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HIGHLAND REGIONAL COUNCIL EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Gaelic Medium Education: Pupils with Special Educational Needs

1 Background

- 1.1 The Council recognises the continuing importance of the Gaelic Language in the life and culture of the Highland Region, and therefore supports Gaelic medium education (GME).
- 1.2 The aims of GME are:
 - a) To provide a balanced, progressive and relevant curriculum geared to the needs of the individual child;
 - b) To bring pupils to broadly equal competence in Gaelic and English in all language skills by the end of Primary 7, and to ensure that by the end of Primary 7 their English language skills are at equivalent levels to those reached by pupils in English Medium Education;
 - c) To achieve the above two aims within the parameters of the 5-14 development programme both in relation to language and to the rest of the school curriculum.
- 1.3 In recent years the availability of GME has increased significantly in many areas of the Highland Region. GME began in the Highland Region in 1985 with 9 pupils in one school, by August 1994 there were 545 pupils in 18 schools.
- 1.4 The children joining GME at school entry will have varying experiences of the Gaelic language. They may have grown up in families where Gaelic is spoken, live in a community where Gaelic is spoken, have attended GM playgroup or have watched GM television. Other children will have no experience of Gaelic prior to school entry.
- 1.5 During the first two years in GME, teaching and learning will take place entirely in Gaelic. In the middle primary years (P3-P5) English reading and writing will be phased in, and in upper primary (P6/7) some teaching will be carried out through the medium of English.
- 1.6 Successful participation in GME requires pupils to become bilingual in relation to both spoken and written language.
- 1.7 As more parents seek places in GM classes for their children and as more pupils are enrolled, the likelihood is that a number of these pupils will have special educational needs which will affect their learning and educational progress. This document discusses, in relation to GME, the processes of ensuring that pupils with special educational needs are identified and receive appropriate educational support.

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2. General factors to consider at school entry
 - 2.1 As a general rule all pupils who would benefit from attending mainstream school should have the right to enrol in GME.
 - 2.2 Where a child has been identified prior to school entry as having special needs, the Authority and the school - and where appropriate the Health Board - will aim to provide in Gaelic all of the support arrangements normally provided in a mainstream context. It has to be recognised, however, both that the range of materials available to support Gaelic learners is limited and that there are national shortages of Gaelic speaking learning support teachers and speech and language therapists so that despite the Authority's best endeavours it may not always be possible to provide support for a pupil's learning difficulties, and it may in such cases be necessary to recommend against enrolment.
 - 2.3 If a pupil's special educational needs are such that the Authority, as well as their school, should keep that pupil's educational progress under continuing review then both the pupil's special educational needs and the measures required to support and assist them must be described in a document with legal status, the Record of Need. The Authority has legal duties to identify and assess children aged two years and above who may have special educational needs and to open a Record of Need if necessary. If the child is Recorded the Authority must ensure that the child receives appropriate education, and must provide any support specified in the Record of Need.
 - 2.4 The majority of pupils with a Record of Need at school entry have been identified as having significant difficulties in relation to one or more of the following: learning, vision, hearing, language and communication, co-ordination and movement difficulties. At present approximately 1% pupils in the Region are identified as having these types of difficulty prior to school entry.
 - 2.5 If entry to GME is requested by parents for any child who has a Record of Need, or who is in the process of obtaining one, the request will be considered in relation to that child as an individual.
 - 2.6 Within the Highland Region the majority of children with special educational needs who have a Record of Need are educated in their local, mainstream school. For some pupils with a Record of Need, however, education in a specialist facility will need to be considered because the expertise, equipment and staff time which they require are not available within the mainstream school setting. Other pupils with special educational needs may be able to cope in mainstream school but may have difficulties which make it particularly hard for them to cope with the extra learning load involved in education in a second language. Whenever a child with a Record of Need is accepted within a GM class then the Region will endeavour to provide adequate support. If this

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cannot be provided within the GME system, then GME will not be offered.

- 2.7 The development of the ability to communicate with others is an essential aim of education. Without such competence the ability to function independently as an adult will be unacceptably curtailed. The majority of pupils will use oral and written language to communicate, but where oral communication skills are not developing there will be a need to supplement these skills with alternative and augmentative communication i.e. signs, symbols or electronic communication aids. If it is probable that a pupil can develop basic competence in only one language then efforts should be directed to the development of communication in the language which will be most important and widely useful throughout the pupil's life. Most children with generalised learning difficulties, however, learn two languages to the same spoken level, and the existence of learning difficulties alone should not be regarded as a reason for refusing the opportunity to learn a second language.

