CALL FOR EVIDENCE ON THE EDUCATION (SCOTLAND) BILL
Response from Fèisean nan Gàidheal

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF VIEWS ON THE EDUCATION (SCOTLAND) BILL
The proposal that a statutory process should be put in place to enable authorities to assess and respond to parental requests for Gaelic Medium Education (GME) within a reasonable timescale is welcome. However, Fèisean nan Gàidheal feels this fails to live up to pre-election commitments in both 2007 and 2011 which were the impetus for this Bill.

Fèisean nan Gàidheal’s view is that a clear entitlement to GME would come much closer to delivering the Scottish Government’s commitment to grow and strengthen Gaelic Education.

In addition Statutory Guidance is required that should address various matters, some of the most important of which are listed in 2.4 below.

We would urge the Education and Culture Committee to bear pre-election commitments in mind as well as the need for carefully prepared statutory guidance. We would ask members to consider recommending amendments to the Bill that would ensure an entitlement to GME for those parents who wish it for their children.

1 INTRODUCTION
Fèisean nan Gàidheal offers this response to the call for evidence on the Education (Scotland) Bill and would be happy, if it would be helpful, to give further evidence to the Committee at a later stage of the Bill’s progress.

Scotland’s Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Fiona Hyslop, said in Past, Present & Future: Culture & Heritage in an Independent Scotland: "We know that immersion in cultural activity can help bolster the resilience and well-being of communities and individuals. I’m thinking here of Fèisean nan Gàidheal which is at the forefront of Gaelic arts development, with research suggesting that participation not only increases skills in young people but also self-esteem and a sense of identity."

The current sense of vibrancy in both the traditional music scene and Gaelic language development in Scotland is, in no small measure, due to the success of the Fèis movement.

Fèisean nan Gàidheal is one of Creative Scotland’s regularly funded organisations and supports 46 tuition-based Fèisean that offer tuition in traditional Gaelic arts to young people across Scotland. For over 30 years, the Fèisean have been tutoring young people in traditional music, Gaelic song and Gaelic drama. We have around 6,000 young people annually taking part in such tuition. Audiences for our events and other projects we are involved in mean we reach around 43,000 people annually and that figure rises to 482,000 when television appearances and YouTube hits are taken into account.

Fèisean now employ hundreds of musicians and singers on a regular basis to teach in the community and in schools. Fèisean have played a key part in producing a large number of excellent performers and players, some of whom are now in the top flight of Scottish musicians, making their living from performing and teaching Scottish traditional music and Gaelic song across the globe. They also produce content that helps to fill the schedules of radio and television programmes as well as contributing to the earnings of recording studios and record companies. Fèisean also play an important part in supporting the Gaelic language skills of young people, and engendering positive attitudes towards the language among participants, with many having gone on to develop fluency in Gaelic.
More recently, Fèisean nan Gàidheal established its Fèisgoil service that pulls together the various strands of education and community work in which Fèisean nan Gàidheal has been involved. The expansion of that work will include a new Gaelic teaching service. Fèisgoil offers local authorities a valuable service that helps deliver non-certificated Gaelic teaching and areas of the Curriculum for Excellence relating to Expressive Arts, Health & Well-being and Literacy & Gàidhlig. The service can also assist local authorities and public bodies deliver commitments in their Gaelic Language Plans as well as initiatives such as Studying Scotland and 1+2 languages.

2  RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS ON GAELIC IN THE BILL

While our particular interest is in the sections of the Bill that seek to strengthen GME and we offer answers to the following questions posed by the Committee, we are also cognisant of the important role of learners of Gaelic as a second or third language at all stages.

2.1  How significant a change in Gaelic medium primary education will the Bill deliver? Do you agree these provisions should be limited to primary schooling?

We do not believe this Bill, as it stands, will effect significant change in GME.

The Bill seeks to put a time-limited process in place for dealing with requests from parents for GME, which is welcome. However, without putting mechanisms in place to ensure local authorities actually take steps to offer provision on completing the process, there is no right conferred on parents to secure GME for their children. This Bill could represent a missed opportunity.

If the Bill aims to increase the number of pupils in Gaelic education and, through time, increase the number of Gaelic speakers in Scotland, considerable amendments will be required to strengthen it if the Bill is to deliver those aspirations. These provisions should extend across all sectors of education 3-18.

2.2  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?

Existing legislation and Statutory Guidance on Gaelic Language Plans could be used more effectively to ensure the promotion of Gaelic education.

The Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 (the Act) confers on Bòrd na Gàidhlig the general function of promoting, and facilitating the promotion of the use and understanding of the Gaelic language, and Gaelic education and Gaelic culture. The Act also enables the Bòrd to give a notice in writing to any relevant public authority requiring the authority to prepare a Gaelic Language Plan.

Therefore, mechanisms already in place could be used more effectively to facilitate the promotion of Gaelic education, including the proper implementation of Gaelic Language Plans. There is no shortage of policy and good intentions, but there are too many examples of local and public authorities which, having agreed a Gaelic Language Plan, do not then implement it. Having agreed a plan a duty should be placed on such bodies to measure its implementation with appropriate scrutiny and quality assurance arrangements.

