

James Gillespie's High School

Parent Council Meeting

Tuesday 23rd February 2021

Note of Meeting

This meeting was held using a Microsoft Teams presentation due to ongoing limitations on group meetings related to Covid-19.

Questions from parents and carers were invited prior to the meeting and could also be added during the meeting using a moderated chat.

The following are notes of the presenter names, agenda, and action points to accompany the video of the meeting held on Teams and available to view at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5iHJFINkUYY>

Presenters:

Donald Macdonald – DM (HT),
Sarah Scott – SS (Chair),
Deirdre O' Brien – DHT, DO
Bob Shankland – DHT, BS

Moderators:

Graeme Davis – GD, Cath Downie – CD

Minutes:

Laura Young – LY (Secretary)

1. Welcome and note of last meeting (2nd February 2020) – Sarah Scott (0:00:00- 0:05:57)

SS welcomed everyone and outlined the format of the meeting. Formal minutes were not recorded for the previous online meeting as a video record is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N6S-pQcHbxE&feature=youtu.be>
Sarah welcomed tonight's speakers.

SS pointed out that there have been a great many changes at the school in the last couple of months, even in the context of a very disrupted year, with a return to remote learning for most pupils since Christmas and another set of changes to the management of SQA arrangements. Three members of school staff will present tonight to give an update on where we are with a variety of issues. Dierdre O'Brien will give an update on online learning which the school has recently carried out a survey on and Bob Shankland who is dealing with SQA assessment arrangements. At the end of the meeting there will an opportunity to ask questions.

Before handing over to DM, SS gave a quick update on behalf of the PC. The PC hosted a meeting on the 2nd of February where we heard from Council Officers and School staff about plans to deal with the late running Darroch building refurbishment

by introducing a system of teaching Advanced Highers through three periods in classroom and two periods through other means, including distance learning in the 2020/21 school session. The PC's letter to the school following that meeting is on our website, together with papers produced by the school on the plans and the link to the recording of the meeting. In particular, the PC raised the strong concerns by parents about the effects the failure to provide accommodation could have on children who have suffered a long period of disrupted schooling and now two sets of abnormal SQA assessment processes, about the lack of transparency about why accommodation is not being made available and on what steps have been taken to consider different accommodation options. The PC also emphasised the importance of mitigation, such as a digital hub, if we do end up in a position next year where additional classroom accommodation is not provided as well as our concerns at the possibility of any further slide in the timetable for the refurbishment of Darroch. Although this delay has been occasioned by Covid, the effects of it must be both managed in an appropriate way for next year and whatever happens not be seen by the Council as a precedent for anything that might happen in the future without proper consultation. We know that other individual parents and groups of parents and also pupils have raised these issues with School and Councillors. We have not received a response to our letter yet, and we understand that although the letter was addressed to the School many of the issues raised and the answers, we are looking for are not within the School's control and it will fall to the Council to address them. We have been told that a reply is being prepared at Council level. The revision of School accommodations is, of course, entirely within the control of the Council and not the School itself. Whilst awaiting that response we will keep pursuing these points with the Council and keep considering all our options. We will also continue to work with the School. We will report back to parents on the reply once we receive it and on any other significant developments. Please continue to look at our website for updates.

Finally, financial issues on behalf of Ros Ingle, our Treasurer, I can report that since the last PC meeting, we have paid the School a cheque for £2,428.86 for the Small Sums Award which we reported on in December. This includes grants to many different parts of the School and includes supports for literacy and equity. You can see the report on the different projects that were covered on our website. The balance of our current account is £1,379.07. Over Christmas and New Year, we held a fund-raising appeal for the Small Sums Award which will be made later this year and we are pleased to have raised £624. We would like to thank everyone who contributed. We really appreciate your help. Unfortunately, we are quite a long way down on our fundraising from previous years, this year and we are also affected, as everyone is, by the fact that fundraising events have now not been held for more or less a whole year. If you are able to support the School in this way then please do consider making a donation either via Parent Pay or, at no cost to yourself, by using Easy Fundraising in your online shopping and you can find further information about this on our website. SS thanked everyone for listening and introduced DM for his Head Teacher's Report.

