

To Secure an Anchor for Our Celtic Souls: An Integrated Development Programme for Manx Gaelic

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Abstract

Over the past ten years there have been many significant developments in support of the Manx language. This paper attempts to identify the most important issues which will need to be addressed over the next 10 years.

Introduction

In April 1998, I began work as 'Yn Greinneyder' (Manx Language Development Officer) for Manx National Heritage (MNH) and the Manx Heritage Foundation (MHF) the two main cultural/heritage organisations in the Isle of Man. The primary task I was given was to produce an Integrated Development Programme for Manx Gaelic incorporating the work of public, private and voluntary organisations. In writing this programme, I have built on two previous Manx Government reports - "Report of the Select Committee on the Greater Use of Manx Gaelic - 1984" and "The Future Development of the Manx Language - A report to Tynwald by the Department of Education (DoE) - 1995".

In considering the long term viability of our language two immediate areas for action are readily identifiable. We must improve and expand the facilities for teaching Manx, and we must do more to show the majority of people living in the Isle of Man that Manx is worthy of support. Education has perhaps the most important role to play in this regard, though Manx Gaelic can be used in Economic, Social and Political Development and in the Media, Arts and Cultural Development to help achieve these goals.

Why do we need Manx?

Perhaps the most important element I have had to address in the programme is the reason for bothering to support or develop a language which for much of the twentieth century was being declared dead by prominent linguists. I have endeavoured to do this by expanding on the cultural significance of Manx Gaelic and its related traditional culture.

Through cultural reconstruction the wide range of interests which make up contemporary Manx culture in Mann can be brought together to build and strengthen our sense of place, community and national identity, which have been considerably weakened over recent decades. If this reconstruction is not to be wholly artificial, it must draw heavily on our traditional, Manx Gaelic derived culture. I have used the themes of cultural reconstruction/development and sense of community and identity throughout the programme to reinforce my reasoning for development in the areas outlined below.

Government Support Structures for Manx

Manx Gaelic currently receives support from the Department of Education (DoE), MNH, MHF and the IOM Arts Council, however, the level of support remains modest when compared with support given to Scottish Gaelic, Welsh and Irish. It is also true to say that Government support for Manx Gaelic is to some extent haphazard in its application and the few existing Departmental budgets for Manx Gaelic are far from secure.

If there is to be a successful expansion of provision of Manx Gaelic services, even to meet current demand, then there must be greater security in the support infrastructure for the language. To this end it is important that either a current Government agency or department, or a new Government body be established to take specific responsibility for the development and coordination of Government policy on Manx Gaelic together with the implementation of this policy.

I would envisage that this proposed body might include political representation through Tynwald members, representation from appropriate Government Departments, and, most importantly, representation from the voluntary organisations such as Yn Cheshaght Ghailckagh (Manx Gaelic Society), Mooinjer Veggey (Manx Preschool Organisation) and Caarjyn ny Gaelgey (Friends of the Manx Gaelic). The body would have a similar function to the MHF in terms of providing grant aid to Manx Gaelic projects, as well as employing at least two full time development officers.

Of these officers, one would be responsible for administration, policy development and coordination of Manx Gaelic policy throughout Government. This officer would work with the DoE, MNH, MHF and other Manx Gaelic Governmental organisations providing support and advice as appropriate. The second officer would provide support for adult and preschool education (including resource development, promotion and administrative support) and would introduce and manage a suitable support structure for Manx Gaelic related cultural activities such as music, song, dance, folklore and literature (including Manx English).

To keep up with current grant aid to Manx Gaelic, the new body would need to have a grants budget of around £40-60,000. The officers would work closely with organisations which received aid to ensure effective use of the money was made and that different organisations were not working needlessly on the same subjects.

Education

Department of Education - The DoE is currently providing a very effective programme for raising the profile of Manx and ensuring that a large proportion of children in Manx schools attend Manx lessons during their school years. The introduction of the Teisht Chadjin Ghaelgagh TCG and endeavours to introduce an 'A' level in Manx are crucially important in ensuring that Manx is taken seriously as an academic discipline. However, despite overwhelming pressure for more teachers for the Manx language team to ensure adequate provision throughout primary and secondary schools, only modest staffing increases have been forthcoming. Bearing in mind the high level of parental support for Manx in schools, it is essential that the IOM Government, through DoE, makes a commitment to ensuring that the teaching of Manx in Manx schools is given a higher priority.

While the current DoE programme is providing an invaluable service in terms of promotion and understanding of Manx Gaelic, it is unlikely that it will produce many, if any, fluent Manx speakers. Through the significant work of Moinjer Veggey, a growing number of parents wish to send their children to a Manx medium primary unit, where their children would be taught through the medium of Manx Gaelic. A new organisation 'Parents for Gaelic Medium Education' has been lobbying the DoE for the establishment of such a unit with the parents of over 20 children committed to, or very interested in sending their children to a Manx Gaelic Medium Unit (MGMU).

