



# **Identifying the links between Gaelic and Wellbeing**

## **Executive Summary**

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### **DC Research**

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### Introduction and Aims of Study

Bòrd na Gàidhlig commissioned DC Research – in partnership with Dr Douglas Chalmers, Prof Mike Danson and Eilidh Danson – to carry out research *"Identifying the links between Gaelic and wellbeing"*. The primary objective was *"to identify the place of Gaelic in the recognised indicators of wellbeing, and to identify its place in assessing changes in wellbeing"*.

Having considered which wellbeing indicators might involve Gaelic, the study investigated how Gaelic might enhance the wellbeing of individuals, language networks, local communities and Scotland's national wellbeing. Consideration was also given to how such enhancement could be measured, drawing upon evidence from other minority languages where possible.

### Overview of Approach

The key stages of the approach taken were as follows:

- A review of national and international literature on wellbeing issues in today's Gaelic world was carried out, including literature amongst comparable populations as well as non-academic community level literature and recordings about Gaelic alongside a broader review of current wellbeing literature.
- A series of 23 'one-to-one conversations' was also undertaken with a range of relevant individuals involved in Gaelic and/or wellbeing.
- Fifteen case studies were developed which illustrate the various aspects of the research findings in terms of the contribution of Gaelic to wellbeing. Twelve of the case studies were of Gaelic organisations and three were from comparable minority languages.
- Following these steps, an overview was taken of each aspect of wellbeing in the Scottish Government's National Performance Framework with consideration of the links between Gaelic and each outcome, together with examples of how Gaelic has made a positive contribution to each outcome. The examples of the various contributions are considered in the case studies outlined in Section 3 and Annex 4 of the report.

### Summary of Findings from the Literature Review

The aim of the study was to identify the place of Gaelic in the recognised indicators of wellbeing, and to identify its place in assessing changes in wellbeing. This approach is consistent with moves across the OECD and beyond to recognise the limitations of traditional measures of the performance of an economy.

Wellbeing is embedded into Scottish strategies, policymaking, delivery and into practices at all levels: community, local, sectoral and national. Scotland is a pioneer in also adopting 'wellbeing' as an objective, a framing tool and priority across portfolios and departments, and in the Scottish Government's 10-year National Strategy for Economic Transformation an overriding vision is set out to deliver a wellbeing economy for Scotland.

Scotland is a founding member of the Wellbeing Economy Governments (WEGo) group, and the Scottish Government's National Performance Framework (NPF) is addressed through pursuing 'Scotland's Wellbeing' in terms of 'Delivering the National Outcomes', and progress in meeting these eleven outcomes is measured through various indicators. The National Outcomes, and so indicators, are explicitly related to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), again confirming a structured and transparent approach to policy formation, delivery and progress. This structured approach therefore follows best practice guidelines from the UN and OECD, and so offers an appropriate and internationally approved basis for this research.

Applying the theory to practice, some members of WEGo have embraced the philosophy of wellbeing by delegating the process of determining the appropriate themes, outcomes, and indicators to constituent first nations, communities and cultural groups.

Considering wellbeing themes around language and culture specifically, there is a growing literature complementing and reinforcing the work of the OECD. This literature confirms the emerging consensus on how to apply the concept and dimensions of wellbeing to specific contexts. A recent study by McCartney et al. (2023)<sup>i</sup> argued that "*advocates for a Wellbeing Economy, and similar economic models... should prioritise and embed support for cultural development as a ... social asset if we are to adequately respond to current crises and navigate to a flourishing and habitable future for ourselves and our descendants*". Gaelic, as a vibrant part of Scotland's culture, allows such an exercise to be undertaken.

Regarding research on wellbeing amongst comparable populations of minority languages and cultures, there have been studies in the Oceania context, Wales, Northern Ireland, the Basque Country, and in the Faroe Islands and Nordic Europe. These have been involved variously in examining and analysing aspects of happiness, mental and physical health and wellbeing of communities where marginality and minority status characterise the lives of a group based on their language and culture being within dominant mainstreams. A number have pursued the positive benefits of bi- and multi-lingualism and education, of having the capacity to live in different spaces within a place, and of having greater capabilities and assets than the majority.

