

Comann nam Pàrant (Dùn Èideann & Lodainn)
Response to Aberdeen City Council GME zoning 2021 consultation
October 2021

Introduction

Comann nam Pàrant Dùn Èideann (CnPDE) is the representative organisation for parents with children at all stages of Gaelic - Medium Education (GME) in Edinburgh and the Lothians. It aims to promote and develop GME throughout the region. All GME parents in Edinburgh and the Lothians are ordinary members of Comann nam Pàrant. The group is part of the national organisation, Comann nam Pàrant Nàiseanta (CnP Nàiseanta).

Comann nam Pàrant is a constituted voluntary organisation, with its activities funded primarily by Bord na Gàidhlig (BnG). Comann nam Pàrant is managed by a committee, including office bearers. The committee serves for a term of one year before standing down at each AGM. All committee positions are open for election at the AGM.

The Proposal

Aberdeen City Council propose

- To establish a catchment area for the existing Gaelic Medium Education provision at Hazlehead Academy, to overlay the existing English medium catchment areas for Hazlehead Academy, Northfield Academy and Aberdeen Grammar School.
- To establish a catchment area for the existing Gaelic Medium Education provision at Gilcomstoun School, to overlay the existing English medium catchment areas for Gilcomstoun School, Ashley Road School, Mile End School and Skene Square School
- That the new catchment areas should take effect from 1 August 2022.

Response from Comann nam Pàrant (Dùn Èideann & Lodainn)

The views expressed in this response are those of the elected committee members of CnPDE. They are offered in support of the families in Aberdeen who choose GME for their children and to whom Aberdeen City Council (The Council) have a duty to provide with GME education.

This response has been framed to follow The Council's online consultation and will provide answers to the questions it raises.

Question 1

What is the most positive part of the proposal (if any)?

We agree that there is some merit in the proposal to try to base a school catchment for GME on reasonable travel times for children to their school. However, doing this within the context of a GME catchment area is problematic as it cannot be dealt with in the same manner as a non-GME catchment area until such time as growth in GME allows for more than one school and would necessitate a catchment division that maintained fair access to GME in the newly divided catchments.

There is recognition within The Council's proposal document that the statutory guidance from Bòrd na Gàidhlig on GME catchments would normally overlay a number of school catchments.

1. 3.2 Bòrd na Gàidhlig issued statutory guidance in 2017, specifying that local authorities should create catchment areas for GME. The guidance states that a catchment area for GME provision should normally cover an area in which the local authority thinks it is reasonable for pupils wishing to receive GME to travel to school, and that this will normally overlay a number of school catchment areas.

Question 2

What is/are your main concern(s) about the proposal?

This proposal creates an inequitable situation for children and families within the Aberdeen City Local Authority on a number of levels. Children within the proposed new catchments will have access as a right to a place in GME while children outwith the new catchments will only have access via a placing request and will only be given a place if space is available. Children within catchment will have an advantage based on having a sibling already attending a school that would outweigh a placing request with or without a sibling at the school in the event of a shortage of places. A placing request with a sibling already in GME would be a disadvantage to a child from within catchment but with no sibling in similar circumstance.

It is not reasonable for The Council to argue that these circumstances will not arise, as currently there is sufficient space in the schools. The growth in GME across Scotland has been upward and it is not unimaginable that the GME schools in Aberdeen will reach capacity. Notwithstanding that, The Council has a duty of care to all of the children within its Local Authority area and should treat them all equally.

Choosing to reduce the catchment area for GME in Aberdeen demonstrates a lack of support for GME in the city, despite claims contained within the proposal document that there is support for GME. Reducing the area where GME provision is available without having to make a placing request is a reduction in commitment to a growth in GME. Adequate GME provision is being offered to a smaller number of families in a smaller area.

A failure to provide transport provision to a GME school, which as has been recognised in the proposal as normally having a larger catchment area, is contradictory to The Council's stated aim of providing reasonable travel times to schools. Transport by dedicated or public transport for reasonable journey times is common practice across Scotland and not just for GME schools when catchment areas exceed certain distances.

The educational benefits that the proposal claims for reducing the catchment are not credible. While the arguments for the benefits of bilingualism are well established, it is not plausible that this will be enhanced by offering this to fewer children in the city or that putting obstacles in the way to accessing GME by poor transport provision.

The claim that 'drop-out' rates at transition from primary to secondary is not supported by any evidence whatsoever and is not credible.

Question 3

What would you like the Council to know about the proposal?

This proposal creates a division within the City and shows a lack of understanding of the needs of GME and how it should develop within a local authority. By treating some families within the city differently from others, the Council is failing in its duty under legislation to provide GME provision where there is a proven demand. By creating a two tier system within the local authority they are creating a system which runs counter to all other local authorities where successful GME has developed. This shows an unwillingness to learn from the success achieved elsewhere and if this proposal is passed will create a detrimental precedent that other local authorities may follow especially those who have yet to develop successful GME provision.

Question 4

Overall do you support the Proposal?

Based on the arguments outlined in the previous answers it is the opinion of the committee of CnPDE that they do not support this proposal. Furthermore, while we have not had the opportunity to canvas the families of over 800 children 0-18 in GME in Edinburgh, it is also our opinion that faced with a similar proposal they would overwhelmingly oppose it.

Question 5

Any other comments?

Successful GME provision has always been parent led. It has come about through close collaboration between stakeholders and local authorities. As members of a national organisation with representatives from families in Aberdeen we are aware that the families in Aberdeen do not support this proposal. On that basis alone it should be rejected. Not to do so would be counter to how success has been achieved elsewhere in Scotland.

The proposal if passed would constitute the closure of a school and it would be doing so without providing any educational benefit to the children who would find themselves outwith the catchment. In that circumstance the Council would be putting itself in a position where the proposal could face a legal challenge.

Instead we suggest that the Council engages constructively with GME representatives in Aberdeen and across Scotland to develop a strategic plan for growth of GME in Aberdeen at all levels 0-18. This should be a plan that looks to grow schools rather than reduce opportunities. If Aberdeen can achieve the success that has been accomplished elsewhere then they might have a future where more GME schools are placed a sensible geographic distances across the city. Doing so would be the best way to achieve the stated aim of the proposal – basing GME catchments on reasonable travel times.

We urge you to reject this proposal and create a future that treats the educational needs of all the children in Aberdeen.

Any other comments?

2. 3.2 Bòrd na Gàidhlig issued statutory guidance in 2017, specifying that local authorities should create catchment areas for GME. The guidance states that a

catchment area for GME provision should normally cover an area in which the local authority thinks it is reasonable for pupils wishing to receive GME to travel to school, and that this will normally overlay a number of school catchment areas.