3. When is Gaelic Medium Education not appropriate at school entry

- 3.1 Learning to speak Gaelic involves the learning of a new vocabulary and of some sounds which are not present in spoken English, and the order of words within sentences differs between English and Gaelic. Children who have difficulties with these aspects of spoken language may find it difficult or impossible to learn to speak both languages.
- 3.2 In written Gaelic individual letters and combinations of letters may not be pronounced in a similar manner to those in English, and both the frequencies of occurrence of letter combinations, and the allowable letter sequences are different in the two languages. Children who have difficulties with these aspects of written language may find it difficult or impossible to learn to read and write both languages.
- 3.3 GME is not appropriate for children who have sensory or communication difficulties such that the introduction of the need to learn any additional language will result in severe and long-term difficulties in relation to language or communication development and school work. It is estimated that such pupils represent up to 1% of all children.
- 3.4 Most children with severe speech and language difficulties are identified prior to school entry. Those children with severe difficulties in understanding and using language, and those children whose pronunciation is so unclear that it is difficult to understand them should not enter GME unless Gaelic is their first or only language.
- 3.5 It is thought that the development of intellectual ability and language are closely related, and that where language does not develop normally there is a significant risk that the development of some

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aspects of intelligence will, as a consequence, be impaired. Hence signing approaches and symbols are used with some children both to aid the development of communication skills and to help mitigate the effects of language difficulties on other aspects of intellectual development. Most children using a signing or symbols approach to assist in learning to communicate will be using this approach as part of a language learning programme, which includes spoken language. Such children are likely to be confused if the spoken language which they hear includes the differing vocabulary and grammatical structures of two languages. It is recommended that children using a signing or symbols approach should be exposed to only one spoken language.

- 3.6 A few children with severe and profound learning difficulties have little or no functional speech when they are of school age, and many of these children initially learn to communicate using signing or symbol systems. It is recommended that children with severe and profound learning difficulties who communicate via alternative methods incorporating signing or symbol systems should be exposed to only one spoken language.
- 3.7 Children with severe or profound hearing losses derive little useful information from speech sounds, even with the assistance of powerful hearing aids. Most of their information is derived from lip-reading and from signing. The aims of education include the development of lip-reading skills, and helping the child to make as effective use as possible of any hearing which they have. Both the introduction of further sounds and the broadening of the range of words to be lip-read, which would follow placement in GME, are likely to compromise the development of linguistic understanding in severely and profoundly deaf children. Additionally, the sign language used by the deaf is generally recognised as a language in its own right, so that deaf children are already faced with learning two languages, spoken English and British Sign Language. Placement in GME would require the pupil to learn a third language. Given the high frequency of learning difficulties amongst deaf children in EME the addition of a third language is not justifiable and children with severe and profound hearing losses should not usually be placed in GME.
- 3.8 A few children have severe visual difficulties. Some use a closed circuit television (CCT) system to magnify documents so that they can read them. For such children, provided that a CCT document reader can be made available, there is no reason to recommend against GME. Blind children, however, must learn to read in braille and this is more difficult than learning to read print using sight. As braille competence increases, pupils learn to read shortened braille forms of words which are specific to the language being read. Although a blind child could follow the oral aspects of the GM curriculum there is no justification for further complicating the acquisition of braille by introducing a need to learn to read in two languages. If a blind child is placed in GME, English reading and writing should be taught using English language braille.

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3.9 A few children, have difficulties in physical movements (for example movements of mouth and tongue, and breath control) which prevent them from developing functional and intelligible speech. Some may be unable to make any sound, and others will not be intelligible at all. In order to promote effective communication the speech and language therapist may advise the use of an augmentative communication aid with a voice output. Users of augmentative communication aids draw attention to the very heavy memory load involved in learning to use their machines effectively even in one language. The introduction of a second language would significantly increase this memory load and would be likely to adversely affect the development of the child's ability to communicate. Additionally the programmes currently available for these computerised aids cannot satisfactorily be adapted to communicate in Gaelic (and indeed there are still problems in adapting the machines from American English to British English). Children who are likely to need to use a form of augmentative communication should not usually enter GME.

4. Where the decision is not clear cut

- 4.1 For those children with a Record of Need who have general learning difficulties, emotional and behavioural difficulties, or specific medical difficulties which require significant support GME should be considered, and a decision taken based on the overall situation. The following factors will need to be considered:
- i. How far is Gaelic spoken at home, and if it is not, what support can parents, brothers and sisters and the extended family provide to the language learner?
 - ii. Is Gaelic a significant language within the local community?
 - ii. Can any general support required by the child be provided in the GM class? For example, are there appropriate toilet facilities, does the child need any assistance from an auxiliary and if so can it be provided, does the child need access to any specialist equipment or therapies, and can these be provided locally?
 - iii. Will the child require learning support, and can this be provided within GME?
 - V. Can the child's safety be guaranteed in the open environment of a mainstream school?
- 4.2 Where these issues arise as a child approaches school entry, and parents have requested a place in GME, a case discussion including parents should be convened. It is suggested that this discussion should be chaired by the Divisional Education Officer or his Representative and should include the parents, a representative of the school which would provide GME, the educational psychologist involved, and someone with an overview of the resources and

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expertise currently available with GME in the Region. (This would probably be the adviser for GME.) If the child is known to any professionals, for example in relation to hearing and/or language problems, then these professionals should be invited to join discussions about whether the child should enter GME when he or she reaches school entry age.