This movement to capture and apply wellbeing on their own terms has been especially pronounced in New Zealand (*He Ara Waiora* case study in the report), with further examples developed across Oceania: in Yawuru Country, in indigenous communities during Covid, and in the Mayi Kuwayu Study created by and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The importance of self-determination in improving and maintaining wellbeing at individual and community level is recognised in the development and application of these dedicated frameworks and toolkits, and in turn these generate, and are based on, emerging understandings of their specific economic, social, cultural and environmental milieux. In the case of First Nations in Canada, for example, the benefits of a positive cultural identity and continuity amongst minorities contrasts with cultural annihilation – of aboriginal lands, peoples and families – creating trauma which impacts adversely on wellbeing. In an age of rising populism, generated by a lack of *ontological security*<sup>ii</sup>, wellbeing constructs and indicators can be applied to reveal the benefits of identity and belonging.

Within Scotland, wellbeing toolkits and frameworks have been developed and applied at local authority level<sup>iii</sup> based on a pilot in Clackmannanshire for those involved in developing economic strategy and place-based economic development policy.

An equivalent exercise was undertaken recently to reveal the links between these different layers of the wellbeing economy for the *Gaelic in Glasgow* research study<sup>iv</sup>, confirming the appropriateness of this approach to situating the language and culture in national and global contexts. Further, that report highlighted the ways in which Gaelic in Glasgow contributes to NPF outcomes, demonstrating how to identify the place of Gaelic in recognised indicators of wellbeing and the place of Gaelic in assessing changes in wellbeing locally and nationally.

Summarising the potential in generating wellbeing frameworks, themes, domains and indicators, it is fruitful to consider the findings of a meta-analysis by Butler et al. (2019)<sup>v</sup> which aimed to explore the generic issues facing people of minority language and cultures. That research team identified nine broad interconnected dimensions pertinent to the wellbeing of Indigenous Australians: autonomy, empowerment and recognition; family and community; culture, spirituality and identity; country; basic needs; work, roles and responsibilities; education; physical health; and mental health. They concluded that these domains and influences may not be reflected in the mainstream, core Quality of Life and wellbeing instruments, and that such findings may be shared with Indigenous populations globally. Butler et al. therefore identified the need for 'a tailored wellbeing instrument' that includes

factors relevant to minority indigenous cultures and that *"developing such an instrument will ensure meaningful, culturally-relevant measurement of [the wellbeing of] such communities"*.

It follows that the rationale for constructing a set of indicators of wellbeing that are customised to the Gaelic communities of Scotland means extending the literature review to include non-academic community level literature and recordings about Gaelic.

Informed by the academic and community literature, adapting wellbeing as a *"new approach to measuring prosperity in Scotland...moving beyond economic growth and increased consumption and looking instead at a broader range of factors that matter to people and communities"* <sup>vi</sup> is both possible and appropriate to exploring the contribution of Gaelic to wellbeing and vice versa. This is consistent with approaches in Wales where language use is incorporated into the *Wellbeing of Wales: National Indicators*. Showing how Cymraeg is embedded into the overall assessment of wellbeing in a similar context to what could be done for Gaelic and wellbeing in Scotland offers further justification for such an approach.

### Summary of Findings from the 'Conversations'

It was clear to many of those consulted who are directly involved in Gaelic that it plays a role in supporting and contributing to wellbeing – and various examples were offered highlighting this. However, some of those working in Gaelic roles admit to not having given too much consideration to the wellbeing aspects of Gaelic. Some feel that there is a misunderstanding and lack of recognition about Gaelic and wellbeing – not helped by a lack of clarity around the concept of wellbeing.

There is notable concern from some about the wider impacts on wellbeing due to the challenges facing traditional Gaelic communities. A key concern is that, if the traditional Gaelic communities are facing economic and social challenges, the wellbeing of those in these areas and communities therefore will be negatively affected.

There was very little, or no, awareness of examples of the use of wellbeing and Gaelic together for many of those involved in the current and developing wellbeing policy landscape. As such, there is clearly work to do here to address this lack of awareness and appreciation.