2. Overview - Donald Macdonald (0:05:57-0:19:06)

DM thanked SS and wished everyone a good evening. He spoke of how we are becoming accustomed to meeting online but pointed out that he does genuinely look forward to the day we can all meet face to face in the School Library. There is a place for online meetings, perhaps in case of inclement weather but it is always better to meet face to face. It was DM's turn to be SLT on duty at school this morning and he was really impressed with how calm everyone was and how much they were gaining from being with others. Everyone DM spoke with was happy to be in school and able to interact with friends and peers. DM has no doubt that everyone would agree that an education system that depends exclusively on online learning is far from the ideal. As human beings we need human interactions, and these can be many and varied. DM spoke with one member of staff who shared with him an anecdote. When the member of staff had asked a youngster what they had really missed from being face to face in school. The youngster had replied that we had missed teachers nagging at him. DM has been reflecting on that through out the day. And thinks it could mean so many things. DM realises that keeping youngsters on task for parents who are already trying to hold down jobs and deal with a myriad of things as well as not being trained teachers is hugely difficult. Youngsters have missed being in school. Teachers have. Online learning exclusively is difficult, a challenge for all of us. We have learned many things about ourselves over the past eleven months. Some of what we have learned can be used to make our lives or learning in a school context even better when some kind of normality arrives later this year. Mrs O'Brien will give a brief overview of where we are at with online learning later this evening, but the feedback would indicate that we are doing much better than during the first lock down. However, the skills and the knowledge it takes awhile to gain but we are improving, and we are open to feedback as we go on and Mrs O'Brien will say more about this later.

The First Minister's announcement earlier today served to indicate that more clarity around returning to schools will be with us next week. In many ways this illustrates a key challenge that we have all faced over the past year, that feeling of not quite knowing what is happening next week or in two weeks' time has presented all of us with quite extraordinary additional challenges. As parents, DM knows that you'll have done your best to support your children's' independence in these most extraordinary of circumstances. Many of you will have faced hardships with illness, employment of losing loved ones. DM thanked everyone for all that they have done in working with the School over the past year in particular. However tough or uncertain the road ahead is, it appears at present that continuing to work together and staying calm will help. All pupils will be feeling anxious and stressed to varying degrees. Please continue to reassure them that all will work out fine in the end. DM genuinely believes this. He hopes to present an air of calm this evening but is working tirelessly behind the scenes to address new and unfolding challenges. DM has been in teaching a long time and the challenges being presented now are new and quite different coming hard and fast at the same time. S1 may be worried that they haven't had the opportunity to develop the relevant skills to be successful in S2, which provides a gateway into study in eight National Certificates in S3 and 4. S2 may feel that they haven't developed the skills or have all the information that they need to make important course choices as they prepare for entry into S3. S3 will feel apprehensive about going into S\$, where, for example, cancellation of exams for the

last two years has led to greater emphasis on teacher judgement and also a greater emphasis on the assessment of that we would normally carry out in school. S4 are bound to feel anxious about how the school will arrive at grades for them by the end of June. The deadline that is set by the SQA.

Mr Shankland will say a bit more about this later. S5, having not sat exams for in S4 or having exams in this year, will also feel considerable uncertainty and anxiety about what lies in store in the next few months. Those who are intending to take Advanced Highers next session have indicated to their parents that they are feeling very anxious about contingency plans for delivering Advanced Highers, in response to us having a shortfall in accommodation. This was the area of focus at the most recent PC meeting on February 2nd so DM is not proposing to go into detail about that this evening. DM thanked all parents and pupils who followed up the meeting with queries and questions. Since that meeting, DM and Mrs Stewart have had an online meeting to which all S5 pupils were invited. A working group involving S5 pupils has met at least once and a working group involving parents is pending. The matter has attracted both media and political interest. DM asked parents to bear with him while he forms a detailed response to all the correspondence received. He expects to respond to the PC correspondence on this matter later this week. DM is awaiting a few more responses from Council leaders. He apologised for taking so long but given the widespread interest he thinks it merits a detailed response. It is an ongoing situation. As it stands now the School is planning on developing their FDL. If additional accommodation is provided that would be a Council decision and maybe after political intervention, they may take a different view but as it stands at the moment, DM's role is to lead within the parameters that he has with the resources at his disposal. DM believes that FDL approach is one that will serve us best as a whole school community. DM appreciates that there is apprehension and anxiety around this, particularly given the experiences through the first lock down, the feelings of isolation and all the negative associations there has been about working in isolation. DM recognises this and wishes it were different and that we had a period of stability to look forward to but we have not and so we will do our level best to support all our youngsters.

