



JAMES GILLESPIE'S HIGH SCHOOL

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Councillor Melanie Main
Councillor Mandy Watt
Councillor Neil Ross
Councillor Nick Cook

26 February 2021

Dear JGHS Parent Council,

Thank you to our James Gillespie's High School Parent Council for contacting me and giving colleagues and me the opportunity to respond to and address the concerns raised by parents in relation to how we propose to address the shortfall in accommodation available to us from August 2021 for session 2021/22. This followed an online meeting with parents, hosted by the Parent Council on Tuesday 2 February.

In responding to the matters raised, I seek to reassure parents, carers, and pupils that our preferred proposal will facilitate the continuing successful delivery of Advanced Highers for all pupils attending James Gillespie's High School.

Background and context

Across the City of Edinburgh, secondary school rolls are rising. The current campus has a capacity of 1450 and was projected to outstrip this capacity from August 2021. To accommodate the additional pupil numbers, the City of Edinburgh Council secured enough funding to completely refurbish the former Darroch Secondary School building which is situated off Gilmore Place and is around 0.75 miles from our main campus. The refurbishment was scheduled to be completed in the Summer of this year (2021). Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the refurbishment of Darroch has been delayed by one year; completion is now scheduled for the Spring of 2022.

The school became aware of the delay to the refurbishment of the Darroch school when we resumed in August 2020. Soon after, we were informed that no additional accommodation could be provided for the school in the timescale available.

As you may be aware, Darroch was used as an overflow facility for JGHS in the 70s and 80s at a time when an increased school roll was greater than the school's capacity.

Also, between 2013 and 2016, when the current campus was modernised with the demolition and rebuilding of new accommodation, Darroch was used as an overflow facility (an annexe) to accommodate JGHS pupils. Despite the anticipated difficulties associated with pupils and staff having to travel between the sites the school's attainment increased year on year over that period.

From August 2018, an additional 6 classrooms were installed to the rear of the main JGHS campus to provide for a school roll that had risen and exceeded the school's capacity. These additional classrooms took the capacity of the school to 1450.

In August 2020, you will recall that we were amid planning and arranging for all pupils to return full time to school following a national lockdown which resulted in the school's closure to almost all pupils between 23 March and 26 June 2020. Our efforts and energies were almost entirely consumed with responding to the rapidly evolving and challenging circumstances at that time. Thus, whilst much was happening in leading and managing the resumption of 'normal' operation, we began reflecting on how we might address a shortage of accommodation from August 2021. At that earlier stage we did consider sharing the challenges we were facing with the wider school community, but we chose not to. At the time, we felt that in the absence of concrete proposals we would further destabilise an already very fraught and anxious school community. With the benefit of hindsight, we could have shared this with the Parent Council, and this may have led to a lessening of the current levels of concern being expressed by parents and pupils. Therefore, we felt it was better to develop a workable solution before sharing with the wider community.

At the outset, we were determined and committed to finding a solution that met the following criteria:

1. Maintaining the quality of Learning and Teaching so that, at the very least, current high levels of attainment are maintained.
2. Maintaining the current breadth of courses in S6.
3. All pupils are supported towards achieving their educational goals in S6
4. All S6 to participate fully as members of the school community
5. All S6 to be supported in their mental health as individuals and as a group, and in all educational settings

In the subsequent months, work was carried out in collaboration with Council Officers to explore diverse options and after we were confident that we had developed a solution that would meet our criteria and could be delivered and resourced, we shared with our wider community. Initially, this was with Curriculum Leaders, then teaching staff and closely followed by the Parent Council (November 2020) and the current S6 students who are presently involved in studying Advanced Highers.

At the Parent Council meeting on 2 February, Mrs Stewart referenced papers that had been shared with parents and the rationale for developing our preferred solution. (*JGHS Accommodation Contingency Plan June 2021–June 22* and *AH Pupil Feedback Contingency Planning and Flexible Digital Learning (FDL) December 2020*)

As we discussed at the Parent meeting, our contingency plan is to deliver all our Advanced Higher courses with an allocation of 5 periods per week. A minimum of three of those periods will be classroom based with the remaining two periods being utilised flexibly to meet the needs of students and to reflect the different contexts needed to successfully deliver the different courses. This could involve but is not limited to:

- Face to face meetings in small groups with teachers in smaller school spaces.
- Presentations by outside speakers in the school's theatre
- Excursions and field trips to local venues
- Working remotely at home on completion of tasks.
- Working remotely in a peer group in a HUB on assignments
- Working independently but in a classroom with younger pupils with some input by teachers.

Initial reactions from teachers who are experienced in delivering AH courses were positive and has led to further discussion around how the flexible periods can be used most effectively. In the coming weeks, it is envisaged that further work and consultation with current S5 and S6 will be useful and important towards informing our planning.