For those involved in wellbeing policy, there is recognition that there is a wide range of policies and activities that contribute to wellbeing (including Gaelic), but the focus of wellbeing policy is primarily through the lens of the economy and how the economy and economic activity contribute to wellbeing. As such, some see the impact of improving wellbeing as a way of the wellbeing economy helping to support more resilient communities. It is seen to be more about the contribution of developing a wellbeing economy to support Gaelic as much as/more than Gaelic's contribution to wellbeing.

Some involved in wellbeing policy do reflect on areas where they feel Gaelic contributes to, or has links with, wellbeing. One common area is the 'cultural capital' aspects of Gaelic – e.g., via tourism, festivals, arts, etc. – as well as around Gaelic Medium Education. For those outside of the Gaelic world, this is typically where Gaelic's role is considered, rather than in other areas of the wellbeing economy.

In addition, some of the consultees not involved in Gaelic reflect on the broader role of language generally (rather than Gaelic specifically) around wellbeing – and the links that language development can provide in terms of this.

Whilst there is an acceptance of a link between Gaelic and wellbeing, there is typically little done about it, or very much consideration given to it, by those working in wellbeing policy.

There is recognition from those working in wellbeing that wellbeing economics and wellbeing lack clear definitions, or each suffer from a multiplicity of definitions, which can be

problematic. Therefore, some of these wider issues around wellbeing policy are important aspects to consider in exploring and identifying Gaelic's role and links to wellbeing.

An appreciation of Gaelic's contribution to wellbeing is not strongly evident from consultees in wellbeing policy. However, the consultations highlight that this is not a Gaelic-specific issue but a broader issue around culture generally and the appreciation of its wellbeing role.

A very strong theme that emerged from the consultations for those involved in the understanding of wellbeing issues in the Gaelic world at the current time, is about the negative wellbeing aspects surrounding the criticism and treatment of Gaelic.

This can manifest itself in various ways, and consultees highlighted examples where negativity, criticism and a lack of support surrounding Gaelic can have an impact on people in Gaelic communities and those involved in the understanding of wellbeing issues in the Gaelic world – negatively affecting their (mental) wellbeing if Gaelic is being opposed and attacked.

These negative wellbeing issues can include: the impact of general criticism and negativity surrounding Gaelic through societal attitudes; the negative wellbeing impacts that result from the decline in the language and in the traditional Gaelic communities; the negative impact of a *"hostile public policy environment"* for Gaelic; the *"tokenistic approach"* that can be taken to Gaelic – in terms of support within public policy and the scale and level of funding provided.

Despite these issues, all of those consulted who are involved within Gaelic roles do highlight many examples of achievements around the links between Gaelic and wellbeing.

Some consultees recognised that developing approaches to measuring the connection between Gaelic and wellbeing could be very difficult, whilst others reflect that there are a broad set of indicators which could be measured and would indicate improved wellbeing. There is an acceptance that developing a set of wellbeing measures to measure Gaelic's links and contributions to wellbeing is achievable – but that this has not yet been done.

The key areas where consultees highlighted links between Gaelic and wellbeing and where Gaelic contributes to wellbeing are listed below. Many consultees who offered examples emphasised the multifaceted nature of the contribution of Gaelic to wellbeing, highlighting the wide range of links and the array of inter-relationships between Gaelic and wellbeing.

- **General wellbeing** - Gaelic is well recognised as contributing to general wellbeing, as one consultee highlighted: *"But to me, if there wasn't that Gaelic dimension to life here, it would be the poorer for it."*
- **Individual wellbeing**, with consultees suggesting that for native speakers Gaelic is *"core to who you are – how you think, how you imagine life"*.
- The **sense of belonging, sense of connection and feeling part of the community** was a key aspect around Gaelic's links to wellbeing. *"It makes me feel that I belong more to my community"* and that *"I feel a connection to where I come from"* due to Gaelic.
- Gaelic's relationship to a **sense of identity** has an important positive relationship to wellbeing: *"If you have a genuine sense of identity and realise it is somewhat special, different then this can affect their behaviour and interactions positively."*
- The contribution of Gaelic to **mental health and wellbeing** was commonly identified, including helping to support and improve the mental wellbeing of **young people** through increased pride, confidence, etc. Gaelic's role in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of **older people** was also recognised, helping address and overcome loneliness.
- The **wellbeing links through Gaelic Medium Education (GME)** were clearly identified by consultees, with the increased interest from parents in sending children to GME in both the traditional Gaelic communities as well as other/newer communities being recognised.

