

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee
Wednesday 11 September 2024
13th Meeting, 2024 (Session 6)

PE2098: Provide essential investment in the Gaelic language to secure its future

Introduction

Petitioner Màrtainn Mac a' Bhàillidh on behalf of Misneachd

Petition summary Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to bring investment in the Gaelic language to sustainable levels by increasing Bòrd na Gàidhlig's annual budget to at least £8.5 million and increase funding in line with inflation each year.

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2098>

1. This is a new petition that was lodged on 14 May 2024.
2. A full summary of this petition and its aims can be found at **Annexe A**.
3. A SPICe briefing has been prepared to inform the Committee's consideration of the petition and can be found at **Annexe B**. [A Gaelic translation of the SPICe briefing has been produced and is available on the petition webpage](#).
4. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing 1,123 signatures have been received on this petition.
5. The Committee seeks views from the Scottish Government on all new petitions before they are formally considered.
6. The Committee has received submissions from the Scottish Government and the Petitioner, which are set out in **Annexe C** of this paper.

Action

7. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

Clerks to the Committee
September 2024

Annexe A: Summary of petition

PE2098: Provide essential investment in the Gaelic language to secure its future

Petitioner

Màrtainn Mac a' Bhàillidh on behalf of Misneachd

Date Lodged

14 May 2024

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to bring investment in the Gaelic language to sustainable levels by increasing Bòrd na Gàidhlig's annual budget to at least £8.5 million and increase funding in line with inflation each year.

Background information

Investment in Gaelic development creates jobs, particularly in marginalised rural and island communities, and has a positive impact across numerous policy priorities.

Two panels of Government appointed experts estimated in the early 2000s that to fulfil its obligations Bòrd na Gàidhlig would need an annual budget of £10 million. It has only ever received around £5 million per year, which has never risen in line with inflation.

Gaelic community development is chronically underfunded and suffers real-terms cuts year on year. This comes against a worsening trend of language-shift in the island and rural communities and insufficient support nationally. We face the very real threat that Gaelic will cease to exist as a community language.

If Bòrd na Gàidhlig's initial budget had increased in line with inflation it would have reached between £8.5m and £10m for 2024/25. Even that increase would leave it below the level recommended in the early 2000s.

If the Scottish Government, and Parliament, are serious about securing Gaelic's future then investment in it must be brought to adequate levels.

Annexe B: SPICe briefing on PE2098



Brief overview of issues raised by the petition

The petition is seeking an increase in the Scottish Government's annual grant to Bòrd na Gàidhlig.

[The Parliament is currently considering the Scottish Languages Bill at Stage 1](#). The funding for the Bòrd is set out as a Level 4 line in the budget and has been listed under the Education and Skills portfolio. Recently this policy area moved into the portfolio of the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy & Gaelic, Kate Forbes MSP.

Funding for Gaelic

The SPICe Bill briefing for Scottish Languages Bill includes [a section on Scottish Government funding for Gaelic and Scots](#). This explained that—

“In 2024-25, of the £25.6 million of resource funding in the Scottish Government's resource budget for Gaelic, around half of this budget, £12.6 million, goes to Gaelic Broadcasting – which is the Scottish Government's contribution to MG Alba. The funding for Bòrd na Gàidhlig is £5.1 million.”

Over the past decade the Scottish Government's direct funding for Scots and Gaelic has stayed fairly stable in cash terms, which represents a real terms cut of around a fifth. Funding for Gaelic will also come from other sources such as local authorities and national agencies (e.g. Creative Scotland, Education Scotland).

The petition is focused on the funding for Bòrd na Gàidhlig. For over ten years, the annual budget for the Bòrd has remained at £5.1 million.

Functions of Bòrd na Gàidhlig

The [Gaelic Language \(Scotland\) Act 2005](#) established Bòrd na Gàidhlig. The Bòrd is the principal public body in Scotland responsible for promoting Gaelic development and providing advice to the Scottish Ministers on Gaelic issues.