It is recognised and acknowledged that the past year has caused widescale disruption in education and those pupils going into S6 in 2021 will have experienced two school years where teaching of certificated courses has been truncated, and exams at National 5 and Higher level have not taken place. Therefore, we will need to ensure that all S6 students are fully supported towards realising their goals and supporting them with any mental health issues. We will do this by ensuring that the progress of all S6 students is monitored and appropriate steps taken to support them at the earliest opportunity. Also, as has been our practice in recent years, all S6 applying for University or College will be allocated a staff mentor to support them with all aspects of their applications, including personal statements and references. Arrangements for senior transition aim to ensure that all our young people have access to high quality information, advice, and guidance to support individual pathways. For session 2021/22, all pupils will have additional support from professional counsellors, and we will further develop in-house provision for all pupils seeking help with their mental health.

Additionally, prevailing restrictions permitting, we will resume the involvement of S6 working across different year groups in the school. The school's wide extra-curricular programme will also be reintroduced, in line with evolving guidelines, to allow all pupils

increased opportunities to socialise and develop their interpersonal skills. S6 pupils have traditionally taken a strong lead in organising and supporting social events for younger pupils.

I am keen to acknowledge that our contingency plan is a response to a demanding situation which will require the school, pupils and parents and the Council to work together to make it a success. Beyond school, the different and more varied learning approaches we are planning may offer additional benefit for pupils in an increasingly technological learning or work environment.

Accommodation-based solution

At the point of lockdown in March 2020, all the Communities and Families capital programme was put on hold as part of the overall response to the pandemic. This affected all projects at various stages of the design, procurement, and construction process. Between March 2020 and the beginning of the 2020-21 session in August 2020, all activity focused on the return to school and preparation of immediate contingency requirements for August 2021. The Council, throughout this time, was operating in emergency response mode. Once arrangements were in place for the return to school in August 2021, it was possible to turn attention to the longer-term implications of the COVID pandemic.

For the Communities and Families capital programme, this included an assessment of projects which were due to be delivered and operational by August 2021. At this point, the Council's capital programme remained paused, so the initial focus was to get the necessary approval for any project which urgently required to be progressed and then to begin consideration of what contingency arrangements would be required. Darroch was one of the projects which was considered essential to progress before the overall impacts of the COVID pandemic on the Council's capital programme were finalised and approval sought, with agreement to progress with the tender process for the project. At that point, the consideration of providing additional temporary accommodation at James Gillespie's High School, as a contingency for Darroch not being completed on time, concluded that it was not a realistic option. The main contributing factors to this conclusion were:

- The extra accommodation could not have been guaranteed to be delivered on time due to the ongoing pandemic.
- The substantial risk of a second and significant lockdown. (The second lockdown has further impacted on several other projects).
- The continued pausing of the Council's capital programme for all but essential projects and, aligned to that, the unavailability of extra capital funding due to the overall implications to the capital programme caused by the COVID pandemic and lengthy approval timescales which would be required to secure any additional significant capital spend.
- The need to provide a contingency plan for James Gillespie's High School that could be guaranteed to be delivered and provide the necessary quality of learning and teaching, and
- The continued impact of the pandemic across the wider Council which has required continued intensive working to ensure all essential services are maintained.

Communication and Next Steps

We wholeheartedly agree that clear and timeous communication will be key in planning and implementing our proposal. We acknowledge and regret any additional anxieties caused by the late timing of our communications. That this has fuelled concerns for both parents and pupils is something we will reflect on and learn from.

I am pleased to report that on Thursday 18 February, Mrs Stewart and I invited all S5 pupils to meet with us (Online) to hear their views and to respond to questions they had. The meeting was well attended and gave us an excellent opportunity to listen to and respond to their real and genuine concerns. Among others we listened to concerns about:

1. Receiving an inferior AH experience in S6
2. Ensuring that the school took account of the difficulties they experienced during lockdown, and
3. Our not consulting with them until now.

Following the meeting, a questionnaire link was shared with all S5 so that we can gather their views and use these to inform and develop our next stages.

Additionally, parents and pupils have responded well to an invitation to join a working group to help us with our planning and subsequent implementation.

Beyond implementation from August 2021, we will continually monitor and evaluate the progress of our AH pupils and feed back to pupils and parents.

Other than in extreme circumstances, we will always consult with the wider JGHS community in advance of making significant changes to any aspect of the services that we deliver. This will include reflecting on experiences during lockdown, for example, and considering how we can utilise newly developed skills to augment current provision.

On evaluating students' progress with Flexible Digital Learning during session 2021/22, it may be that some newly developed practices can feature in the future delivery of our Advanced Higher provision. For session 2021/22 it will not be necessary to continue with FDL as we will have enough classroom accommodation available to us. Where appropriate, it is anticipated that evolving technologies will continue to develop to support our pedagogical practices in future years. A recent example of this is where, as a school, we have successfully piloted the deployment of a 'Bring Your Own Device' (BYOD) initiative to support all senior pupils with their learning.

