

PE1795/D

Comunn na Gàidhlig submission of 29 September 2020

We are grateful to Misneachd for raising their petition on the work of Spòrs Gàidhlig.

We are also grateful to the Committee and MSPs for considering it, and to the groups who have supported Spòrs Gàidhlig in its early phases, including: Cairngorms LEADER; Highlands and Islands Enterprise; Bòrd na Gàidhlig; and the Scottish Government.

As outlined in the petition, we were experiencing financial difficulties in September and October last year. Comunn na Gàidhlig (CnaG) ** - the Spòrs Gàidhlig parent organisation - had no approved funding in place to allow the project to continue. In the absence of ongoing financial arrangements CnaG would not have been able to retain the Spòrs Gàidhlig team, and we publically communicated that risk at that time. Shortly after, through further communication and engagement with Bòrd na Gàidhlig, we were offered financial support for the period November 2019 to March 2021. Bòrd na Gàidhlig provided a further contribution towards the project costs, and CnaG had to commit to generating additional income through sales activity.

This work was progressing well until the Covid-19 lockdown. In March 2020 we had bookings in place worth £53,000, and expected to generate further bookings through ongoing marketing activity. All of this activity had to be cancelled, along with other work the team would normally undertake through the summer months.

We are very grateful that Bòrd na Gàidhlig have agreed (23rd September 2020) that we can 're-purpose' the support originally awarded on the basis of a 'bridge to commercialisation' towards retaining the Spòrs Gàidhlig team in their jobs. Between the Bòrd assistance and the support we have received through the UK Government's job retention scheme, we will be able to maintain the jobs until March 2021.

Bòrd na Gàidhlig have also accepted an application for further assistance in the 2021/22 financial year. We understand this will be considered in December 2020. This application, if approved, would provide some 50% of the total funding we would require throughout the year. CnaG has undertaken to find the remainder and this may come from a combination of reserves, other funders, or sales activities (*though it would be unwise to assume an easy return to pre-Covid market conditions as early as next year.*) We have approached the Scottish Government informally, though initial indications were not overly optimistic.

Considering all of the above we have reason to be hopeful that the Spòrs Gàidhlig position is relatively secure up to March 2022. In the current climate this might not be too bad a position – but it does not equate to long-term sustainability, the key issue raised in the petition.

We agree with 'Misneachd' – the petition authors – in their assertion that it is critically important that children pursuing Gaelic Medium Education (GME) have access to the resource/opportunities afforded by Spòrs Gàidhlig. We believe there are two important principles here: equality of opportunity with those pursuing 'mainstream' English education; but also fulfilling one of the key aims of GME. If we really expect the GME system to bring

young people to a degree of Gaelic fluency then it is important for them to engage in activities which are fun, attractive and exciting – which will demonstrate to them that Gaelic has a place beyond the classroom.

Returning to the question of sustainability. We believe we have answered some doubters over the past few years, demonstrating that there are no practical reasons why outdoor education cannot be delivered through the medium of Gaelic and to a high degree of professionalism. If we then accept the points made above – that these opportunities are very important for children undertaking GME – then we need to be sure that Spòrs Gàidhlig is sustainable and able to deliver these activities into the longer term.

At this stage all of the delivery hinges upon two members of staff, with freelance support from one other individual. We do not have the resources to train anyone else. If one of our core staff were to leave – for any reason – it would be extremely unlikely that we could sustain the company and its programme.

Therefore we are about to refresh our efforts to put Spòrs Gàidhlig on a more sustainable platform. At this stage, the project costs a little more than £90,000 annually. If we were to receive ca. £150,000 annually we could look to train others, and employ one other person to strengthen the team, we could buy new equipment – and most importantly – we could offer opportunities at more affordable prices to young people, through parents or schools. This is always our focus: to provide young people with exciting opportunities to use and develop their Gaelic.

Covid-19 has delayed this campaign, but we are about to begin again and would welcome any support that MSPs could offer with this.

Finally, we are grateful to ‘Misneachd’ for organising and submitting their petition, and we are grateful to Bòrd na Gàidhlig for the support they have already given us (and we hope they will give us in future towards our activity in 2021/22. Despite this Spòrs Gàidhlig is not yet as sustainable as we would like, and this work continues.

Should this response still leave any unanswered questions we would be only too happy to provide further information.

** It might be useful to clarify that Comunn na Gàidhlig is a registered charity. All of our Gaelic development activity is undertaken on a strictly not-for-profit basis. Our work these days is almost exclusively focussed on young people, working in schools and communities. The Spòrs Gàidhlig ‘project’ is a logical extension of this.