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cc. Lorna French, City of Edinburgh Council
Crawford McGhie, City of Edinburgh Council
Councillor Ian Perry
Councillor Alison Dickie
Councillor Steve Burgess
Councillor Cameron Rose
Councillor Melanie Main
Councillor Mandy Watt
Councillor Neil Ross
Councillor Nick Cook

Dear Mr Macdonald

James Gillespie's High School: proposals on capacity planning

I am writing on behalf of James Gillespie's High School (JGHS) Parent Council in response to proposals to deal with capacity problems at the school in 2021/22, due to delays to the refurbishment of the Darroch building which was intended to provide additional accommodation from August 2021. These delays mean that in the 2021/22 session there will be insufficient classroom space at JGHS for the number of pupils attending.

The Parent Council hosted a meeting on 2 February 2021 at which presentations were made by school staff and officers from the City of Edinburgh Council (the Council) on the capacity proposals, and parents were given the opportunity to raise questions and concerns. Feedback to the proposals had also been given in advance of the meeting following the circulation of school documents *JGHS Accommodation Contingency Plan June 2021 – June 22* and *AH Pupil Feedback Contingency Planning and FDL December 2020*.

As was discussed at the meeting, the main thrust of the contingency planning is to introduce a new approach to teaching at Advanced Higher level where three of the scheduled teaching hours would take place in-classroom, and the remaining two hours would be carried out by some other means, with a particular focus on remote teaching delivered by Flexible Digital Learning (FDL). These plans will particularly affect the current year's S5 as they move into S6.

Both before and during the meeting it was clear that parents have significant concerns about the proposals, both in their substance, and in the way they have been communicated. In particular, these relate to:

- a failure to identify accommodation-based solutions (including temporary units or local spaces in the community), or explain why such solutions are not possible
- a lack of timely communication with parents and pupils
- questions about the mode of delivery of teaching and how this will operate in practice
- concerns about detriment to pupils' feelings of inclusion within the school community
- a perceived contradiction in the rationale for the proposal: previous communications stated that FDL was being proposed because of Darroch not being ready due to Covid; but at the meeting it was suggested that FDL is regarded as an improved method of delivery.

In particular, following a year of disruption in education which has affected all children, pupils going into S6 in 2021 will have experienced two school years where teaching of certificated courses has been truncated, and exams at National 4/5 and Higher level have not taken place. Therefore, there is a particular concern that any plan should have as an aim supporting S6 pupils:

- in attaining their educational goals in terms of Higher and Advanced Higher qualifications
- to participate fully as members of the school community
- in their mental health as individuals and as a group, and in all educational settings

It is recognised that these proposals come after a period of coronavirus-related disruption affecting the construction industry which has caused the delay to the availability of the Darroch building, and also that the school has put forward its plans after consultation within the school, and with a view to avoiding other undesirable outcomes, such as a reduction in course choices. Nonetheless, parental concerns are considerable. The introduction of a new teaching system in normal times would require time, consultation and small-scale piloting before being instituted over a whole qualification level and year group. It is difficult to believe that it would be considered after periods of serious disruption to learning unless no other reasonable steps could be taken. We believe that it is important to acknowledge that this is not necessarily of benefit to pupils, but rather a response to a difficult situation which will require the school, pupils and parents and the Council to work together to make it a success.

It should also be noted that the Council system for managing construction projects for school accommodation does not seem to provide adequately for the possibility of delays, which are common in construction contracts. This inevitably leads to situations where accommodation is not available at the correct time, which then has serious consequences where rising rolls are an issue, as here. Although this is specifically coronavirus related, the possibility of delays is always present and time should be allowed for that eventuality.

The Parent Council's role is to identify and represent the views of parents on the education provided by the school and other matters affecting the education and welfare of the pupils. However, it is also to work in partnership with the school in carrying out that role, and we seek to put forward practical steps to acknowledge and act on the concerns which have been raised, with the aim of allowing the school community to move forward. Our views are set out below.

Accommodation-based solutions

The Council has stated that accommodation-based solutions are not available to cover the period in 2021/22 until the Darroch building is ready. Although this was discussed at the meeting, there remains a lack of clarity about the reasoning behind this, as reflected in the comments made by parents.

