



COMANN NAM PÀRANT PORT RÌGH AR LEIRSINN AIRSON SGOIL GHÀIDHLIG ANN AM PORT RÌGH OUR VISION FOR A GAELIC SCHOOL IN PORTREE

The Highland Council's Gaelic Language Plan commits to the development of two more dedicated Gaelic schools in the region before 2011 in addition to the already-established Bun-sgoil Ghàidhlig Inbhir Nis. Comann nam Pàrant Port Rìgh believes Portree is a logical location for one of these schools.

Portree Primary School currently has 125 pupils in Gaelic-medium education (GME) including pre-school, and has an extremely good Gaelic department that has achieved stability in numbers, but not growth. Numbers of Gaelic-medium pupils have declined in real terms, as have English language numbers due to a falling school roll, and the proportion of pupils in GME has remained static at around 40% of the total. We believe that a dedicated Gaelic school offers the best chance for the council to meet its target of increasing pupils using Gaelic by 10%, and indeed it could far exceed that target if experience in other areas were to be replicated.

Whilst as parents we have been satisfied with the high-quality dual language provision that is currently on offer in Portree, experience in Inverness and Glasgow shows that there are increased linguistic benefits from moving towards a single language option. This would be the natural progression for GME in Portree and would not only benefit the pupils in GME but would also benefit the wider community and would, we firmly believe, prove instrumental in helping to reverse the decline of the Gaelic language in the area.

To ensure that a Gaelic primary school achieves the maximum benefit for the language and for the community of Portree, we feel that the council should take this opportunity to look at a holistic approach to Gaelic education from nursery right through to high school provision, as well as considering a Gaelic community facility at a new school.

A GAELIC CHILDCARE FACILITY

Portree is losing a fair proportion of children to English education, who might otherwise go into GME, due to the lack of pre-school provision, particularly in terms of wraparound care. As there is no Gaelic nursery provision in Portree, some children are placed in the English language nursery and their progression is invariably to the English education stream, which would be less likely to happen if there was a suitable Gaelic alternative.

The English language nursery in Portree is oversubscribed, and the lack of nursery provision in Gaelic is discouraging mothers from returning to the workplace as early as they might if adequate nursery provision were available. The availability of good childcare would boost the economy in Skye where there is a workforce shortage, particularly among Gaelic speakers.

PRIMARY PROVISION

We believe that a new build on a green-field site is the best option for a stand-alone Gaelic school in Portree and we have already identified two possible sites for the purpose. There is every reason to be optimistic that the Scottish Government and Bòrd na Gàidhlig would be supportive of this option. We would respectfully suggest that the proposed consultation should be on a stand-alone school in Portree, not North Skye as initially suggested, to ensure that Gaelic-medium departments in other areas of Skye are not affected by the establishment of a Gaelic school in Portree. It is also fair to point out that no community of parents in the north of Skye, apart from in Portree, has shown an interest in the establishment of a Gaelic school.

A Gaelic school ensures that Gaelic is the dominant language and is used by all the staff and pupils throughout the school for the whole of the school day. This enhances immersion in the language and enables pupils to develop their language outwith the classroom. This is clearly outlined in the report submitted by the Director of the Education, Culture and Sport Service to the Gaelic Committee on the 5th of June 2008 in which such a school is described: "Gaelic is the means by which all staff and pupils interact; the culture of the school is

Gaelic and all the staff and pupils communicate through the Gaelic language at all times and in all situations. In effect, the immersion method which prevails in the Gaelic medium classroom of the dual language school is extended to the whole school and to the whole of the pupils' school day."

We believe that parents should have no fear about their child's ability in English from participating in a fully Gaelic education. In this regard, we believe that if the council is minded to establish a Gaelic school and if they choose to take the holistic approach we are calling for, there could be an opportunity for the re-examination of the GME system we currently have in Scotland whereby Gaelic-medium pupils are taught English reading and writing, alongside Gaelic, from P3, as outlined in the report to the Gaelic committee by the Director of the Education, Culture and Sport Service. We believe there is room for a progressive Gaelic educational experience where English is either not taught at all in Gaelic primary schools, or not introduced until P6. There is precedent for this in several other countries where the reversal in the decline of minority languages has been extremely successful. While the present system could not be changed by Highland Council on its own, the council could certainly take a lead, with a Gaelic school in Portree offering a platform to pilot such an initiative.

A COMMUNITY FACILITY

As parents, our primary concern is with Gaelic-medium provision in Portree. However we envisage a Gaelic school as being more than a centre of education. We would urge councillors to look at the possibility of providing the community with Gaelic specific services on the new school site. This could include a Gaelic resource centre with learning facilities for parents and office space for Gaelic organisations two of which, already based in Portree, have pledged their support for such a move. This could perhaps be separately financed by organisations such as Highlands & Islands Enterprise (HIE) and the Highlands & Islands Partnership Project (HIPP). Of course organisations occupying such a facility would need to adhere to the Gaelic policy of the school in order to protect the integrity of the Gaelic environment within the school.

HIGH SCHOOL PROVISION

While we recognise that the Gaelic-medium provision at Portree High School is currently the best in Scotland, there are significant issues with what is on offer in terms of resources, both human and educational. We welcome the proposal by the Chair of the Highland Council's Gaelic Committee that we, as a group of parents, should examine the case for a Gaelic-only secondary school for the area. However, we believe that while there are issues at a national level regarding the lack of resources available for the teaching of Gaelic-medium subjects in high schools - which cannot be resolved by a group of parents - proposing a Gaelic-only high school at this stage may be less than fruitful.

In advance of a dedicated Gaelic primary school being established in Portree, however, we would propose that Portree High School works up a vision and a plan to develop itself as a Centre of Excellence for Gaelic to complement the increased provision at primary level a Gaelic school would bring, and to ensure the continuum missing at present. We would be very happy, as parents, to discuss our ideas in this regard with the council and Head Teacher of Portree High School. If such a centre proved successful, and if national issues were resolved in relation to Gaelic-medium teaching in secondary schools in the intervening years, there could well be a case for establishing a Gaelic-only high school in Portree at a future date. While looking at sites for a primary school, it would be sensible to identify one that could accommodate such expansion.

Related to this, we believe there is a need for a Gaelic secondary subjects resource development unit, which could be of national significance in advancing Gaelic education at secondary level. This could be located within a Centre of Excellence for Gaelic at Portree High School, utilising the expertise of those teachers who have for some years been teaching their subjects in Gaelic, often with a huge amount of goodwill and an unreasonable lack of resources, or time, to prepare their own.

CONCLUSION

The Isle of Skye currently has 252 pupils in Gaelic-medium education and over half of these pupils attend Portree Primary School. Portree is the natural location for a stand-alone Gaelic school in Skye and, we believe, should be the only location the Highland Council considers within the proposed consultation.

We believe the majority of parents with children in GME at Portree Primary School support the development of a Gaelic-only school in Portree. We would urge the Highland Council to give added weight to the views of Gaelic-medium parents in the forthcoming consultation process as those most likely to be affected, and would encourage councillors to support a dedicated Gaelic school with wraparound childcare and community facilities for the area, at the same time as developing Portree High School as a Centre of Excellence for Gaelic.