1. INTRODUCTION
1.1 Bòrd na Gàidhlig welcomes the provisions in this Bill brought forward by The Scottish Government and supported its consultation. The Bòrd has responded to the set of questions from the Committee. However, our overall message to the Committee is that Scottish Government must ensure that these statutory provisions are met with adequate resources and funding to develop and sustain the Gaelic education sector.

2. BÒRD NA GÀIDHLIG RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS ON GAELIC IN THE BILL
2.1 Question 1: How significant a change in Gaelic medium primary education will the Bill deliver? Do you agree these provisions should be limited to primary schooling?

2.2 The provisions of the Bill have the potential to have a significant impact. Accessing GME must be easier for parents than at present. Significant increase in resources is needed for real change. Teacher/staff recruitment continues to be a challenge for GME and requires strategic and financial investment at national and authority level. This will require investment in human and infrastructural resources. A commitment to promote and support the development of GME must be realised by education authorities for the Bill to have an impact.

2.3 The assessment process is time-limited. This is welcomed. However there must also be a timeframe outlining how long is reasonable for establishing Gaelic-medium education once an application has been approved.

2.4 Bòrd na Gàidhlig does not agree that the process should be limited to primary schooling. Request for GME by parents of children between the ages of 3-5 should also be included in the Bill. Attending Gaelic-medium Early Years Education prior to transition into GMPE has an impact on Gaelic language fluency which may result in children accessing the benefits of bilingualism sooner. Gaelic language and culture will also be part of the child’s life from an early age.

2.5 The majority of pupils in Secondary Gaelic-medium education will have their access to Gaelic during school time and through a range of subjects greatly reduced. Parents should have the right to request education authorities have plans in place to extend the Gaelic-medium provision available in Secondary Education.

2.6 Bòrd na Gàidhlig feels that the extensions of the Gaelic education provisions of the Bill to early years and secondary education is essential to ensure a secure future for the Gaelic language.

3. Question 2: What are the most appropriate ways for education authorities, particularly those with low levels of Gaelic usage, to promote and support Gaelic medium education and Gaelic learner
education? What impact is this promotional work likely to have on the Gaelic language and the number of Gaelic speakers?

3.1 Gaelic and Gaelic education must be promoted and supported by education authorities and public authorities with an interest in education. This will include education authorities where parents may access Gaelic-medium education in neighbouring authorities. Information about Gaelic and Gaelic-medium education needs to be accurate, accessible to all irrespective of language background. Gaelic can be advertised through leaflets, posters, through an authority’s online facilities etc. Family Information Services have a role to promote Gaelic-medium education. Gaelic-medium education can be promoted by establishing 0-3 activities and groups in Gaelic. Such initiatives need to be accessible to all and can inform parents of the options available to them in educating their children. Gaelic needs to be included in Early Years Collaborative initiatives. Promotion of Gaelic-medium education must also attract young people who will be the teachers and parents of future Gaelic speaking generations.

3.2 Supporting Gaelic-medium education needs to be developed strategically to ensure there are adequate resources and staff to develop and sustain the system. Gaelic-medium must be part of curriculum initiatives at all levels.

3.3 The increase in uptake of Gaelic-medium and Gaelic learners’ education will increase the number of Gaelic speakers amongst younger age groups. Language acquisition through education is a key aspect of Bòrd na Gàidhlig’s National Language Plan 2012-17, and contributes towards the maintenance of speaker numbers of Gaelic. The expansion of the Gaelic education sector is key to achieving the Governmental target of the proportion of Gaelic speakers being returned to the proportion returned in the 2001 census by 2021.

4. Question 3: Do you agree that the Bill “will establish a clear process for authorities to follow in considering parental requests for an assessment of the need for Gaelic medium primary education”? Do you agree with the thresholds proposed in the Bill in relation to the assessment of parental requests?

4.1 Yes. This will be a significant step forward as there is no process or assessment procedure at present. A clear process will result in parents having more awareness and understanding of the Gaelic-medium education system and access to it for their children. Clear guidelines and templates need to be provided for parents and local authorities. Gathering evidence to support a request for GMPE must not be an onerous task for parents. Full assessment of the request must consider equally each of the criteria for assessment outlined in the Bill under Part 2 section 10 (7). Guidance must clearly set out the process.