Turning, finally, to the current S6, of the 151 UCAS applications submitted through the School, 112 applications have received at least one offer. Five students have received all their decisions and thirty has not yet heard but don't panic. Some Universities, traditionally, respond later. The vast majority of students, however are very positive and are now working hard to achieve their conditions but DM hopes that those who have received unconditional offers will want to emphasise that they should continue working because as many as half of our students change their courses at the end of the first year of University and it is their courses in S6 that give them the additional flexibility to allow them to sometimes, change direction completely or do something slightly different. The School is in the process of planning for university applications for next year and any S5 pupil who was interested in applying for Oxbridge, medicine, vet med or dentistry will email Tanya Peters and she will add them to the early applicants Teams page. This work has already started although we are not in School DM would remind and urge S5 pupils, amidst all that is happening there will be information out in preparation for next year. The School has also confirmed a date with the Cambridge Link Officer on March 23rd for an online meeting to support early applicants. All S5 pupils will be supported with

their UCAS applications from early June this year and parents will be kept informed and invited to an online UCAS information session in term three.

Finally, a couple of queries that were relayed to DM via the PC. A query on vaccinations carried out by NHS Lothian but that are hosted in School. We haven't had confirmation of the next round of vaccinations that will be held in school. Resources in the NHS may well be tied up with the Covid vaccination programme but as soon as we hear more detail about vaccination the School will let parents know. If a parent has concern about the timing of a particular vaccination, for whatever reason, then the advice is to contact your medical practice and speak to the GP about that query. The School does not have access to this information, we just provide a venue for the NHS.

Secondly, there was a query in relation to rising rolls that is pertinent given our challenges around accommodation next year and in particular in relation to P7 into S1. The current P7 into S1 intake is 324. The School was originally built for an intake of 200 so for a whole variety of reasons school roll continues to rise. The levels of interest transferring from P7 into S1 continue to rise. All these children are in catchment. Specifically, in relation to catchment, six or seven years ago our P7 intake was comprised of roughly a two thirds catchment and one third non catchment. That has gradually changed until over the last three years, to the point that unless you are in catchment then you cannot attend JGHS. There are a handful of pupils who have gained entry without being in catchment, but that route is through the appeals process, which is a legal process that is taken by a panel independent to the Council. There is no certainty of gaining a place. DM has been involved in more than 200 appeals in his nine years at Gillespie's and he would say that around 10% of these applications have been successful. Very few have been successful in recent years. If you live in catchment and have applied for a P7 into S1 place by February of this year, then the council guarantees you a place at your catchment High School. Across the city there are challenges with rising rolls. DM drew his comments and observations to a close by saying the School is very busy with arrangements for next session, the roll rising above 1500, for example, necessitates a management restructuring and the community structure of the school will need to change too. There will need to be more promoted staff within the school and the work towards this has begun. There will be limited opportunity for DM to consult with parents on the naming of the School communities given everything else that is going on. We will need to move quickly on this matter so that it is settled by the beginning of June as this will be roughly the time that timetables will change. DM handed over to Dierdre O'Brien for an update on online learning.

3. Deirdre O'Brien - DHT (19:06-0:32:58)

DO thanked DM and said Good Evening to everyone. Tonight, DO will be speaking about online learning and teaching during the second lock down. DO thanked parents for all that they do to support their children while at home and recognised the challenges of this. A lot was learned from the online learning experience during the first lock down and things have come a long way since then. Although there is always still work to do. DO admitted it has been a challenging journey at times but

immensely rewarding when we see pupil's engaging more with their learning and feeding back with positive comments. The many positive parental comments that have come in have also been much appreciated over the past few weeks. The School will continue to review and make any necessary adjustments to try and ensure the best learning experience for pupils. The biggest challenge has definitely been finding a balance between learner progression, which we know is critical, but also ensuring there is minimal impact on pupil's wellbeing, which is equally vital. The School is proud of its pupils for trying their best in these learning conditions and it is so important to acknowledge that. We can never underestimate how important it is for children to see their friends and for peer support in a classroom which is invaluable to learning as we know that many children do learn best from helping each other and discussing their work. Of course, at the moment so many children are isolated and don't have that opportunity. As a School we need to find ways around this as best we can, and this is going to be one of our focuses. We are still trying to adapt our online teaching practises and although we may not yet have the finished article, we want to reassure parents that we are constantly reviewing our practises to get it right for as many of our pupils as we can. We know that one size certainly does not fit all, and we are conscious of trying our best to meet the needs of all pupils and not just the minority. In a classroom, for example, a teacher can instantly gauge when a pupil has completed a piece of work and give them extension work or when a pupil needs a different explanation to understand a task or needs additional help. We are continuing to improve our practise to ensure that pupils are given enough work and are challenged but also to support pupils who find completing work at home difficult and feel overwhelmed, of which we know there are many. The School is still learning and adapting to ensure that pupils receive meaningful experiences and feel supported in their work but are also protecting their wellbeing. Our pupil voice is a powerful tool to tell us how we do and we learned a great deal from extensive pupil feedback in a survey DO conducted upon the schools return and this rich data has underpinned our current online learning guidance along with the parent carer and staff feedback as well as our National and Local Authority guidelines.

