

**Copy of email sent to Edinburgh City Councillors and Lothian MSPs
22 June 2011**

Dear Councillor,

I am writing to you on behalf of Comann nam Pàrant (Dùn Èideann & Lodainn) (CnP), the representative body for parents with children in Gaelic-medium Education in Edinburgh (GME).

We would like to thank all elected members for their interest in the issues surrounding GME, and for the time they have taken to meet with parents and to read our correspondence. You will be aware that GME is on the agenda of the Edinburgh Council meeting of 30 June, and the vote on this day will be crucial not just for the future of GME in Edinburgh, but also for the future of the Gaelic language nationally.

We hope that on 30 June, councillors of all parties will show support for Gaelic education by voting for the establishment of a dedicated Gaelic primary school, and by opposing a premature consultation on secondary.

Below we have set out some points in response to the Edinburgh Council paper of 9 June, *Outcomes Arising from Consultation on Proposals for the Future Development of Nursery and Primary Gaelic Medium Education* (the Outcomes Paper). We hope you will find these points of use in helping you to assess the options in the run-up to the vote.

Primary GME

CnP broadly agrees with the Director of Children and Families in her conclusions as set out in the Outcomes Paper, in summary, "that the implementation of Option 1 - a dedicated school - offers the best educational outcome and associated best value for the City of Edinburgh."(10.1) We are also in agreement with the significant disadvantages inherent in Option 2, the Tollcross extension, particularly that it does not deliver the fuller benefits of immersion and provides only a short-term capacity solution. (5.13) The failure of Option 2 to provide a real solution for capacity issues results in it being seen as an unsatisfactory outcome by the whole parent body at Tollcross Primary, including the mainstream parents.

We very much welcome the clear statement from the Director that, "If Option 1 were to be implemented, Tollcross Primary School would not close." (3.7/5)

CnP applauds the commitment to Gaelic development as repeated several times in the Outcomes Paper. We would like to highlight the key point made that although maintaining the status quo was mentioned in the consultation paper, this could only be achieved by capping the

GME intake, and "Capping is not specifically given as an option for GME primary provision as it is contrary to the Council's commitment to the development of GME in the city." (3.7/6)

The Outcomes Paper is clear in setting out the linguistic benefits to GME pupils of a dedicated school and also in demonstrating that it was the favoured option of over 96% of the 1,140 consultation respondents. CnP believes this unprecedented consultation response indicates the broad support for the Gaelic language throughout the general population.

Revenue Costs

CnP believes that the dedicated school also represents the best value for money for the city. It is generally true that larger schools are more efficient, and the potential for growth of the dedicated school will make it far more cost efficient over time than a small and fragmented unit system.

It is disappointing that the Outcomes Paper does not take on board the arguments that have been made over the past year that each GME pupil does not represent an additional cost to the Council. CnP does not believe that GME pupils could be redistributed across the mainstream school system at no additional cost, and it is quite against the commitment to GME development to even suggest that after 23 years GME is not an integral part of the Edinburgh school system. As the dedicated school meets projected growth in future, the position of accounting for all GME pupils as additional to the system becomes less and less tenable.

We also believe that in attributing higher transport costs to the dedicated school, the Outcomes Paper fails to recognise that GME will be a very attractive option for many families local to the new school. There has been great support for the school's establishment from the Leith community, and in fact Cròileagan Dhùn Èideann - Edinburgh's Gaelic playgroup - is in the process of setting up a new Leith branch in response to local demand.

It is also significant to note that the establishment of a dedicated school is more likely to attract further development funding from the Scottish Government, as pointed out in the Outcomes Paper. (5.15)

Capital Costs

The Scottish Government has made a generous offer of £1.4m towards the refurbishment of the building chosen by Edinburgh Council as the site of the dedicated Gaelic school - the former Bonnington Primary School. This offer matches the refurbishment cost as quantified during the public consultation.

It has now become clear that the projected cost of refurbishment of the Bonnington building may have been understated in the public consultation document by 100% or more. The steadily rising costs of reinstating the building as a school are attributed largely to ongoing vandalism - a situation which is to the detriment of the local Bonnington area.

Taking into account the position we are in today, with the fabric of the building having suffered serious deterioration, CnP believes the best financial decision is to bring the school back into everyday use as soon as possible. The Bonnington building is listed, and therefore the land by itself is not a marketable asset. A listed building in the deteriorated state of the Bonnington school is highly unlikely to be sold given current market conditions.

In order to return the building to a saleable condition, and to provide security against further vandalism, significant future cash outflows would be incurred by the Council. Only by reinstating the building as a Gaelic school is it possible to gain financial support from Government to assist the refurbishment.

It is clear that the failure to maintain one of the city's assets over the past three years may require some financial outgoings by the Council, however we believe the best way to minimise the loss incurred is to accept the Government money available for the establishment of the dedicated Gaelic school. It may be possible to reduce the level of expenditure required by agreeing on a minimal level of work necessary to have the building in a functioning condition. A high specification finish would of course be ideal, but it is not necessary to get the school up and running.

Further delays in coming to a decision on this issue are likely to prove very costly in terms of salvage work to the building and ongoing security costs.

We should also note that the alternative option, that of the Tollcross extension, would require borrowing in the region of £2m - and resulting debt servicing at significant levels, for a solution that is projected to be effective for a maximum of 6-7 years.