4.2 The thresholds proposed must be flexible and dependent on the overall early years and school population in an area. In some rural areas the number of children may be as low as 5 per year or under 5 per year. Parents who would live in such areas would therefore be excluded from requesting GMPE. The
number of children in following year groups should not have an impact on the assessment. Each area must be assessed on a case by case basis. Reasonable requires to be defined as this is currently interpreted differently across the country.

4.3 Designation of assessment areas would need to be on a case by case basis. This would depend on the application request and the evidence provided with the application. Bòrd na Gàidhlig is aware of the long-standing request for a parental right to Gaelic-medium education. A right and a request need to have a process before parents could secure their objective of GME. We would welcome the committee’s view on this.

4.4 Section 7, 3 (b) makes the demand for GMPE amongst children in other year groups within the GMPE assessment area part of the criteria to provide, or to make a full assessment of the need for GMPE. Moreover, there is imprecision in the required threshold for such future demand for Gaelic-medium primary education. Section 6 (b) states that the local authority must consider the ‘demand for GMPE mentioned in subsection (3)(b) to be at, or to be likely to increase to, a level the local authority considers to be reasonable’. Reasonable requires to be defined as this is currently interpreted differently across the country. Bòrd na Gàidhlig do not agree that demand in pre-school pupils should determine the full assessment of parental requests. If Local Authorities follow the recommendations for supporting and promoting Gaelic-medium education future demand for Gaelic-medium primary education would emerge from the provision of Gaelic-medium pre-school provision, and greater parental awareness of the availability of Gaelic-medium primary education.

5. Question 4: Under existing legislation, education authorities must have regard to Bòrd na Gaidhlig’s education guidance when they are producing their annual statement of improvement objectives. What will the requirement in this bill add to this?

5.1 The guidance on Gaelic education will provide more details on the provisions in the Bill and will include guidance on a range of issues relevant to the delivery of Gaelic education. Bòrd na Gàidhlig welcomes this.

6. Question 5: Overall, to what extent will the Bill help to deliver the Scottish Government’s commitments to grow and strengthen Gaelic education?

6.1 The Bill will provide a structure and clear process for parents, education authorities on how to request Gaelic medium education and also the terms of assessment. The success of Gaelic education (GME and GLE) requires many things. We are confident that the Bill will contribute and strengthen Scottish Government commitments to grow and strengthen Gaelic education. However many areas remain under resourced which need to be addressed.

7. Question 6: What potential impact on other educational services might arise from the local authority having to implement these new duties?
7.1 Local Authorities will need to ensure that commitments in Gaelic Language Plans support the development and implementation of Gaelic Education and correlate with Guidance on Gaelic Education. Planning for Gaelic education is required to be developed nationally. Education authorities will need to consider specific capital and workforce planning for Gaelic Education. As the numbers of children accessing Gaelic-medium education increases and local authorities are developing and implementing Gaelic Language Plans; assessing requests for Gaelic-medium education; and actively promoting Gaelic and Gaelic Education the post of Gaelic Education Strategic Coordinator may need to be included within local authority structures. Otherwise the Chief Education Officer must have a clear understanding of Gaelic education and how it requires be promoting, supporting and implementing.

7.2 Education authorities must provide evidence on how they plan and develop Gaelic as outlined in Guidance on Gaelic Education.

7.3 Education authorities will need to consider specific capital and workforce planning for Gaelic Education. Teacher recruitment and education, resourcing of Gaelic-medium education and support for parents will be require considerable commitment and investment from education authorities and other public authorities with an interest in Gaelic Education.

7.4 Gaelic-medium teacher recruitment is considered to be the main constraint to extending Gaelic-medium provision. To counter such issues education authorities could proactively seek information on education staff Gaelic language skills, and collate information on teachers who would consider teaching in Gaelic-medium education.

8. BÒRD NA GÀIDHLIG RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS ON THE FINANCIAL MEMORANDUM IN THE BILL

8.1 Did you take part in any consultation exercise preceding the Bill and, if so, did you comment on the financial assumptions made?

8.2 Yes. The Bòrd highlighted that significant investment was needed to ensure the Gaelic education was supported and developed, so as to determine security for the Gaelic language.

Mary MacMillan
Head of Education and Learning
Bòrd na Gàidhlig