



**Comann nam Pàrant (Dùn Èideann is Lodainn)**  
**Written Deputation to Education, Children and Families Committee**  
**Tuesday 1 March 2022**

**Comann nam Pàrant (Dùn Èideann is Lodainn)**  
**Written Deputation to Education, Children and Families Committee**  
**Tuesday 1 March 2022 at 10am**

**Introduction**

Comann nam Pàrant (Dùn Èideann is Lodainn) represents families across Edinburgh and the Lothians. We campaign for the development of Gaelic Medium Education (GME) by liaising with families, listening to their concerns, amplifying their voices and advocating on their behalf.

We very much welcome the ongoing discussions on the development of a new GME high school, and the huge potential such a venture holds for the future of GME in Edinburgh and the Lothians. We are also aware, however, that support from GME families is crucial to this project. It is why we have undertaken significant engagement with such families over the past year so that we can understand their views and reflect these. It is also why we have stressed that the Council needs to meaningfully engage with GME families to fully understand their concerns in order to create a proposal which meets their needs and therefore gains the support which is crucial to the success of a new school.

The Council's latest update on GME does not appear to take such parental views into account, listing as it does several suggestions with which Comann nam Pàrant has frequently had cause for concern. This includes the repeated and misleading reference to rising rolls at James Gillespie's High School (JGHS), the option of capping numbers and introducing catchment reviews for GME pupils at primary level, and the lack of clarity, transparency and planning regarding the use of Darroch. Missing from the update is any reference to further conversations with the Scottish Government about their manifesto pledge and the potential funding available, and how discussions around this might be progressed. This is a significant and outstanding issue which is crucial to the broader discussions around the new GME high school.

As such, Comann nam Pàrant wishes to see greater demonstrable commitment from the Council in terms of progressing GME. As noted in previous correspondence, meetings and deputations, we seek evidence of a concerted effort from the Council to create a fruitful partnership with the Scottish Government, particularly around assessing centrally located sites. We also seek a step change in the way in which the Council engages with families who are at the heart of discussions for a new GME high school.

**Consultation with GME families**

Comann nam Pàrant notes the several references in the Council's proposal to 'ongoing engagement with the GME community'. We have certainly welcomed the two opportunities (2 February and 22 February 2022) in which representatives from Comann nam Pàrant, along with Chairs of the parent councils from Bun-sgoil Taobh na Pàirce and James Gillespie's High School met with Ian Perry (Convenor of the

Education, Children and Families Committee) and Amanda Hatton (Executive Director of Education and Children's Services). However, this does not constitute full engagement with the GME community, nor does it meet the expectations of Comann nam Pàrant or the parents and carers we represent. A much wider and deeper level of engagement with the GME community is required to allow for discussions of the full range of issues under consideration. We have repeatedly called for the Council to undertake significant, meaningful engagement with families and we look forward to this taking place.

In terms of next steps, we welcome the Council's proposal to consider options for the future of GME in Edinburgh though we would query the reference to this being 'based on the output of the engagement' given, as already highlighted, sufficient engagement with GME families is yet to take place. We ask the Council to clarify their phrasing, for example whether this perhaps refers to engagement which will take place in future. Here, we remind the Council that statutory consultation should be neither the first nor only opportunity for parental engagement or for building support for a proposal.

We therefore urge the Council to continue building its relationship with GME parents, establish trust through transparent and frequent communications, and undertake the significant engagement *prior* to presenting any further proposal through a statutory consultation. It is only through the developing and sustaining such a partnership that success can be achieved.

### **Update on Liberton and other potential sites**

We understand the need for Liberton to progress but believe the Council should articulate how the necessary needs of the potential GME school (such as immersion being supported and protected within shared spaces of a co-located school) can be properly considered if the design, development and building of shared spaces takes place in advance of the timescales of the GME secondary. If Liberton is the preferred option for the Council for the new GME high school then we would expect clarification as to how the design and build of the GME element and shared facilities of a co-located school will be taken into account in terms of the overall timelines.

In the report, the Council includes the Old Royal High School in the list of sites being considered although it is unclear why this site features given that this will become the new home for St Mary's Music School.