We submit that it is entirely reasonable for parents to expect that the provision of additional classroom accommodation would normally be the preferred solution to capacity problems; this would reflect standard teaching practice at this school, and at others in the city, and is the solution which was used when erecting the current temporary units at the school, and in planning for the refurbishment of the Darroch building. If it is indeed the case that an accommodation-based solution is not possible, then clearer explanations of why that is the case should be supplied, in particular on:

- why the solution of further temporary units on campus is not possible
- what other accommodation within the community in the vicinity of the school has been considered, and why it is not possible to use it

If the school community is to move to working together in adopting a positive approach to FDL next year, it is essential that all concerned are satisfied that these sorts of solutions have been properly explored before being dismissed.

There is also a very real possibility of further delays to the Darroch construction project as the pandemic continues to affect all aspects of society. Planning for such an eventuality, and in particular options for additional accommodation, needs to be carried out now so that it is clear for the whole school community what measures would be put in place after 2021/22 if necessary. A further period of disruption would lead to increasing problems with classroom space, affecting the school much more widely, which would be an unacceptable outcome.

Communication

It is clear that communication is key in planning and implementing any proposal and that a lack of communication has helped give rise to concerns for both parents and pupils. It is vital that the school engage more, as soon as possible and as fully as possible, with S5 parents and pupils.

Communication must also be ongoing during the next school year allowing pupils and parents to give their feedback on teaching as it progresses, and to express any concerns

about how it is functioning. If there is the potential of further delays to the Darroch refurbishment, or there is any other reason that the new approach to teaching will be used for future year groups, this should only be done with consultation with those concerned, carried out well in advance, and with a presumption that normal teaching will be resumed as soon as Darroch is ready.

Digital Hub

A vital element of the plans put forward is the provision of a digital hub where S6 pupils are able to participate in remote learning and other course-related study, and also where they can benefit from being together as a group. For many pupils it will not be possible to easily participate in remote learning at home or their distance from school means it will be impossible to move between classroom-based and remote learning without a school hub to facilitate this.

In recent years it has also been difficult to find appropriate space for an S6 common room and it has been acknowledged that this is to the detriment of pupils for both practical and social reasons. Arriving at a solution which allows S6 pupils to feel part of the school and their year group when it is likely that they will have comparatively little in-classroom time, and have already experienced significant dislocation over 2020/21, is essential. Therefore space must be found in 2021/22 which is:

- a sufficient size to accommodate an appropriate part of the S6 pupil group and, if not on the school campus, within easy reach of the school
- equipped appropriately for such a purpose, including with Wifi
- capable of being used both for study and for socialising within dedicated areas
- reserved for this use, and is not subject to being appropriated for other uses during the school day
- staffed, where necessary, for this purpose

Such a space is a core requirement without which it is difficult to see how FDL can be successfully delivered and should be a priority in planning for 2021/22. Providing specific details of this hub (where it will be and how it will be equipped and managed) may go some way towards reassuring parents.

Resources

Digital equipment

There has already been undertaking that suitable devices will be provided to both pupils and teaching staff to allow engagement with remote learning. We welcome this commitment, and consider it to be entirely necessary for any sort of teaching relying on FDL. Likewise, we note that technical support will be provided centrally for both equipment and connectivity – also a critical part of the infrastructure which will be needed.

All involved now require further details of that provision, and reassurance that the roll out of equipment will be timed so that it is available for the change in timetable, whenever that will be. Although pupils and teachers have become more familiar with remote learning this

year, a new teaching set up will necessitate both training and practice, and this will require time.

Staffing

In addition to equipment, a critical part of the functioning of FDL will be the availability of appropriate staffing. Although all teaching staff now have experience of remote learning, in a situation where it is expected that all other pupils apart from the S6 will be taught in-classroom, it must be ensured that it is those staff with the greatest experience and training in remote learning, and who are in the best position to successfully deliver FDL, who are allocated to these classes. In addition, any additional training or support which may be required should be available to this group of staff.

As noted above, it is envisaged that staffing may also be required to allow the digital hub to function appropriately.

Approach to Advanced Higher Teaching

The main proposal put forward is for Advanced Higher courses to be taught on a basis of three periods in classroom and two periods delivered either remotely or in some other format (such as self-study or excursions). We note that five periods will continue to be timetabled for each subject, meaning that both teachers and pupils should have protected time to engage in the course curriculum.

In order to build confidence in this new teaching approach, we consider it is essential that specific information on how this will be implemented in practice is required as each subject area will have its particular requirements. For this reason, we request that Curriculum Leaders engage with parents and pupils as soon as is practicable on the details of how Advanced Higher courses will run in 2021/22 on a subject-by-subject basis. This needs to take place in good time to properly inform Advanced Higher coursing choices for next year which are currently underway.

