

SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT – CROSS PARTY GROUP ON GAELIC

Draft Minute of the meeting of the Cross Party Group on Gaelic, held in Committee Room 2, The Scottish Parliament, Holyrood on Wednesday 15th June, 2016 at 6pm.

Present: *Kate Forbes MSP (Convener); John Finnie MSP (Vice Convener); Angus MacDonald MSP; Lewis MacDonald (MSP) Donald MacNeill, Comunn na Gàidhlig (Secretary); Shona Nic'Illeain (Bòrd na Gàidhlig); Bruce Robertson (Bòrd na Gàidhlig); Douglas Ansdell (Scottish Government); Mata MacIver (UHI); Dòmhnall Caimbeul (MG Alba); Diane MacIntyre (Scottish Parliament); Carole Henderson; Duncan Henderson; Steven MacIomhair (Bòrd na Gàidhlig); Maeve MacKinnon (Foghlam Alba); Ruairidh MacIntyre (Scottish Government); Beathag Mhoireasdain – simultaneous interpretation.*

1. Welcome & Apologies

Apologies had been received from: Donald Cameron, MSP; Allan MacDonald (Bòrd na Gàidhlig); Jane Renton (Foghlam Alba); Iain MacLeòid (An Comunn Gàidhealach) Fiona O' Hanlon (Oilthigh Dhùn Èidinn); Wilson MacLeod (Oilthigh Dhùn Èidinn); Coinneach MacIomhair (Comunn na Gàidhlig); Joan Esson (HMIe); Ann Desseyn; Dòmhnall U. Moireasdan (Stòrlann)

Angus MacDonald MPS, CPG Convener in the previous session of Parliament, welcomed everyone to this first meeting of the CPG in the new session.

2. CPG Terms of Reference and working practices

As this was a reconvened CPG for the new session, Donald MacNeill outlined the status of Scottish Parliament Cross Party Groups - established and operating under the MSPs Code of Conduct (*a link to this had been circulated with the Agenda*).

To maximise the opportunity for the CPG to get authoritative information on specific questions, it was agreed to continue with the practice of the previous year's CPG of requesting agenda items or information requests at least 10 days prior to the meeting. This would not preclude urgent items being discussed that might arise during that 10 day period when the Agenda is 'closed', but that this would be at the Convener's discretion and might require a point to be deferred and a response to be made following the meeting.

Donald MacNeill also explained why there were no Minutes of the previous meeting (*Wed. March 16th*) on the Agenda - as these had been approved electronically on 18th March 2016, prior to the dissolution of Parliament.

3. Election of CPG Office Bearers

(Donald MacNeill chaired this item on the agenda)

Convener - Kate Forbes, MSP was nominated as Convener of the Group by Angus MacDonald MSP. As she was willing to stand, and there being no other nominations, she was duly elected.

Vice Convener - John Finnie, MSP was nominated as Convener of the Group by Lewis MacDonald, MSP. As he was willing to stand, and there being no other nominations, he was duly elected.

Secretary - Donald MacNeill (CnaG), was nominated by Angus MacDonald, MSP. As he was willing to stand, and there being no other nominations, he was duly elected.

4. Update from Bòrd na Gàidhlig.

Shona MacLennan, newly-appointed CEO of Bòrd na Gaidhlig, updated the Group on recent developments relating to the Bòrd and its work.

Staffing: That the new Stiùiriche Foghlam (Education Director) Mona Wilson would be in post from July - an important step forward given the significance of GME to overall Gaelic development. Daibhidh Boag was confirmed as Stiùiriche Leasachaidh (Development Director); Steven MacIver as Head of Marketing and IT; and that recruitment was underway for a Head of Finance post. As well as being an internal role, this latter would also look outwards to cooperation with other organisations.

Bòrd membership: That 5 new Bòrd members had been appointed and would attend their first formal meeting shortly. Joanne Smith, Jim Whannel, Joy Dunlop, Donald MacSween, and Mary MacInnes. It had also been agreed to amend the Bòrd's working practices to incorporate Working Groups aligned with the strategic priorities of the new National Plan, and that these would be opened to key figures from outwith the Bòrd.

New Plan timetable: That the seminar of 17th March in Edinburgh, attended by 165 people, provided a good grounding for the new National Plan; and that the University of Edinburgh was examining the impact of the 2nd National Plan. The Bòrd would be debating the structure of the new plan, and would incorporate others views. A draft Plan would be circulated for consultation in due course, with the intention being that the Bòrd would approve a new Plan in February 2017, at which point it would go forward for formal approval. In response to a question about the nature of the Working Groups, it was said that the Bòrd were aware of the risks of making such groups too large, and would seek a balance between inclusivity and effective operation.

Bruce Robertson, the Bòrd's Acting Education Director provided an update on the forthcoming Statutory Guidance on Gaelic Medium Education. The Bòrd were delighted to be charged with developing this secondary legislation, particularly given the important provision that all children will have an entitlement to GME providing there is reasonable demand.