The [Scottish Government's consultation in advance of the Scottish Languages Bill](#) set out the Bòrd's current role—

“The general functions of Bòrd na Gàidhlig, as set out in the 2005 Act, can be summarised as relating to the Gaelic language, Gaelic education and Gaelic culture. Bòrd na Gàidhlig has duties to promote and facilitate the promotion of the use and understanding of the language. Bòrd na Gàidhlig has functions to provide advice on language, education and culture to Scottish Ministers and

other public bodies. In addition, Bòrd na Gàidhlig has power to advise, on request, other persons on matters relating to the Gaelic language, Gaelic Education and Gaelic culture.

“Bòrd na Gàidhlig is also responsible for duties relating to Gaelic plans and for the preparation of the National Plan for Gaelic. The Bòrd can require public authorities to produce a Gaelic Language Plan setting out what that body will do in relation to Gaelic, can agree the content of the plan with them and request reports on progress on how that is implemented. Bòrd na Gàidhlig is also required to prepare Guidance on Gaelic language plans and on Gaelic education. A significant percentage of the funding allocated to Bòrd na Gàidhlig is distributed through grants by them to other bodies and projects related to support for the Gaelic language.

“The 2005 Act provides that the functions conferred on Bòrd na Gàidhlig should be exercised with a view to securing the status of the Gaelic language as an official language of Scotland commanding equal respect to the English language through increasing the number of persons who are able to use and understand the Gaelic language.”

The Scottish Languages Bill proposes changes to the functions of Bòrd na Gàidhlig. The Bill would remove the duty to develop a National Plan for Gaelic from the Bòrd but would create additional duties for the body.

A significant amount of funding to the Bòrd is disbursed in the form of grants to support the language in communities. The most recent [Bòrd na Gàidhlig annual report covers 2022-23](#). This reported that the total grant in aid (GIA) that year from the Government was £5.735 million – higher than the £5.125 million reported in the Scottish Government budget. £1.754 million (31% of the total GIA) was for running costs, £2.729 million (48% of GIA) was allocated to “funds for Gaelic development”, and £1.252 million was allocated to the “Gaelic Language Plans Implementation Fund” - Gaelic Language Plans are plans that public authorities develop.

In evidence to the [Education, Children and Young People Committee on 15 May 2024](#), the Chief Executive of the Bòrd said—

“We have just put out money from our community fund: we could fund only 39 per cent of the applications that came in, and looking at who we turned down is quite soul destroying. There is a demand and a wish to take Gaelic forward in our communities, but we are unable to provide the support that the community needs.” (Col 33)

The terms of the petition reflect [Bòrd na Gàidhlig’s submission to the Finance and Public Administration Committee’s call for views on the Scottish Languages Bill](#). This said—

“The budget allocated to Bòrd na Gàidhlig for 2024-25, at £5.125M, is some £5M short of the funding that would be available had the 2007 level of funding been maintained. Adjusting the budget for the lowest calculation of inflation as opposed to any additional investment, Bòrd na Gàidhlig should be receiving in the region of £8.5 million a year, therefore every year where a standstill

budget is delivered reflects a real-terms cut in available resources, the impact of which is felt across Gaelic speaking communities. Simply, Bòrd na Gàidhlig is receiving a real-terms cut in funding.”

Financial Memorandum of the Scottish Languages Bill

The [Financial Memorandum](#) (“FM”) sets out the expected additional costs that will arise from the Scottish Languages Bill. In total, the cost of the Bill is estimated to be around £700,000 over five years. The FM states—

“The main impact of the Bill provisions is a shift in activity, a repurposing of resources in terms of effort and attention. The Scottish Government considers that provisions do not create wholly new costs or a requirement for wholly new spend.” (FM Para 13)

The [Finance and Public Administration Committee asked the Government how the aims of the Bill, “to provide further support for Scotland’s indigenous languages, Gaelic and Scots”, will be met](#) given the additional funding set out in the FM.