- 4.3 If a child has a Record of Need, the Local Authority has the final obligation to determine a suitable school - parents cannot make a placing request for a non special school. If a child does not have a Record of Need, parents can make a placing request for any non-special school including a GME facility.
5. As pupils progress through Gaelic,-Medium Education.
 - 5.1 With a very few children it becomes clear as the primary one year progresses that they are having severe problems in learning Gaelic, or in relation to immersion in a new language environment. These children should be reviewed individually jointly with their parents as withdrawal from GME may be advisable. If the child is known to the educational psychologist or to any other professionals, for example in relation to hearing or language problems, then these professionals should be invited to join this discussion.
 - 5.2 Children admitted to GME are likely to have the same range of learning difficulties as their peers in EME. The impact of the immersion in Gaelic may, however, delay the recognition of any underlying learning difficulties, since the pupils in GME begin to learn reading and writing later than their EME counterparts. Nevertheless, by the end of primary two it may be clear that a child is developing reading and writing in Gaelic significantly more slowly than his or her peers within GME, and extra educational support may need to be considered.
 - 5.3 If a pupil is having significant difficulties by the end of primary two, the process to be followed is similar to that for pupils in EME. This process will be fully described in the Education Department document "Guidelines on Record Keeping, Assessment and Monitoring: an Integrated Approach to Pupil Support in Mainstream Schools" which is in preparation. It may be that sufficient resources will be available in school, and that the curriculum can be modified by the class teacher so that it becomes appropriate for the child. If not, it will be necessary to seek the opinion of a learning support teacher. At present the range of learning support materials available in Gaelic is very much less extensive than that available in English, but it is intended gradually to develop a similar range of resources in Gaelic to those available to teachers in EME.
 - 5.4 It may be helpful to consider the provision of a small, portable, notepad computer, and it should be noted that some predictive word

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processing programmes can be used in any language, provided that an appropriate dictionary is added to the computer.

5.5 1-2% of all children have, it is estimated, a severe specific learning difficulty or dyslexia. These children find it extremely difficult to learn to read at all, and without intensive and highly specialised help their reading difficulties may persist into adulthood. Similarly they may have severe, long-lasting, spelling difficulties which, without specialist help, make their written work incomprehensible to others. Such children find it very difficult to learn the relationships between printed letters and words and their spoken sounds, and to remember the orders of letters within words. Both the sound-symbol relationships, and the letter order patterns differ between languages, and for children with a severe specific learning difficulty learning should be restricted to a single language.

5.6 It is difficult to detect specific learning difficulties prior to school entry. Children with these difficulties are usually identified after they have entered school, when a detailed individual assessment is carried out by an educational psychologist following concern about poor reading or writing expressed by teachers or parents. The signs that the child may have a severe, specific learning difficulty include:

1. Severe difficulties in acquiring any useful reading or writing competence.
2. Difficulties in learning common sequences e.g. the alphabet, days of the week, months of the year, times tables.
3. Difficulties in remembering and repeating sentences, rhythms and rhymes.
4. Difficulties with visual memory and copying shapes.

If it is thought that a child in GME has a severe difficulty of a dyslexic type, the advisability of referral to the Regional Psychological Service should be discussed with parents, and their consent sought for this.

5.7 It will occasionally become clear as a pupil progresses through GME that, although oral Gaelic competence is satisfactory, the child is experiencing a level of difficulty with acquiring reading and writing skills in Gaelic which suggests that he or she may not be able to master these skills adequately in two languages. In such cases, for a very few children, it may be appropriate for them to continue in GME, but to try and learn reading, writing and spelling in English only. This may provide the best of both worlds in that the pupil has the opportunity to develop spoken Gaelic competence to a good level while at the same time concentrating his/her efforts in relation to the acquisition of functional literacy skills. It is suggested that, in consultation with parents and any

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professionals involved, a final decision regarding any modification of GME should usually be taken by the headteacher by the end of primary four at the latest, in order to allow a substantial time for English only study of reading and writing if this is needed.

6. Conclusion.

GME provision within the Highland Region seeks to provide appropriate education for all those pupils whose parents request it. This has already been achieved for the vast majority of GM pupils. There is now a need to develop learning support expertise and materials to further widen the range of educational needs which can be provided for within GM provision. There will probably always be a tiny minority of pupils whose special educational needs cannot be met in mainstream school, but in GME (as in EME) the aims should be to decrease this group to the minimum by continuing to develop resources and expertise.

14/11/94.

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