Hub accommodation/Study Space

We recognise that a main element of the plans put forward is the provision of a hub where S6 pupils can participate in remote learning and other course-related study, and where they can benefit from being together as a group. For those pupils who are not able to participate in remote learning at home for any reason, this facility will be provided so that all have access to a safe and comfortable space to work and interact with peers.

It is envisaged that HUB accommodation provided will be:

- of enough 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

Resources

Digital equipment

The local authority has given assurance that our new S6 learners and the staff supporting and teaching them will be prioritised for new devices and training. Having digital devices for school, study and home use will be a distinct advantage, enabling pupils to access many more resources than previously.

Staffing

Work has already begun towards ensuring that those staff who are delivering courses through FDL are experienced with the content of the courses and skilled and comfortable with the use of technology to support remote learning.

In addition, any additional training or support which may be required will be available to this group of staff.

Approach to Advanced Higher Teaching

As mentioned earlier, the Advanced Higher courses will be delivered on a basis of a minimum of three periods in a classroom and two periods delivered flexibly to suit pupils and context. Five periods will continue to be timetabled for each subject, ensuring that both teachers and pupils will have protected time to fully engage in the course curriculum.

The specific details of how the flexible time will be utilised will develop over time in response to evolving circumstances and opportunities as they arise. **We will aim to maximise the use of school-based spaces to ensure that as many of the 5 periods allocated are in school accommodation.**

Following continued planning by staff and consultation with pupils, school staff will keep parents informed of progress.

At this stage in the planning, we will not be able to provide specific details of how the flexible times will be utilised in advance of course choices being made but can reassure everyone that all courses will be delivered to fully support and meet the needs of all pupils.

For subjects which include practical work, access, as appropriate, to specialist accommodation and resources will be made available to pupils as required.

School community and pupil well-being

Previously, I stated that one of the advantages of FDL in the delivery of AH courses will be as preparation for more independent learning, at university or within a work context. AH courses are intended to encourage more independent learning.

Studying for an Advanced Higher can be a useful bridge between the class-based learning, typical of Highers, and the more self-motivated and proactive type of study at college or university.

https://www.sqa.org.uk/files_ccc/NQIntroducingAdvancedHigherLeaflet.pdf

We recognise that one of the main difficulties arising from lockdown was the lack of opportunity to socialise and benefit from being part of a vibrant and stimulating school environment. To address this, we will seek to ensure that our S6 pupils are part of the school community and will encourage all to engage fully in the opportunities available. All in the school community are looking forward to the resumption of our extra-curricular activities, including Duke of Edinburgh, Choirs, orchestras, drama, sporting, and excursions. I am confident that these experiences will all contribute to enhanced mental wellbeing and provide pupils with additional opportunities to develop their social, leadership and personal development skills.

Additional Support Needs

As parents will know, we have a strong and well-established pupil support system in the school. This includes our Pupil Support Leaders who are the first point of contact for all pupils needing pastoral support or our Support for Learning Department who are there to provide bespoke support for any pupils experiencing specific barriers to their learning. We also have a Key Adult provision which many pupils find helpful as an alternative means of accessing support. Additionally, during this past session, the addition of two professional counsellors to our staff has given us the additional expertise that can make such a difference.

If FDL leads to additional issues for pupils, staff will be asked to be vigilant in spotting early signs and taking proactive steps to support pupils.

We will provide additional check-ins for pupils with staff to discuss progress in learning and identify any potential barriers.

Quality Assurance

Our standard calendar of quality assurance to ensure the highest quality of teaching and learning will be enhanced for this group of learners. As such, we will have more sharing of classroom experiences which includes colleagues observing each other and sharing of best practices in addition to providing opportunities for senior staff to engage in learner conversations with S6 students and staff. Where any concerns occur in any of the above, steps will immediately be taken to ensure all pupils are on track to successfully complete courses.

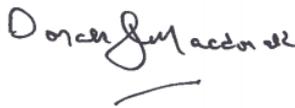
In conclusion

I would like to thank the Parent Council for acknowledging the efforts of all staff in how they have responded so positively to the demands of rapidly changing circumstances over the past 11 months. In my 39 years in teaching, I cannot remember such a challenging period. The pandemic related restrictions, cancellation of exams, constantly changing assessment guidelines and moving from school based learned to remote learning, often with little notice has presented enormous challenges. I take this opportunity of thanking the Parent Council for your continued support throughout this time.

I also want to pay tribute to the teaching staff who have risen to these challenges, with the result that pedagogy has developed and skills in delivering digital learning have significantly improved. This has been because of their commitment to ensure every learner experiences the best teaching and learning. It is our firm commitment that the experience of S6 studying AH will be a success.

Looking to the future, I have no doubt that there will be more challenges. Resuming 'normal' school learning for all, SQA assessments, rising rolls, supporting all pupils with their health and well-being and, of course, supporting S6 through new and unfamiliar courses will all present challenges. I am confident that with the continued support of parents, pupils, officers from the Council and our wider community we will continue to learn, grow, and thrive as a school.

Yours sincerely,



Donald j Macdonald

Headteacher