The [Government’s response stated](#)—

“I am aware that there is considerable finance in place to support the provisions of the Bill but I hear the messages from the languages community that additional resources is required. I acknowledge that in a more relaxed financial climate this would be desirable. There are still important stages to consider with this Bill, namely the drafting of strategies and standards and how these will apply to areas of linguistic significance, for example. In relation to this, we will monitor this progress, we will ensure good structures are in place and that implementation proceeds within available resources.”

On 20 March 2024, Parliament agreed that consideration of the Scottish Languages Bill at Stage 1 will be completed by 20 September 2024.

Ned Sharratt
SPICe Researcher
30/05/2024

The purpose of this briefing is to provide a brief overview of issues raised by the petition. SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However, if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at spice@parliament.scot

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in petition briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

Annexe C: Written submissions

Scottish Government submission, 11 June 2024

PE2098/A: Provide essential investment in the Gaelic language to secure its future

Thank you for your committee's correspondence seeking the Scottish Government's views on the action called for in this petition relating to investment in the Gaelic language.

Scottish Government recognise the opportunities that exist in Gaelic across communities and the mutual benefits that further inclusion and support can bring. The Scottish Government agree wholeheartedly that investment in Gaelic development creates jobs, many of which are in rural and island communities and in areas of low population. Gaelic investment is cross cutting in nature and impacts positively across a number of policy priorities.

The Scottish Government budget for Gaelic and Scots is £29 million for financial year 2024/25 and all of this investment goes to support the language and speaker communities through a variety of routes. Investment through the Gaelic and Scots budget to Sabhal Mòr Ostaig for example supports the National Centre for Gaelic language and culture, a major source of employment on the Isle of Skye; similarly investment in MG Alba supports 350 jobs indirectly and returns £1.34 for each £1 of money invested.

The petition states that budgets have been static – however there are a number of examples that demonstrate that the funding of Gaelic should not be described as static. It should be noted that at the start of 2007, MG ALBA had a budget of £8.7 million and its budget is now £13 million at that point there was also no Gaelic schools capital fund which currently stands at £4 million.

Scottish Government also administers Gaelic Specific Grants, a ring-fenced funding scheme (£4.48 million for 24/25), made available by Scottish Ministers to Scottish Local Authorities for up to 75% of the cost towards delivery of Gaelic education.

Investment in Gaelic does not just come from the Scottish Government and through Bòrd na Gàidhlig but important contributions are made by local authorities and entities such as Highland and Islands Enterprise, Scottish Funding Council, Skills Development Scotland, Creative Scotland, Nature Scot and many others across the public sector in a range of subject areas. Following the introduction of the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 contributions towards Gaelic from local authorities and public bodies have been increasing.

There are notable Gaelic capital developments in Glasgow, Fort William, Inverness and in Islay. The context referred to above indicates the progress that is being made with both capital and resource developments to support Gaelic.

Gaelic community activity is also a priority for the Scottish Government. Recognising this, Bòrd na Gàidhlig received additional funding for Gaelic officer scheme for three

financial years from 2021 to 2023. The 2024-25 budget settlement did not originally allow the continuation of this funding. However following feedback the Scottish Government has provided additional funding of £175,000 for the first six months of the 24/25 financial year to secure the Gaelic officer scheme and Bòrd na Gàidhlig has been asked to report to Scottish Government on the scheme by the end of June 2024.

The Scottish Government is aware that Gaelic officers across a number of organisations play an important role in supporting local development across a range of bodies for example the Gaelic Development Officers working with young people through Comunn na Gàidhlig who play an important role in supporting the use of Gaelic out of the classroom and in community settings, supporting and enhancing fluency.