In addition, the Council's report to this committee states that a modern high school requires a 10-acre site. Comann nam Pàrant would question this statement on the basis that the site of the current JGHS campus, with its notional capacity of 1450 pupils, is 6.1 acres, and the site of the current Boroughmuir campus, with its capacity of 1560, is 2.7 acres. Both schools feature an all-weather sports pitch. The Council's roll projections for a GME high school in Edinburgh peak at a total of 720 pupils. This is a similar number to the notional capacity of both St Thomas Aquinas (750 pupils) and Drummond Community High School (600 pupils), which have areas of 2.2 acres and 4.4 acres respectively.

City Plan 2030 shows a range of sites, the acreage of which would accommodate the school. We ask the Council to provide a detailed breakdown of all the sites within the plan, including those earmarked for sale or speculative use. This would demonstrate transparency and allow for families to see the options which are potentially available. It would also provide a helpful alternative to the ongoing situation in which the Council presents updates on sites which have been suggested by families themselves who do not have the detailed information necessary in assessing the availability of such sites. We would look for GME to be part of the Council's planning and for the Council to consider GME infrastructure on par with other schools. We also expect that locations for a GME high school suitable for a city-wide catchment and other criteria, such as proximity to another high school, to be reflected in strategic plans such as the Council's City Plan 2030.

In addition, we seek an update on any progress regarding the feasibility studies requested from the Scottish Government, especially sites which would align with the manifesto commitment of a stand-alone central school.

### **Contingency plans**

In the update, the Council proposes to potentially implement either a catchment review and/or a placing policy to 'ensure GME numbers can be managed within current capacity.' We assume this refers to looking at catchment review and/or a placing policy for JGHS as a whole and not specifically the GME intake given that the GME intake itself is not the determining factor in the increasing rolls at JGHS. In terms of any proposed catchment review being applied to GME, we remind the Council that GME provision is to serve all of Edinburgh and the Lothians.

We note that in terms of primary provision, the Council has said that 'options to consider capping the number of pupils entering primary GME in the city need to be considered until the plan for growth is determined.' However, the rights of younger children to access Gaelic Medium Education at primary level should not be adversely affected by a rising rolls issue, especially one which is not intrinsically linked to GME. On a practical note, should Darroch be utilised for GME (the premise on which funding was given from the Scottish Government), there should be no cause to cap numbers or introduce a placement policy given that Darroch will not reach capacity in terms of the GME intake from primary level. The development of primary provision is not dependent on the timescales of a GME high school while Darroch is used for GME secondary provision, noting that use of Darroch for GME was agreed with the Scottish Government.

We would like to remind the Council of previous proposals to cap numbers or to review catchments. In 2010, the Council's proposal to cap the number of pupils able to access GME was met with significant objection from parents and was subsequently withdrawn. In 2016 the Council proposed restricting the number of pupils going to JGHS based on their distance from the school, disproportionately affecting Gaelic pupils, denying access to GME for some, and splitting the small GME cohort across different secondary schools. This proposal was also withdrawn following campaigning by Comann nam Pàrant and legal intervention by Bòrd na Gàidhlig.

In terms of per pupil cost-efficiencies, delivery of a broad curriculum at a dedicated GME high school and reducing any dependence on staff from other schools, it is surely better to expand GME primary provision now, so that there is a greater critical mass of GME high school pupils sooner rather than later. As the proposed expansion of Cròileagan and early years provision (detailed in the Council's January report to this committee) does not require statutory consultation, we would urge the Council to proceed with its ambitions for GME at this level rather than artificially seeking to reduce demand with a placing policy or catchment review which causes uncertainty for families who would consider GME for their children. We would urge the Council to remember that, as opposed to EME (whether that is non-denominational or Roman Catholic), there is currently no alternative provision for GME at primary level or secondary level for families in Edinburgh and the Lothians who seek to access this educational option for their children.

## **Rising rolls**

When referring to the implications of delaying the statutory consultation, the Council first lists rising rolls at JGHS. Comann nam Pàrant has stated repeatedly that rising rolls at JGHS should be separate from the discussion on the development of GME at secondary level.