Parents and pupils will also require specific information about how the proposals will interact with teaching where practical study is a core part of the curriculum; this is particularly the case as disruption to the practical aspects of education has been a serious problem during recent periods of remote learning, and will continue to have an impact on pupils next year. Although reassurances have been given at a general level about this, again this is an issue which needs to be dealt with at individual subject level. This will include access to specialist space, such as laboratories, music practice rooms or art rooms, in order to develop relevant skills and complete course-work requirements. It is recognised that such space is under great pressure within the school, and that specialist classes are having already to be held in general purpose space. However, S6 pupils should not be disadvantaged by a reduction in classroom-based teaching in their access to such space, and we hope that the school can work positively and flexibly to ensure this access is provided.

It is noted that the school does not expect this new approach to have an effect overall on educational attainment. However, after the disruption we have seen, the steps which will be taken to ensure this is the case need to be elaborated, and reassurance given that this

will be monitored through the school year. For pupils, S6 is both an opportunity to gain further qualifications required for university study or work, and to study at higher levels in particular subjects which may, again, be required for their life following school. It needs to be clear how pupils can achieve the embedded learning which may be lacking after this disruption and the second cancellation of exams, in preparation for which much learning consolidation would normally take place.

School community and pupil well-being

It has been stated that one of the advantages of FDL will be as preparation for more independent learning, at university or within a work context. Whilst there is a natural move toward greater self-sufficiency in learning at this stage of education, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that these pupils are part of the school community, and that S6 is not simply a preparatory year for a life after school, but a core part of their educational and social development. This is all the more important given the disruptions of the last year where pupils have spent lengthy periods away from the school.

The provision of a digital hub and common room will be a core part of achieving the objective as it will provide an anchor for pupils for studying and socialising. In addition, thought needs to be given, in collaboration with pupils, to supporting inclusion by other means, for example, through schemes such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award and in extra-curricular activities and other school events, which provide social, leadership and personal development opportunities.

Additional Support Needs

Within the whole S6 cohort there will be pupils who need specific assistance in participation in school, whether in supporting their mental health, because of a difficult or changing situation at home, or due to other vulnerabilities. This will require monitoring and support across the school, but it must also be recognised that FDL and a reduction in classroom time will bring additional challenges to some children and these need to be anticipated, identified and met.

FDL also has the potential to have a particular effect on pupils who have specific learning needs. Again, early engagement with those pupils and their parents to identify how their needs will be met is required.

The school

The end of the last school year and all of this school year have been disrupted and stressful for all involved in education. JGHS staff have worked extremely hard over this period to provide stability and support for pupils, even as the school has dealt with pandemic-related restrictions, cancellation of exams and constantly evolving arrangements on assessments, and moving between remote learning and school-based learning and back again. The Parent Council acknowledges that, against this difficult background, many if not all of the educational points raised above have already been recognised by the school, and school staff and the school leadership team have been working for some time on contingency plans and to identify mitigations needed to support pupils. If it is really the case that additional

classroom space will not be possible, then in the view of the Parent Council, this is deeply regrettable. If all other options have been properly explored and are not possible, and plans using FDL must be implemented as anticipated, we hope and expect that the school will work together with parents and pupils to make it as successful as possible.

Conclusion

Parents have expressed a number of serious concerns about these proposals which will cause ongoing anxiety until they are addressed. As a Parent Council our role is to represent parents' views but it is also to support the school in dealing with the very real problems which face it. We consider that this can only be achieved by real engagement with concerns raised, though responding to parents' questions in full, providing detailed information on how the proposals will work in practice and working with both parents and pupils in planning for the future. We recognise that many of the points raised above are already part of the work the school is carrying out, or subject to commitments by the Council. However, we consider that it is important that parents' expectations are set out clearly, as a first step to their being met. In particular, in the implementation of FDL, guarantees are sought on:

- the provision and nature of the planned-for hub accommodation
- the provision of equipment, technical support and staffing
- the provision of detailed information on the actual running of courses
- a return to classroom-based learning as soon as Darroch is ready

As noted above, pupils are already being asked to take decisions on their S6 course choices. As the proposed changes will have a material effect on how those courses are run, we request a first response to the points of concern raised in this letter in the week following the February holidays as an initial step in planning for the future.

Yours sincerely

JGHS Parent Council