- Beyond formal education, the **wellbeing benefits of learning Gaelic** as an adult were also noted – consultees recognising that the process of being involved in learning (i.e., the learning itself) can impact positively on wellbeing.
- Consultees pointed towards the link between how people feel about their heritage, culture and community, and their **confidence** or *misneachd*<sup>vii</sup> in their community and the way in which this helps strengthen the economy as well as individual and collective wellbeing.
- Another strand of Gaelic’s links and contribution to wellbeing relates to the **connections to nature, connections to the past, and better understanding of history** that Gaelic helps support and the increased wellbeing that this engenders.
- The **openness and inclusivity of the Gaelic community** is noted by consultees as a wellbeing benefit of Gaelic. Consultees reflect that the Gaelic community is more open, more inclusive, and more diverse.
- Links between Gaelic and wellbeing also reflect the **profile of Gaelic** – in the media but also more generally. Increased profile and recognition help to underpin aspects around confidence and sense of identity.
- For some there are **direct economic wellbeing benefits of Gaelic** if they are employed in Gaelic jobs/careers.
- The role of Gaelic around **cultural wellbeing** was well recognised. There is clear recognition that access to the arts and culture is important to wellbeing, and Gaelic plays a role in this through Gaelic arts and culture at the local, national and international levels.

### Case Study Examples – Gaelic’s Links and Contributions to Wellbeing

Section 3 of the report presents a high-level summary of the findings from the case studies. For the 12 Gaelic case studies, which are also included in full in Annex 4 to the report, the links between Gaelic and wellbeing and the contribution of Gaelic to various aspects of wellbeing are considered via the Scottish Government’s National Performance Framework as well as the four pillars of capital approach that was used in the *Towards a Robust, Resilient Wellbeing Economy for Scotland: Report of the Advisory Group on Economic Recovery*.

Three non-Gaelic case studies are also considered – although the links to the NPF are omitted as they are not directly relevant.

The Gaelic case studies examined were: **BBC ALBA; City of Glasgow Wellbeing; Comunn Eachdraidh Nis (Ness Historical Society); FilmG; The Galson Estate; Guthan nan Eilean/ Island Voices; Aire air Sunnd (Attention to Cheerfulness/ Wellbeing – North Uist); People of Glasgow; Portree and Braes Community Trust; Taigh Cèilidh (Stornoway); Urras Thiriodh – Tìree Community Development Trust; and Urras Ceann a Tuath na Hearadh – North Harris Trust.**

The non-Gaelic case studies examined were: the Cultúrlanna (Northern Ireland); Menter Y Felin Uchaf – a Welsh Cultural Centre; and Ha Ara Waiora (a Māori Perspective on wellbeing).

### Issues To Consider/Recommendations

There are clearly links between Gaelic and wellbeing, and Gaelic makes a wide range of contributions towards wellbeing – exemplified by the contributions to the Scottish Government’s National Performance Framework set out in Section 3 of the report.

In seeking to further develop the links between Gaelic and wellbeing there are a range of issues and recommendations for action that Bòrd na Gàidhlig, and others, can consider.

First, and linking to the *Consultation on the proposed Wellbeing and Sustainable Development Bill*, having clarity on the definition of wellbeing would be helpful. As noted in the report, there is a lack of clarity around the concept of wellbeing, and addressing this would help

provide such clarity, enabling the links between Gaelic and wellbeing and contribution of Gaelic to wellbeing to be better and more clearly articulated.

Second, the development of an indicator/small number of indicators, within the National Performance Framework or as National Outcomes for Gaelic, should be considered. This follows the Welsh example where there is a National Well-Being Indicator about the number of people that can speak Welsh, as well as a related National Milestone. Embedding such measure(s) in the NPF will help increase the profile of Gaelic within the NPF and wider wellbeing and other policy circles, addressing some of the challenges identified in the report.