As highlighted to the Council in our written deputation in January 2022, the pupil numbers at JGHS are projected to be greater than the capacity of its main campus whether or not GME remains at JGHS in the medium term, hence the requirement for JGHS to access the Darroch Annexe from August 2022. The proposed statutory consultation itself contained options that would have aimed for a GME high school to open in 2027 and inaccurately associated this with accommodation pressures at JGHS.

Given that the capacity of Darroch, which was refurbished with Gaelic-specific funding and originally for the development of GME, is in excess of the Council's projections for the number of GME pupils at JGHS (right up until 2035) the rising rolls issue should not be a determining factor in the timeline for the opening of a new GME high school.

We consider that it is unhelpful and potentially harmful for the Council to conflate these issues. All of the pupils who are at JGHS have a right to be there, under rules put in place by the Council, and it is the Council's duty to promote the wellbeing of the whole school community, from all language groups. Any suggestion that capacity problems at the school relate to one group only should be avoided, as should any language which might fuel misplaced resentments within a school community that will remain together until such time as the Council successfully implements a plan for change.

The Council must instead look at the issue of rising rolls for the whole of JGHS rather than incorrectly pointing to the delay in the proposed statutory consultation on GME as the source of the problem.

## **Funding for GME development at Darroch**

We note that the Council references that ‘as the expansion plan was contingent on improving and enhancing GME secondary provision in the interim, at Darroch, there now needs to be a decision about funding.’ However, the Council should be aware that funding for GME development at Darroch is required now, irrespective of when or where a GME high school is built. This has been mentioned before at meetings between the Council and Comann nam Pàrant, and has been understood and agreed upon. The Council is acutely aware of the need for resources, including the recruitment and retention of teaching staff. As mentioned again in our meeting with the Council on 22 February 2022, investment here, now, is vital in order that a robust cohort of Gaelic speaking staff are in a position to lead a thriving dedicated GME high school at whichever site it is eventually located.

The Scottish Government has provided Gaelic-specific funding towards the cost of the refurbishment of Darroch with the intention that it be used for GME. We therefore seek clarity on the Council’s intentions for the role of Darroch. In January, the Council’s proposal noted that ‘the Darroch building will be used as a temporary annexe for JGHS for as long as is required.’ It is unclear if this is for GME pupils or for the broader student body at JGHS despite, as already noted above, that Darroch is funded specifically for GME.

Indeed, the Council’s own proposal in Winter 2021 stated that they had the intention to increase GME secondary staffing allocations at JGHS from August 2022 as the GME curriculum is expanded when the school begins to utilise the Darroch Annexe. We therefore seek greater understanding around the financial plans for the support and development of the *current* GME provision at secondary level.

## **Finance**

We note the Council’s assertion that ‘the requirement to establish a capital budget for the delivery of a secondary school will need to wait until there is more clarity on the preferred future option and can then be given consideration through an appropriate budget setting process.’ We are concerned that there appears to be little clarity around the financial aspect of the development of GME at secondary level and that plans to date appear to have potentially been contingent upon support for the Council’s preferred option of a co-located school at Liberton. We remain concerned that GME does not appear to be budgeted for within the Council’s own financial plans for education. We also seek, again, further information on the Council’s ongoing discussion with the Scottish Government about potential financial support, especially given that pro-actively exploring such assistance would be beneficial for the Council itself.

## **Conclusion**

Comann nam Pàrant welcomes continued communication from the Council. We look forward to hearing further updates which address the significant queries and outstanding issues outlined above and we offer our support, where necessary, in developing our partnership to date. At this stage, we wish to highlight that

information regarding financial support from the Scottish Government is particularly important given that, without such clarification and confirmation, it is difficult for both the Council and for GME families to establish the options that are available and to then work together in achieving our joint aims. We therefore urge the Council to continue their discussions and to update families as soon as they are able. We also recommend the Council fully explore sites for the new GME high school. Throughout the process, we ask for transparent communication to GME families as well as increased and frequent opportunities for engagement.

We remain committed to working with partners at local and national level in the development of GME for Edinburgh and the Lothians. We look forward to receiving further updates and clarification from the Council as we progress towards our shared goal. Comann nam Pàrant will continue to represent the views of GME families in achieving the best possible outcome for our children.