variability between schools.
- 3.5 Highland Council is committed to delivering Gaelic medium education in accordance with the most recent "Advice on Gaelic Education" published by Education Scotland. As a Council, we take great pride in our track record on Gaelic Education. With 20 Nurseries and partner centres, 21 Primary Schools and 16 Secondary Schools delivering Gaelic education, it is important that we strive to provide a consistent, sustainable, structured and progressive learning experience for all of our young people, through their different educational phases.

4. Implications

- 4.1 **Resources, Risk and Equalities:** If we increase the current teacher to pupil ratio for Bun-Sgoil Shlèite, there would be potential significant additional cost across the Highlands
- 4.2 **Gaelic:** The implications regarding Gaelic medium education are set out in this report.
- 4.3 There are no **Legal, Climate Change/Carbon Clever or Rural** implications

5. Recommendation

- 5.1 Committee is asked to endorse the existing policy across Highland regarding teacher/pupil ratios.

Designation: Director of Care and Learning

Date: 17 August 2015

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