In similar units in Scotland, children become fluent understanders of Gaelic in their first year in the unit and rapidly become competent speakers thereafter. The effect of just 10 years operation of a fairly small MGMU would be to yield up to 80 fluent Manx speaking children - at least 12 times the number of children who became fluent in the last 10 years.

Such children would be the teachers, writers, playgroup leaders, etc.. of the future and would ensure the long term survival of Manx. If we are to achieve this reproductively significant number of fluent Manx speaking children, then the DoE must support the establishment of this unit.

Moinjer Veggey - Moinjer Veggey currently operates at four different locations throughout the island, has over 60 children registered and employs 15 members of staff. Moinjer Veggey shows clearly how Manx medium education is successful and has parental support, as well as demonstrating the potential economic and social development which can be achieved through Manx Gaelic based initiatives.

Moinjer Veggey currently relies on very high levels of voluntary work from its committee and staff to ensure its success. Recent expansion of the group could lead to an undermining of Moinjer Veggey's achievements so far, unless paid administrative and development workers are employed by the group. Moinjer Veggey has been lucky to receive funding from MHF and DoE, however, this support is very small when compared with the funding available to similar groups in Scotland and Wales. Guaranteed funding for general preschool work as well as higher levels of specific Gaelic grants for preschool education is essential if Moinjer Veggey is to achieve its full potential.

General - There remains considerable scope for development and expansion in the voluntary sector in terms of adult education. We desperately need more courses for teaching Manx, particularly intensive and immersion courses, and a centrally based comprehensive resource centre housing all currently available material would reduce the amount of time wasted in producing resources which already exist. Yn Cheshaght Ghailckagh and/or Caarjyn ny Gaelgey must work in conjunction with Government agencies to

ensure that these important issues are addressed.

Economic Development

In trying to win the argument for greater support and development of Manx Gaelic, the ways in which the language can be used to bring medium to long term economic benefits to Mann are of fundamental importance. Use of Manx in cultural tourism, the work of MNH, in business as a 'branding' tool, and the increasing need for adequate support services for education and fluent speakers (including publishing, broadcasting and IT) will generate new employment and small business opportunities.

Media, arts and culture

To understand the significance of Manx it must be clearly identified at the heart of our native culture. If people are to be drawn to Manx Gaelic it must be demonstrably an essential element of contemporary culture and artistic life in Mann. Language planners use the promotion and development of cultures associated with minority languages as an invaluable way of reestablishing links between communities and their disregarded languages. We will use similar methods to promote better access to, and understanding of Manx Gaelic through folklore, music, literature (including Manx-English) and the arts.

The use of Manx in broadcasting, publishing, festivals and other promotional events has been increasing in recent years. The second development officer, suggested earlier in this paper, would have responsibility for ensuring that the growth in these areas would continue, providing an improving service for fluent speakers and learners.

Social and Political Development

It is important that a greater understanding of the roles which Manx can play, socially and politically be promoted in the Isle of Man. Manx certainly can be, and indeed is already being, used as a branding tool both inside and outside the Isle of Man. For example it is harder for a monoglot English speaking offshore island with no culture to speak of to defend its semi-independent political status, than it is for an island with its own strong language, culture and heritage. While this is a fairly clear cut matter to the 'Gaelophile' it is perhaps the most difficult area to convince the cynic as the arguments are less clear cut and often more subjective than objective.

An example of this difficulty is shown by the following : a Manxman who argues strongly that he can be truly Manx without Manx Gaelic has as valid a case as another Manxman, or a new resident for that matter, who argues the opposite. There is no clear answer here as both are right in their own context, however, to many Manx residents (99.9% of respondents to my survey of Manx speakers and learners) the belief that Manx Gaelic is an essential part of Manx identity, is fundamental to their support of the language.

That said the potential roles for Manx in this area include continuing to strengthen community and political identity, building links with Celtic neighbours and other minority language regions in Europe and helping to build greater political, social and cultural awareness in Mann. This area builds on the work already being done by MNH to bring cohesion to our collective understanding of what the Isle of Man and its people are and where we have come from, as well as indicating how this can be used beneficially in the future.

Concluding remarks

The writing of this Integrated Development Programme has provided an opportunity to secure the future of Manx Gaelic whose declining fortunes are only just beginning to be reversed. An important theme throughout the programme is that the development of Manx Gaelic is not purely a linguistic matter, but a highly relevant, contemporary, cultural issue. I have not attempted to draw up a programme to restore the language to its ancient form, but rather tried to create the conditions which will nurture a vibrant, 'relevant' language which can be used for the social, political, cultural and economic benefit of the Isle of Man.