A Working Group has been developing the Guidance; it will be considered by Bòrd na Gàidhlig next week (beg. Monday 20th June) and will then go to formal consultation. This is expected to run from 1st August to 1st November. The Bòrd would then analyse, consider and respond to the views received, with the intention being to get Ministerial approval in February 2017. This would be an important milestone in the development of Gaelic and Gaelic education.

Alongside the Guidance itself would be a number of working documents or 'toolkits' for parents and others, intended to facilitate work with Local Authorities and Parental bodies to meet their aspirations.

John Finnie MSP raised a point about the potential for such Guidance to provoke negative or critical comment in the media, and enquired whether a strategy to address this would be in place. In response Bruce Robertson agreed that this was a risk, and that a communications plan would be developed. While negative comments often made the press, there was no doubt that GME was a real success, even a victim of its own success, with more parents realising the link between bilingualism and their children's development and attainment.

Angus MacDonald MSP raised a point about Local Authority transport spending in support of GME, with particular reference to cross-boundary movements. In response Bruce Robertson said that one of the key aspirations of the new Guidance would be to encourage greater Local Authority co-operation. It was hoped that jointly-held strategic discussions could see further expansion of GME provision. In particular relation to transport, Mr Robertson said that the Government was keen to protect or even enhance Gaelic Specific Grant spending, which often went towards supporting transport costs.

Màta MacIomhair raised a more general point about the importance of Gaelic having enjoyed cross-party support in the past. He suggested it would be beneficial to try and identify Gaelic spokespersons within each of the political parties at Holyrood. In response John Finnie MSP agreed with the general point, but added that there was a risk this would identify the 'usual suspects' and that a broader support would be welcomed. **It was agreed that the CPG would write to each Party seeking clarification.**

Kate Forbes MSP asked for further clarification about the attainment levels within GME. In response Bruce Robertson said that this had been well-researched in the past and that it was possible to state with some confidence that GME pupils perform at least as well as their (non-GME) peers, and in many instances better. However he said that there were no grounds for complacency - that it was important this attainment level continued into secondary education; and that new Scottish legislation on enhanced early years/childcare provision must also be delivered in a GME context, given the importance of such provision on children's attainment levels.

Carol Henderson asked a question about teacher staffing and recruitment, citing present constraints and asking how enhanced demand might be accommodated. Bruce Robertson agreed with the sentiments expressed, and said that teacher recruitment remained a key objective for the Bòrd, and that they had specific staff focussed on this. While there had never been so many Gaelic teachers in Scotland, there had never been so many pupils either. The secondary curriculum was now being prioritised and that a range of things were in place to boost numbers including: encouraging pupils exiting GME to go to teaching careers; making teacher training courses more accessible via distance learning; and small bursaries being made available to those undertaking GME teacher training.

5. Gaelic education conference, Inverness, 2/6/16 - Maeve MacKinnon, Foghlam Alba

Maeve MacKinnon, Education Scotland provided an update on the above conference. (*A conference summary paper received just prior to the CPG meeting is to be circulated with this Minute*). It was felt this had been a very useful event, with lots of opportunities for participants to raise and discuss issues. These outcomes were still being gathered and would be considered further; the conference materials would go to the Education Scotland website; the powerpoint presentations made were already posted there; and that a participant survey was underway.

Education Scotland and Bòrd na Gàidhlig were to meet to discuss next steps once all of this work had been concluded.

Màta MacÌomhair thanked Education Scotland and Bòrd na Gàidhlig for organising the event given the demand that had existed. He said it had been a very effective day and its significance was underlined by the number of people who had been willing to attend to discuss the various issues, and in particular the development of GME into secondary education.

Angus MacDonald MSP added his thanks to Education Scotland for organising the event.

Bruce Robertson suggested that, given the significance of developing GME into secondary education, and the CPGs continuing interest in the issue, a presentation on the 'e-sgoil' methodology being developed by Comhairle nan Eilean Siar might be a useful item for a future agenda.

6. BBC Royal Charter renewal - the case for a greater contribution to Gaelic. Donald Campbell, MG Alba.

Donald Campbell addressed the Group on the current review of the BBC's Royal Charter. When this was last reviewed BBC Alba didn't exist, and as such it was important to place the channel on the agenda this time round. At the moment the channel does not have the legal status enjoyed by S4C in Wales, which affords that channel a great deal of security. The BBC currently provides S4C with £75M per year, and 10 hours of programming each week. Mr Campbell said that now was the time to seek a measure of parity or equal status for BBC Alba.

He thanked the CPF for its support in the past and asked if it could further support the demand for equality in one key area; the provision of 10 hours of programming per week. The BBC currently provides 4 hours of programming each week, and this is not enough.

Kate Forbes MPS, and Angus MacDonald MSP said that they were hoping to raise this issue in Parliamentary debate in the near future, and **it was agreed that the CPG would write to the BBC supporting this call for a greater programming commitment.**

7. Proposed date of next meeting

It was agreed that the next meeting be held at 1pm on Wednesday 30th November. This would coincide with the national Gaelic Schools Debate, the finals of which would be held in the Parliament Building on that evening.