We believe that if the political will exists to find a solution to the issue of the increased capital cost of refurbishing the only available building for the Gaelic school, then that solution can be found. CnP hopes that politicians can come to an agreed solution prior to the Council meeting on 30 June and prevent further costly delays to the school's establishment.

Secondary GME

In the Outcomes Paper, it is noted that, "the future of secondary level GME is the subject of a separate paper to this Council meeting." (3.7/2)

No report on secondary level GME has yet been published, but we understand from discussions with individual councillors that the Council may be invited on 30 June to vote for an almost immediate public consultation containing one option - to relocate secondary GME from James Gillespie's High School to Tynecastle High School from 2013.

CnP recognises the intent of the Council to expand provision of GME at secondary level. We are grateful for the input of councillors and officials in their consideration of the best route towards the delivery of an improved range of subjects through the medium of Gaelic.

However, it is the view of CnP that a consultation on a move of secondary level GME is premature. We welcome the fact that the expansion of primary level GME is highly likely to lead to capacity issues at James Gillespie's in the long term, but there is adequate time to formulate a proper strategy for secondary Gaelic education, which includes input from parents and has their support. Common sense would dictate that the question of primary education should be settled first, and the future impact of the primary decision factored into discussions about secondary education.

Particular concerns of parents are:

Evaluation of options

There has been no independent evaluation of a range of options for GME secondary, based on the strategic needs of GME rather than the tactical need to fill up a particular under-capacity high school. The feasibility study conducted in 2009 by the Council on Gaelic education made a number of recommendations on the subject of secondary level GME, however the study was undertaken with the assumption that secondary GME would be retained and developed at James Gillespie's.

If this assumption is to change, there should be further work performed to consider the strategically best solution going forward.

The short life cross-party Working Group which met three times in the early part of this year to discuss the development of secondary GME was tasked only with considering the option of a move to Tynecastle.

A number of councillors have highlighted other potential host schools for secondary GME that could provide a more strategic, long-term solution. Tynecastle currently has a low capture rate from its own catchment, and its future capacity is highly sensitive to changes in this rate. It has not been demonstrated to provide certainty of long-term capacity.

On the subject of primary GME the Outcomes Paper is clear: "The Council agrees that a solution that does not offer certainty and permanence for parents, pupils and staff in GME does not create an environment that is conducive to the growth and development of GME." (4.6) This is also directly applicable to secondary GME. It is vital that our primary level GME families have the confidence to transfer their children to secondary GME so that they become fluent adult speakers and are able to use Gaelic in their lives.

It would therefore appear sensible to investigate long-term options fully for secondary level, particularly given the investment about to be made in primary level GME.

The Scottish Government has indicated willingness to fund this further research into the future of GME at secondary level.

Integrated Gaelic Provision

It has been suggested that Tynecastle should become a central hub for Gaelic, rather than Bonnington. This would appear to undermine Bonnington's key position as Edinburgh's only dedicated Gaelic school, from its very inception.

However CnP believes that it is inevitable that with a large population of fluent speakers, including teachers, pupils and parents, Bonnington will in fact become Edinburgh's centre of excellence for Gaelic. It is very likely to become a hub for Gaelic cultural activities and learning opportunities.

The Outcomes Paper itself recognises the advantages of concentrating provision at one site: "...GME provision being concentrated in this one location to provide an "all-through" experience. It is not proposed to disperse this provision by retaining some facilities at Tollcross." (4.16) While it is recognised that secondary level GME could not be accommodated on the Bonnington site, the physical distance between Bonnington and Tynecastle is a great concern to parents, in its dispersal of the Gaelic speaking community, and its barrier to resource sharing between primary and secondary.

Development of GME

Any proposed changes to secondary GME must *develop* GME. This does not simply mean moving GME to a more spacious location, but must demonstrably be likely to *increase demand*. Unfortunately, it appears that the Council may expect a move to Tynecastle to *decrease* demand - from the Outcomes Paper: "it should be noted that changing secondary feeder arrangements represent a potential risk to the continuation of current levels of demand for primary GME places." (3.7/2).

The Council will be required to demonstrate that any proposed changes are likely to increase demand for GME, not introduce a "potential risk" to its take-up. CnP would suggest that a move that introduces such a risk would raise questions about the Council's ability to continue to secure Scottish Government development funding for secondary GME.

We hope that all elected members recognise that GME is a great success story for the City of Edinburgh and its Council, and that the key driver of this success is the GME parents. From those first committed families who worked so hard to set up a small unit at Tollcross, to today's much larger group who have campaigned tirelessly for a dedicated Gaelic school in Edinburgh - it is the parents who will determine whether a development solution meets with success. It is important that parental views are considered in the secondary debate in the same way they have been in the options discussed at primary level.

Thank you for your time and interest in these issues. We hope that on 30 June, councillors of all parties will show support for Gaelic education by voting for the establishment of a dedicated Gaelic primary school, and by opposing a premature consultation on secondary.

Leis gach deagh dhùrachd

Alasdair Cameron

Convenor

Comann nam Pàrant (Dùn Èideann & Lodainn)

22 June 2011

To:

All City of Edinburgh Councillors

Lothian constituency and list MSPs

Alasdair Allan, MSP

Gillian Tee, Director of Children and Families, Edinburgh City Council