

Bun-sgoil Taobh na Pàirce Parent Council

16th March 2016

The Education, Children & Families Committee (“EC&F committee”) was scheduled to discuss a report on the *Strategic Management of School Places: P1 and S1 Intakes for August 2016* (“the Placing Report”) at its meeting on 1st March 2016.

The Placing Report included proposals for significant changes to the transfer arrangements between primary and secondary school of children in Gaelic-medium education (“GME”) in Edinburgh. The current catchment secondary school for children in GME is James Gillespie’s High School (“JGHS”).

Although the Placing Report was withdrawn prior to its discussion at the EC&F committee meeting, parents of children in GME at the Gaelic primary school, Bun-sgoil Taobh na Pàirce, have a number of questions about the Placing Report itself, and about the process of its issue at such a late stage in the school year.

Rather than pose these queries verbally to Edinburgh Council officers at a meeting of the Parent Council, the Parent Council has provided questions in writing to allow for more considered and informed responses.

The list of queries below is not an exhaustive list of all the questions posed by parents, but provides a summary of some of the frequently asked questions.

We understand that City of Edinburgh Council officers are very busy, but the process that led to the report being issued has raised serious questions. We would therefore be grateful if some time could be taken to respond to these questions as soon as possible, and prior to 25th March 2016.

Questions

1. Wellbeing of Children – general issues

- 1.1. The Placing Report proposed relocating children from their catchment secondary school to another secondary school. Was there any consultation with educational experts during the production of the Placing Report to determine whether there would be a negative effect upon the wellbeing of the children (educational and / or emotional) as a result of this decision being taken so far into the process of transition between primary and secondary? Has such a decision ever been made before in relation to any other group of pupils?
- 1.2. Subsequent to the withdrawal of the Placing Report, has there been any consideration of the potential issues around child wellbeing of the GME children being effectively, and incorrectly, blamed for the over-capacity issue at JGHS (see 2.1 below)? Has there been any discussion with the school around managing

potential victimisation of these children as a result of the publicity around the over-capacity issue?

2. Secondary School Capacity in Edinburgh – general issues

- 2.1. On the basis that the Placing Report indicated that there were 243 catchment children who had provisionally been granted a place at JGHS for August 2016, and 24 catchment area children in primary 7 at Taobh na Pàirce, do officers accept that the issue of JGHS capacity is wider than a GME issue?
- 2.2. Have there been adjustments made to school capacity projection models to take account of: changing demographics within the JGHS school catchment, rising rolls in all of its other cluster primaries, the possibility of fewer families choosing private education since the financial collapse of 2008, the likely higher transfer rate due to the new build, and any other factors other than the increase in the number of GME pupils?
- 2.3. Are there other secondary schools in Edinburgh where the projected number of catchment pupils exceeds the capacity of the school within the next five years? We understand that projected roll figures for all schools have been provided to elected Members; could a copy of these be provided?
- 2.4. The Council has been aware of potential difficulties with numbers entering JGHS in 2016 for a number of years. Why did it not address these issues long before February 2016, and why did it not do so in consultation with Parent Councils and schools?

3. Process of Placing Report Completion and Issue

- 3.1. Have any of the writers of the report and those taking decisions on the management of the school estate any knowledge of how GME works in principle and in practice? Did the authors consider the needs of GME at all when preparing the report, or consult with relevant experts in this area, and in what way? In particular, what consideration was given to the need for immersion in the language, and pupils to have interaction with as large a group of peers as possible?
- 3.2. Correspondence between parents and elected members of the EC&F committee indicated that a number of committee members believed the contents of the Placing Report had been agreed with the schools and with the affected parents well in advance of its completion. Schools and parents were first made aware of these significant changes on Wednesday 24th February 2016. How did this confusion arise?
- 3.3. What consideration did the authors of the report give to the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010? Were the elected members of the EC&F committee made aware of the statutory requirement to consult widely when significant changes are made to transfer arrangements between primary and secondary?

- 3.4. A councillor made a television appearance on the evening of Friday 26th February 2016 and made statements which implied that a decision had already been taken to deliver GME at Tynecastle High School. This occurred without consultation with parents or the schools affected and in advance of the EC&F committee meeting on Tuesday 1st March. In light of this, will the Council review its use of the press and its manner of communicating decisions?
- 3.5. Subsequent to the withdrawal of the Placing Report, councillors have made public comments implying that the threat of legal action prevented an open and democratic discussion about the issue. Does the Council accept that the short timescale between the Placing Report's issue and the EC&F meeting, the failure to consult schools, parents and other stakeholders, and the failure to inform all EC&F committee members of the consequences of the Placing Report are the key factors which prevented an open and democratic (and well-informed) discussion about this issue?
- 3.6. The Placing Report asked EC&F committee members to "note" the proposed changes which would have prevented P7 children attending their catchment school. Is it the case that EC&F committee members would have been permitted a debate, but not permitted a vote on this proposal?

4. Specific Queries relating to the Placing Report

- 4.1. Paragraphs 3.60 and 3.66 refer to the JGHS catchment area in the context of GME. Do officers and EC&F committee members understand that JGHS is a two stream school with two separate catchment areas? Is it understood that it is incorrect to apply the geographical policies of the mainstream catchment area to the GME catchment which is not based on a geographical segment of the city?
- 4.2. The Placing Report contains a statement that there is no evidence of a need for expansion of primary GME (para 3.69). What research has been completed to evidence this statement? The establishment of Taobh na Pàirce created significant demand for GME in the North of the city, and it is very likely that were a second GME primary school to be established in another geographical area of the city, that it would stimulate demand for Gaelic education.
- 4.3. The Placing Report indicates that the current Gaelic provision at JGHS could be "relatively easily replicated" (para 3.75). What evidence exists for this statement? What research was completed with Gaelic experts and the Gaelic-medium staff of JGHS to evidence the view that it is easy to replicate GME in another school? Given the difficulty in recruiting teachers, how would this replication be resourced and how much would it cost?
- 4.4. What GME provision would have been on offer to those pupils who would have been sent to another school?
- 4.5. If the intention was to resource GME in the other school by diverting GME staff from JGHS, what impact would this have had on provision at JGHS, noting that Scottish Government funding for one member of GME staff at JGHS is for the purpose of increasing the number of fluent speakers of Gaelic?

4.6. What options other than the option set out in the Placing Report did the Council consider for resolving this issue?

5. Consideration of pupils resident outside CEC Local Authority

5.1. Historically, families living in the Lothians and Fife have been able to access GME in Edinburgh. Has consideration been given to how primary pupils from outside the local authority area will be able to continue their Gaelic education through to secondary level given the capacity issues in Edinburgh schools? Have Council officers investigated receiving remuneration from surrounding local authorities to cover the cost of educating these pupils?

5.2. Local authorities surrounding Edinburgh have relied upon places within Edinburgh schools for the education of children requesting GME in their areas. Have officers completed any advisory work or had any correspondence with surrounding local authorities as to how GME might be developed to allow access to families living outwith Edinburgh?