Bòrd na Gàidhlig can already take cognisance of the varying needs in local authority areas including those where use of Gaelic is low and adjust its expectations accordingly.
Concerted promotion of the benefits of bilingualism and increasing the availability of GME, the leading example in Scotland of bilingual education, would lead to increased uptake and, in time, have a positive influence on the number of Gaelic speakers. Further benefits would accrue such as an overall improvement in third language learning and improved literacy in schools and colleges.

2.3 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?

A process already exists in the provisions of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 which means that if parents wish there to be Gaelic education provision, their request should be granted so long as it doesn’t mean unsuitable instruction and training will be offered and doesn’t involve unreasonable public expenditure.

That process is based entirely on parental demand to which an authority must respond - but with no time limit. In terms of ameliorating some of the difficulties experienced by parents in securing GME, this Bill will certainly help by putting a time-limited process in place.

The danger exists, however, that it will not facilitate an increase in GME provision without going further and placing a duty upon local authorities to make the requested provision, within the parameters of that which constitutes “reasonable demand”.

We welcome the suggestion in the Bill that a threshold of 5 pupils would be required to trigger the proposed process but believe the Committee should go further and recommend offering a right to GME in circumstances where parents of 5 or more pupils make such a request.

2.4 Under existing legislation, education authorities must have regard to Bòrd na Gàidhlig’s education guidance when they are producing their annual statement of improvement objectives. What will the requirement in this Bill add to this?

The Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 gives Bòrd na Gàidhlig the power to issue Guidance. It is very much needed and given that the Bòrd has not done so, we welcome the placing of a duty on the Bòrd to prepare and issue Guidance.

We believe the Guidance should be issued in the name of the Cabinet Secretary, or a Minister, and that local authorities, and other organisations that could influence GME, should be obligated to adhere to it.

Statutory Guidance should address, amongst other matters:
- What GME is and what outcomes parents should expect
- The length of time that is appropriate for immersion in Gaelic
- Ongoing CPD to ensure teachers have opportunities to improve their immersion techniques and ensure their own language skills are ever improving
- The ongoing need for teaching resources and how best to deliver them
- GME in secondary schools and stipulate triggers that would compel local authorities to make adequate provision
- What constitutes an acceptable Gaelic ethos in primary schools with GME provision and in secondary schools with a large cohort of pupils who have gone through primary GME
- What constitutes a Gaelic school and the point at which it would be desirable for an existing unit to become a Gaelic school
- Provision in GME for pupils and students with additional learning needs.
At the same time, a review of the Scheme of Specific Grants for Gaelic Education should be undertaken to ensure gradual mainstreaming of budgets by local authorities so that existing funds could make more of an impact in developing GME.

2.5 Overall, to what extent will the Bill help to deliver the Scottish Government’s commitments to grow and strengthen Gaelic education?

The National Gaelic Language Plan is clear that there is a national target to double the P1 intake in GME by 2017. Its delivery requires local authorities to play their part by expanding existing GME provision, making new provision, as well as employing and retaining teachers.

Without amendments, the Bill has little prospect of helping to deliver the Scottish Government’s commitments to grow and strengthen Gaelic education putting in place, as it proposes, the right to a process rather than the right to GME.

Fèisean nan Gàidheal feels that local and public authorities require clear direction and effective Government leadership to expand and grow Gaelic education, make new GM provision where reasonable demand exists and that this Bill should be amended to ensure this happens.

2.6 What potential impact on other educational services might arise from the local authority having to implement these new duties?

Fèisean nan Gàidheal believes that there will be an enhanced and positive impact on other education services as a result of local authorities having to implement the new duties in this Bill; particularly in terms of the richness and diversity of pupils’ and students’ experiences.

Since all children have a legal right to education, there are no long-term additional costs in making GME provision. All that is needed is a shifter-alignment of some of the funds spent on English-language education towards ensuring more existing funding is pointed towards new GME provision.

The Scottish Government’s Scheme of Specific Grants for Gaelic Education is designed to even out peaks and troughs and ensure that the initial costs of making GME provision are not burdensome to local authorities.

Lack of senior support for Gaelic teachers is a significant problem, since many local authorities no longer have individuals with the necessary educational and linguistic skills at management level to offer advice and assistance. Guidance should address this but having a Chief Education Officer, as proposed in the Bill, could be helpful to GME if she, or he, recognises the potential of, and proven attainment from, such provision.

3 CONCLUSION
It is Fèisean nan Gàidheal’s view that a clear entitlement to GME is required, where reasonable demand exists, as well as Statutory Guidance if Gaelic education is to grow and strengthen in extent and quality.

This would be in line with the commitments made by the Scottish Government prior to election and with the aims of the National Gaelic Language Plan 2012-17.

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Chair of Fèisean nan Gàidheal
15 May 2015