DO shared her screen to give a brief overview of where we are with online learning, what has been happening, what we are currently doing just now and what we are going to do next.

Overview

- Ongoing primary focus on pupil wellbeing and health of school community
- Flexibility and understanding of varying home circumstances continues to be key to supporting effective learning at home.
- Blended learning whole school policy in place with faculty plans for blended learning measures.
- Updated online learning procedure underpinned by robust evidence and data from pupil, parent/carer and staff feedback.
- Continued staff training on the use of Teams.
- Active school Digital Strategy Team to support staff.
- Home Learning Guidance updated and issued to families to support with learning at home.
- Regular guidance shared with pupils to support them in managing their online learning.

What are we doing now?

- Current online procedure updated to ensure that pupils follow their timetable and are given “live” lessons each week for each subject.
- Current procedure based on local authority guidance:
- S1 to S3: 15-20 hours per week
- S4 to S6: 20-25 hours per week

What are we doing next?

- To implement a timetable for some senior pupils to undertake practical work safely in the home.
- To continue to share good practice with staff in the use of Teams through staff survey feedback and faculty reps.
- Develop staff skills and focus more on pupil interaction in lessons and opportunities for group work.
- Review current online learning procedures by analysing data from surveys and making any necessary adjustments.
- To meet with a focus group of pupils to further explore views on online learning from survey results.
- Review the current engagement procedure and make any necessary adjustments.
- Create an additional resources Team for S1 and S2 pupils.

DO ended by saying there is lots more to come and asking parents to watch out for the focus group of parents as well as the key messages and next steps from the survey results. DO thanked everyone for their time and handed over to Bob Shankland.

4. Bob Shankland - DHT (32:58-0:42:43)

BS thanked DO as well as SS and the PC for inviting him to give a brief update on SQA matters. BS shared his screen.

Latest update from SQA – 16 February

- Revised date for provisional course work awards – 25 June 2021
- Continued focus on “demonstrated learner evidence” as the medium by which to determine course awards.
- The importance of robust quality assurance processes.
- The inclusion of an appeals process (details to follow after SQA consultation)

Essential Practical Activities

- Timetable of activities to begin next week.
- Communication regarding the details to be shared with parents/students before the end of the week.

Assessment Planning

- Planning continues as to how assessments will be managed on our return to school.
- The initial focus when senior students return will be to consolidate learning.

- Given the revised submission date and First Minister's announcement it is "likely" that assessments will be carried out following the return from the Easter break and throughout May.
- Assessments will likely be mostly class based with some extended assessments in subjects where this is required or desirable.
- The hope would be to have a detailed assessment schedule with students and parents, before the Easter break.

Questions and answers (0:42:43-1:13:21)

SS thanked the presenters for their presentations and parents for their submitted questions. She then answered one question from the chat regarding whether or not PC meetings will continue online. The PC is currently considering this question and it is likely that the meetings will continue as a mixture of online and in person meetings. There are some things that are much easier to do in person, but the PC has noticed that there is a much higher attendance and participation at online meetings. It is also much easier for teachers and parents to get involved so this question will be considered in more detail.

DM then went through the most popular questions on the chat. All questions will be captured after the meeting, answered, and posted to the PC website - [JGHS Parent Council website](#)

6. Thanks – Sarah Scott (1:14:44-1:16:36)

SS thanked everyone for their participation tonight, the presenters for their presentations and the parents for their questions. SS noted that as parents we are always glad to hear from the School about such important issues. For staff, pupils and parents this has been an extraordinary period of disruption and having opportunities to hear directly from the School is really very important. The next PC Meeting will take place at the end of March, the date will be announced later this week and we hope that you can join us then. As ever the Parent Council can be reached by email or email address is jghscouncilcomms@gmail.com and this can also be found on our website which is linked to the Parent section of the School website. In the meantime, thank you and Good Night.

