

Meeting notes from Monday 9th February 2009

Introduction

The meeting was called by Comann nam Pàrant as a further stage in the development of proposals for a dedicated Gaelic School in Edinburgh. Two open meetings had already taken place in September 2008 and Comann nam Pàrant had undertaken further work to promote debate amongst parents and seek the views of those who had been unable to attend the public meetings. The objective of this latest meeting was therefore to review progress and provide a further opportunity for parents to feed in their views.

The meeting format consisted of:

- an update from the latest Holyrood debate on the Scottish Government's draft Gaelic Language Plan, in which a number of MSPs representing different parties had made important statements of support not only for Gaelic but for dedicated schools.
- a summary of how the parental consultation had progressed to date (presentation attached).
- an open session for parents to ask questions, express their own opinions and raise any issues or concerns.
- an opportunity for Premier Business Development, the company commissioned by City of Edinburgh Council to undertake a Feasibility Study into developing GME in Edinburgh to hear these parental views and ask questions .

Summary

Parents overall were in agreement that the next step in the debate to develop Gaelic Medium Education in Edinburgh should be the establishment of a Gaelic School. The main arguments supporting this were the restricted opportunities afforded by a Gaelic Medium Unit, the rising demand in Edinburgh for GME and the very clear political will on the part of both the Scottish Government and the Parliament to support best practice in minority language teaching – all of which could be met and managed through a dedicated Gaelic School in Edinburgh.

It was recognised that the future location of the school was an issue for parents, as were the availability of adequate teaching resources and support from the Local Authority. Concern also focused upon the current secondary provision in James

Gillespies High School (JGHS) for children studying Gaelic and parents questioned how this could be improved as an interim measure. A pupil from JGHS offered a case study of how the current arrangements had impacted upon him.

In essence, parents agreed that the status quo enjoyed by current Tollcross GME pupils could not be maintained, that current secondary educational provision was having a negative impact on the relationship GME children held with the Gaelic language and that to develop Gaelic as a language in Edinburgh, meet standards of best practice and deliver the targets established in Government policy - a Gaelic School seemed the logical choice.

Points of discussion

Scottish Govt commitment

It was noted that the Scottish Government has made explicit its commitment to the development of dedicated Gaelic schools. Copies of the Government's own recently published draft Gaelic Language Plan were available at the meeting and attention was drawn to p71 where the Government sets out a commitment to "encourage and support the development of dedicated GME schools, to help create the most productive environment for learning Gaelic in primary schools". This unequivocal endorsement of dedicated schools, it was pointed out, establishes a very clear policy context for both parents and the Council - that is, a policy context in which the preferred option should always be a dedicated school. Only where that is impossible to deliver should other options be considered.

Funding

A number of parents asked about the funding which the Government had made available (£2.7m announced during the 2008 Mod by Alex Salmond). It was noted that this had been allocated with the proposed Gaelic schools in Portree and Fort William in mind, but that in light of the Government's commitment it was highly likely that additional funding would become available if a strong proposal emerged in Edinburgh. What was essential however is that such a proposal is strong enough to convince Scottish Ministers to provide the necessary financial support and that parents had a pivotal role in ensuring that that happened, working with individual Councillors.

Location

Two parents raised concerns about the potential location of a new dedicated school. It was apparent that this was the only point of significance on which there was concern about the implications of a dedicated school. The key requirement was ease of access from across the entire catchment and that this should be at least of a similar standard to the current situation at Tollcross. It was argued that there would be value in the school being located within reasonable proximity to a train station and other key public transport (children travelling in from East and West

Lothian and Fife were cited as a factor). Amongst at least some parents it was clear that an unfavourable location for the school (i.e. on the periphery of the city) would prevent them accessing GME.

In relation to the issue of location it was further noted that any primary school provision would have to remain geographically within the JGHS catchment, for at least as long as JGHS continued to provide Gaelic provision at S1-S6.

Second Gaelic Medium Unit in Edinburgh

As a result of the discussion over location, it was clear that the key potential attraction in a second GME unit elsewhere in the city would be ease of access for parents. It was pointed out however that this was essentially the only strength in having a second unit and that this option was considerably less attractive than a dedicated school on every other count. For example, it could not provide the same educational and linguistic benefits as a dedicated school and was highly unattractive in relation to resourcing and the management of staff. A number of parents pointed out that a dedicated school would be inherently more efficient than a scattering of small units and could achieve economies of scale that units could not. In effect, dedicated schools of the size being proposed for Edinburgh would always represent better value for money and best practice seemed to indicate that the best model of expansion for minority languages came from building a Unit, then a school, then a further Unit which would become a 2nd school and on and on.

So, further GM Units elsewhere in the city in the future as a mechanism for addressing massive growth and establishing the foundations for further dedicated schools might well be a necessary stage in GME growth. This issue is being looked at in Glasgow and it had already been pointed out that annual intake into P1 would have to be in the region of 400 in order to reach the target set for 2121 in BnG's National Plan. Over that kind of timescale it was evident that between 4 and 6 Gaelic primary schools would be required in Edinburgh. However, for the medium term, the priority was to achieve the qualitative and quantitative advances which could only realistically be delivered by a dedicated school (e.g. a P1 intake of around 60 annually by 2012 - roughly equivalent to having a school with 3 parallel P1 classes).

