

## **Rising Rolls (Item 7.7)**

### **Deputation by James Gillespie's High School Parent Council**

#### **Meeting of the Education, Children and Families Committee: 2 March 2021**

### **Summary**

James Gillespie's High School (JGHS) will have insufficient classroom space to accommodate its roll in the 2021/22 session, due to delays in the building refurbishment scheme put in place to deal with a long-term rising rolls problem at the school.

The Council does not intend to provide additional classrooms to cover this period, and a solution is proposed which will instead reduce in-classroom time for certain pupils. The JGHS Parent Council would like to raise significant parental concerns about both the Council's position that supplementary accommodation cannot be provided, and the potential effects of such a failure.

### **Background**

Like a number of other schools in the city, JGHS has been dealing for a number of years with a rising rolls issue which means that school buildings are now insufficient to provide accommodation for its roll. In 2018, the Darroch Building in Gilmore Place was identified for use as additional accommodation by the school, subject to refurbishment works which were due to be completed – and the building available for the school's use – by August 2021. As an interim measure, temporary units were erected on school grounds to deal with the period until the Darroch building was due to be finished.

During 2020, delays occurred in the Darroch refurbishment process meaning that it would not be ready for the 2021/22 session, and is now predicted to be completed for April 2022. It is projected that the school roll in 2021/22 will be approximately 1560 which will significantly breach the school's current 1450 capacity.

The solution which has been brought forward by the Council is not to provide additional classroom accommodation, but to ask the school to identify options to deal with the accommodation shortfall. The main thrust of the contingency planning by the school 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.

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 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 on the plans. Significant concerns were raised by parents before, during, and

after the meeting. The Parent Council wrote to the school on 5 February 2021 setting out concerns. A reply has not, at the time of the submission of this Deputation, been received, and it is understood that the response is being considered at Council level. Concerns have also been raised by individual parents, a group of S5 parents and by S5 pupils.

### **Parental Concerns**

The main concern raised is in relation to the failure by the Council to put forward an accommodation-based solution by providing additional classroom space. The provision of physical space for a school to carry out its statutory duties in teaching children is a basic requirement of the education system, and central part of the Council's role in that system. It is reasonable to expect that the provision of additional classroom space would be the normal and preferred solution where capacity problems arise. Any deviation from this practice should be considered abnormal, and should only come about for substantial reasons and after proper consultation. It is not clear to parents why accommodation, for example in the form of temporary units such as those already in place on the school site, or through use of buildings within the community, cannot be provided.

As a result of this failure, the school is having to plan to introduce a new approach to teaching, over a whole qualification level, without the time, consultation and small-scale piloting which should be expected, and during a period when it is having to deal with the multiple issues produced by ongoing covid-related disruption. Although remote learning has been used in 2020 and 2021, this has occurred in extraordinary circumstances and remains an unproven method over the longer term. This proposed change is coming after periods of serious disruption to learning, and 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. This is the wrong time to consider such changes, which have the potential of affecting both levels of attainment and feelings of inclusion within the school. All efforts should be taken to ensure that 2021/22 is as normal a year as possible for both pupils and the school following significant upheaval over 2019/20 and 2020/21.

An additional significant issue is that further delays in the Darroch refurbishment project must be considered possible, if not likely, meaning that the building may not be ready for 2022/23 session. Without additional accommodation, this could mean further degradation of teaching practice reaching into teaching of Highers or other parts of the school. Any acceptance that under provision of accommodation in one year can be considered acceptable entails the risk of normalisation of the practice, with ongoing impact for the school and its pupils.

### **Mitigations**

The school's proposal is made with the promise of mitigations to support FDL. These include the delivery of devices to pupils and teaching staff, and the provision of a 'digital hub' to allow pupils to take part in remote learning. It is understood that a site for the hub has not yet been identified.

Such measures are considered the minimum required for FDL to function in practice and necessary mitigations in a situation where best practice would demand additional classroom space. Although this provision is of great importance, it does not detract from the principal contention that accommodation sufficient for the pupil population should be provided.

### **What parents would like the Committee to do**

Parents would like the Committee to:

- acknowledge the Council's fundamental obligation to provide appropriate classroom space for the pupils in schools within its control
- examine the process whereby it has been decided that JGHS will not be provided with sufficient accommodation for 2021/22
- recognise the significant concerns raised by parents about this failure and its potential effects on pupils
- acknowledge that it is undesirable to introduce new methods of learning in a situation of significant periods of disrupted learning and uncertain assessment arrangements
- request the provision of additional accommodation sufficient for the whole JGHS roll for 2021/22
- seek assurances that the 2022/23 session will not be affected by a lack of basic provision of accommodation with even more widespread detrimental effects on the school