

BRIEF FOR COUNCILLORS

FROM TAOBH NA PÀIRCE PARENT COUNCIL AND COMMAN NAM PÀRANT DÙN ÈIDEANN

EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND FAMILIES COMMITTEE, 1 MARCH 2016

Item number 7.3:

Strategic Management of School Places: P1 and S1 Intakes for August 2016

Background

1. The report on accommodation and placement issues for 2016/17 invites the Committee to note an ill-considered approach that will limit the number of Gaelic-medium education (GME) pupils entering James Gillespie's High School (JGHS) from the Gaelic primary school at Taobh na Pàirce (TnP). This entails allocating any pupils refused entry to JGHS to Tynecastle High School.

Summary

2. This proposal is highly contentious. It is not good administration and may be unlawful for the Committee to agree it without full consideration and consultation with the schools and parents affected. It should be rejected pending proper consideration of the issues, with provision made at JGHS for a small additional intake in 2016/17.

Issues arising

3. The key facts are as follows:

3.1 There has been no consultation with schools and parent bodies affected.

3.2 The Committee has never before considered diverting children living within catchment from school places already offered. Children are substantially into the transition process, and no consideration has been given to their wellbeing and the potentially damaging effect of separation from their tightly knit GME community. While such offers are still technically provisional, withdrawing them at this stage is unprecedented and potentially discriminatory.

3.3 It is incorrect to apply the policy of prioritising children living closest to a school to the GME catchment. The GME catchment is Edinburgh-wide and not based on geographical segments of the city as with mainstream catchments. The suggestion that this is a legacy from Lothian Regional Council (para 3.66) is erroneous, as continued usage of this policy means it is *de facto* a City of Edinburgh Council policy. Parents have accepted and believed the Council's catchment policy on GME and made decisions based on that policy. To change the policy without consultation, discussion or notification is unacceptable.

3.4 The paper contains no discussion and evidences no consideration of educational policy in relation to the teaching of Gaelic as a modern language. The proposal to develop clusters of Gaelic provision at a number of different schools is a fundamental deviation from the centres of excellence currently recognised as best practice at TnP and JGHS. A change of that magnitude merits consultation.

3.5 Children and parents are provided with the protection of the requirement under the Schools (Consultation) (S) Act 2010 to conduct a proper consultation process for significant changes in the delivery of education. Any proposal to effect major changes by administrative action without consultation, as put forward in the paper, may be construed as an attempt to circumvent this protection, to the detriment of the children involved.

3.6 The paper contains no discussion and evidences no consideration of educational policy in relation to broader education in the medium of Gaelic, which relies on a critical mass of fluent Gaelic-speaking pupils in a single place – a community rather than just a classroom. A deviation from that ambition is quite at odds with the Council's admirable commitment to the creation of TnP, and certainly merits consultation.

3.7 The paper fails to address the educational and estate resource issues in the round, proposing to dissipate limited Gaelic teaching resource around a number of schools, rather than pursue value for money and added value from a concentration of teaching resource in one school. The risk of a consequential collapse in Gaelic uptake and attainment and associated staff retention at secondary level across the city merits consultation.

3.8 In that context, the paper misunderstands the nature of GME provision for fluent speakers at JGHS, which is not comparable to the much more limited provision for learners at Tynecastle. There is not the resource to replicate the JGHS experience at Tynecastle and there has been no consultation with Tynecastle on how this could be achieved in an extremely short timescale. GME children who may be offered a place at Tynecastle are **not** being offered a GME school place.

3.9 Given that JGHS is the only secondary school to offer GME in Edinburgh, denying GME children access would represent a very poor return on the central and local government investment made in their GME primary education. The views of the Scottish Government and other national organisations should therefore be included in any decision to deny access to secondary GME to children who have been educated through Gaelic at primary school.

3.10 The Committee should note that GME parent organisations have engaged with the Council in discussing long term strategies for the development of GME in Edinburgh, particularly through the Council's Gaelic Implementation Steering Group. The proposals in this report are in direct opposition to the development discussions which have been entered into in

good faith by all parties. This is inexcusable, as the increasing numbers of GME pupils have long been known and could have been planned for well in advance.

Conclusion

4. The paper is deeply flawed in failing to present the educational, resource and estate implications of changing the GME intake arrangements for JGHS. It also implies significant detrimental change to Gaelic provision and Gaelic attainment in Edinburgh and should not have reached Committee without full discussion with the schools and parent bodies affected. That is a significant administrative oversight and the changes envisaged may well be unlawful.

5. At this advanced stage of the P7 / S1 transition process, the only reasonable option is one which keeps GME pupils together at JGHS. An accommodation solution should be established by JGHS until a satisfactory long term solution for secondary GME is put in place.

6. We **recommend** that the Committee defers consideration of capping of S1 numbers in JGHS as proposed in the paper to allow for a more rounded and administratively appropriate consideration of the issues following the imminent elections.