Council

It was noted that the Council had treated the existing school very poorly in relation to access issues - having failed entirely to take account of the special requirements of the GME unit when removing (and privatising) on-street parking in the Tollcross area. This record of disregard for the requirements of GME parents and children - above all in relation to access to nursery provision and the early primary years - was deeply regrettable and demonstrated that the Council would need to work much harder to support the successful expansion of GME.

Another parent noted that Edinburgh has World Heritage status (based mainly on the buildings it has inherited). But it was felt that the promotion of the Gaelic

language would complement and add another dimension to this Heritage status and that this should be pointed out to the Councillors.

Teaching Resources

The question of the availability of teaching staff was raised. This was recognised as a major issue which had to be addressed at the national level, with both Bord na Gàidhlig and the Scottish Government being well aware of the need. A parent who is a teacher commented that creating attractive job opportunities was the best way to encourage new teachers to train and existing teachers who have Gaelic to convert to teaching in a GME environment. A dedicated school was likely to prove attractive in that respect.

Developing GME in future

One parent argued strongly that current parents had a responsibility to think about future prospective parents and children and to strive for the best solution not only for their own children but for those who would access provision in years to come, including those with children currently in nursery. It was therefore essential to press for a dedicated school, which was clearly the best educational choice. This was backed up by comments from a range of parents who pointed out that full immersion learning in the form which could be offered in a dedicated school was the accepted international model of best practice. Strong as the performance of the current GME unit was, it was an established fact that the fluency and range of language registers available to children would be increased by a dedicated school. Indeed, there was some concern that the current arrangement - with a GME unit embedded in an English-language school - was creating a negative impression amongst children of the status and relevance of Gaelic. Since the language is used only to a limited extent in a whole-school context and not used at all by key figures in the school community it was not uncommon for children to think of Gaelic only as a language to be used in the classroom in connection with schoolwork.

Secondary school Gaelic education in Edinburgh

The weakness of provision at S1-S6 was identified as a significant issue and the meeting heard from a JGHS pupil who revealed that he had faced difficulties maintaining his Gaelic after transferring from Tollcross. Timetabling for Gaelic was such that Gaelic speakers were forced to miss classes in other subjects and were told to catch up with these classes in their own time by getting classmates to take notes for them. There was no teaching support for such catch up. It was clear that the meeting regarded this situation as entirely unacceptable. A parent of another secondary pupil told the meeting that difficulties of this kind had transformed the attitude of her child in relation to Gaelic and that now the child regarded Gaelic very negatively, having previously been very positive about Gaelic and her command of the language.

A pupil from JGHS testified that his understanding and command of the Gaelic language had decreased to a point of almost no return due to the lack of support Gaelic commands at JGHS. He made parents aware of the fact 4 core subject classes have to be missed each week to study Gaelic. He went on to report that no additional teaching materials or help is offered to help bridge this learning gap and that many children, like him, feel they are at an unfair advantage because of this.

Ian MacDonald (Chair of Comann nam Pàrant) indicated to the meeting that it was hoped some progress could be made to improve Gaelic provision at JGHS, but was unable to give any firm indication of timescales. An additional post to support Gaelic learning had been advertised and any improvements essentially depended on securing this additional resource. It had however been made clear to the school that the numbers of Gaelic-speaking children entering JGHS within the next few years would increase significantly (with sufficient numbers to enable a Gaelic-speaking form class to be created). Parents agreed that progress had to be made in this area. The ideal solution was a dedicated school like Sgoil Ghaidhlig Glaschu but it was recognised that an intermediate stage involving significant expansion of provision at JGHS might be necessary. Reference was made to Greenfaulds High School in Cumbernauld which provided a potential model for this intermediate stage. Apparently the Headteacher and Head of Languages from JGHS will be visiting Greenfaulds in the near future on a fact-finding visit.

Feasibility Study

The meeting then heard from the consultants appointed by CEC to carry out a feasibility study, who took the opportunity to pose a range of questions to parents. A questionnaire was handed out for all parents present at the meeting to complete.

In response to the Consultant's questions it again became clear that the consensus amongst parents was for a dedicated Gaelic School capable of providing an integrated and coherent educational experience from ages 3 to 18. This would ideally be delivered using a similar model to the one successfully pioneered by Sgoil Ghaidhlig Glaschu.

There were effectively three challenges for the Council to address:

- feeder provision at nursery level would have to expand significantly in order to support future expansion of GME in line with Government targets. It was possible that this could take place at different locations around the city (and not
- the past success and anticipated future growth of GME at primary level meant that it was now imperative to move forward on the basis of a dedicated school which could accommodate significant expansion (with an P1 intake of around 60 by 2012 being a pressing target).
- serious weaknesses in Gaelic provision at S1-S6 meant that it was also a matter of urgency to improve the quality of secondary education in

Edinburgh, if necessary through substantial immediate development at JGHS but with a firm commitment to move to a dedicated school on the model of Sgoil Ghàidhlig Glaschu as soon as possible.

It was clear from parental comments that the hypothesis underlying key questions posed by the consultants (ie that JGHS was a "magnet" school and that enrolment at Tollcross was driven largely by a desire to gain access to JGHS) was seriously misconceived. In fact there was a great deal to indicate that JGHS was actually having very negative consequences for Gaelic-speaking children. Whatever standing it might have amongst other parent groups, access to JGHS was not a motivating factor for parents of children in GME.

The consultants thanked parents for their open and frank expression of views, which the consultants indicated they had found helpful in informing and refining their research on behalf of the Council.

Comann nam Pàrant

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