It will be important that any explicit mention of Gaelic in the National Outcomes and revised NPF recognises the wider role of Gaelic, and goes beyond simply focusing on the higher profile aspects such as Gaelic Medium Education.

The embedding of Gaelic within the National Outcomes and NPF can be progressed through responses to the *Consultation on the Wellbeing and Sustainable Development Bill*, as well as the ongoing review of the NPF, and Bòrd na Gàidhlig should make sure they are actively advocating for the inclusion of such outcomes/indicators.

Third, consideration should be given to the development of a wider suite of Gaelic and Wellbeing Indicators for use by Bòrd na Gàidhlig and those working in Gaelic. As the report has shown, Gaelic contributes to NPF Outcomes and Indicators in a wide variety of ways. The development of specific Gaelic and Wellbeing Indicators by Bòrd na Gàidhlig and the embedding of these within corporate plans, strategies, grant programme etc. will help raise the profile of Gaelic and wellbeing within Gaelic policy as well as in wider wellbeing policy.

Such actions should help to address the issues around Gaelic being siloed by supporting an increased development and awareness about the contribution of Gaelic to wellbeing, ensuring it is better appreciated and recognised by both wellbeing and other non-Gaelic policy areas.

The development and the use of these Gaelic and Wellbeing Indicators will help raise the profile and develop a clearer evidence base about Gaelic and wellbeing importantly showing the breadth of Gaelic's contribution across a wide range of national outcomes (as shown in Section 3 of the report) – helping to move the conversation beyond just core areas (e.g., GME) and increase the recognition of the wider contributions of Gaelic to wellbeing.

As noted in the report, New Zealand's development of a framework to understand *waiora* adopted a bottom-up approach. Whilst this is not essential for the development of Gaelic and Wellbeing Indicators proposed here, these should be developed in such a way as to involve representatives from across all areas of Gaelic as well as those involved in wellbeing policy.

Some of the challenges for Gaelic around wellbeing are not Gaelic-specific, but relate to broader challenges about the recognition of the role of language and culture more broadly to wellbeing. Bòrd na Gàidhlig should look to work with other partners around the benefits and impacts of intangible cultural heritage to the wellbeing of Scotland's citizens and economy and ensure that this is given clear recognition in future wellbeing policy and national outcomes.

In all the above, it is important to recognise the intersectionality between economic and social challenges, issues and context, and the different Gaelic communities. This includes an appreciation of the different wellbeing needs of different Gaelic communities as well as the variety of ways in which different types of Gaelic communities can interact with, and contribute to, different aspects of wellbeing.

As part of this, it is important to appreciate that for Gaelic to develop, the achievement of, or progress towards, a stronger wellbeing economy is required especially in traditional Gaelic communities. In some areas, Gaelic relies on as well as contributes to a wellbeing economy – and it is important to recognise this and support the wellbeing of these Gaelic communities. This will help to support and sustain the development of Gaelic.

<sup>i</sup> McCartney, G., O'Connor, J., Olma, S., Hill O'Connor, Harroun, L. and Morel, K. (2023) 'Culture as an objective for and a means of achieving a Wellbeing Economy', *Humanit Soc Sci Commun* **10**, 718.

<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02240-6>

<sup>ii</sup> Giddens, A. (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Cambridge: CUP.

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/wellbeing-economy-toolkit-supporting-place-based-economic-strategy-policy-development/>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.glasgow.gov.uk/29502>

<sup>v</sup> Butler, T., Anderson, K., Garvey, G., Cunningham, J., Ratcliffe, J., Tong, A., Whop, L., Cass, A., Dickson, M. and Howard, K. (2019) 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's domains of wellbeing: A comprehensive literature review', *Social Science & Medicine*, 233, 138-157

<sup>vi</sup> <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/293743/rr-humankind-index-second-results-100613-en.pdf;jsessionid=8FA9079998DE41F2A9914A82479BD06C?sequence=1>

<sup>vii</sup> *misneachd* means 'confidence' but also has meanings beyond that with no direct comparison in English, including 'encouragement' and 'fortitude' both of which, of course, are positively related to wellbeing.