The Scottish Government fully understands the request for additional funding for the Gaelic and Scots sectors. Scottish Government wishes to see Gaelic and Scots thrive and is committed to continuing support for the languages through continued investment, support and leadership. The Scottish Languages Bill is an important part of that work to strengthen the structures in place and make them more efficient and to increase protections around the language. Through the proposed Bill Scottish Ministers would prepare the Gaelic language strategy in place of Bòrd na Gàidhlig preparing the National Gaelic Language Plan, Scottish Ministers would also take on the responsibility of issuing the statutory guidance on education and language plans. The Bill also proposes to enhance the reporting powers of Bòrd na Gàidhlig by allowing direct reporting to the Scottish Parliament.

Gaelic and Scots Division

Petitioner written submission, 9 August 2024

PE2098/B: Provide essential investment in the Gaelic language to secure its future

We would like to thank the Petitions Committee for their time in considering our petition, SPICe for their useful briefing paper and the Government for their response. We would like to take this opportunity however to highlight several misunderstandings and conflation in the Government response.

As is clearly stated in the SPICe briefing – and in the petition itself - our petition relates specifically to Bòrd na Gàidhlig’s funding which has indeed been static over the last 10 to 15 years, and therefore suffered a real-terms cut of around 30% over that time. Our petition specifically calls for this funding to be increased in line with inflation.

While some of the activities relating to spend on education, media, and the various quangos will trickle down to communities in one way or another, this spend does not directly address the ongoing rapid language shift in the traditional Gaelic speaking communities. Highlighting the statistic that “investment (£13 million) in MG ALBA

supports 350 jobs indirectly” begs the questions – how many of those jobs are Gaelic speaking and how many are based in rural island communities?

The 2021 SNP Manifesto committed to: “ensuring it (Gaelic) has a sustainable long-term future” and stated that: “In particular we will have a focus on arresting the intensifying language shift in the remaining vernacular communities.” As Kate Forbes MSP highlighted in an article for the National (Gaelic cuts risks ripping core out of our communities, 02/03/24): “community is where language lives or dies”. At present nowhere near enough is being done, or spent, in these communities to have any meaningful impact on the “intensifying language shift in the remaining vernacular communities.”

Two panels of Scottish Government appointed experts estimated in the early 2000s that to fulfil its obligations Bòrd na Gàidhlig would need an annual budget of £10 million – it has only ever received around £5 million per annum, and this sum has never risen in line with inflation. Even the initially inadequate budget of £5m per year would equate to between £8 and £10 million today just to maintain its real-terms value.

We understand that budgets across Government are under pressure, but Gaelic community development has been chronically underfunded since the inception of Bòrd na Gàidhlig. In 2010-11, the Scottish Government’s total budget was £34.6 billion with £25m spent on Gaelic and Scots - meaning the share of expenditure was 0.072% of the overall budget – less than a tenth of one percent. At that time Bòrd na Gàidhlig’s budget was £5.4m which was 0.016% of overall Scottish Government expenditure and 21.6% of the Gaelic and Scots budget.

In 2023-24, the Scottish Government’s total managed expenditure was £59.7 billion with £29m allocated to Gaelic and Scots, which means the share of expenditure has decreased to 0.049% of the overall budget – less than half of a tenth of one percent. In 2023-24 Bòrd na Gàidhlig’s baseline budget was £5.179m, which is 0.009% of overall Scottish Government expenditure and 17.9% of the Gaelic and Scots budget.

There will not be a second chance to preserve Gaelic as a spoken vernacular language in Scotland. If greater investment is not made in the community use of the language, then all other efforts in support of Gaelic will be in vain. At the very least, decisions taken by this Government now will prove decisive in whether Gaelic has a future as a community language.

We believe an urgent review is necessary of the overall funding allocated to the Gaelic language, as part of a strengthening of the Scottish Languages Bill, to ensure every penny spent on Gaelic is being used effectively and efficiently in encouraging the daily use of the language in the community and in the workplace.