

Brakes put on plans for Gaelic secondary school

Plans to create a Gaelic high school in Edinburgh have been put on pause after parents urged the council to consider further options for a dedicated city centre campus.

The City of Edinburgh Council's long-running proposals to establish a Gaelic Medium Education (GME) secondary school and two additional primary units were due to be approved for statutory consultation on Monday.

A report to the [Education, Children and Families Committee](#) explained the initial goal of building a standalone school on the site of the former Royal Victoria Hospital would no longer be possible, as The Scottish Government was still to confirm if the land on Craigmillar Road is available for use.

Instead, it noted, the two options being considered are a GME secondary school on a shared campus with the replacement Liberton High School, or on the existing Castlebrae High School site in Craigmillar.

News that plans for a central, standalone high school have been effectively scrapped led parents of children in Gaelic education to call on the committee to vote against proceeding with the consultation as was recommended by officers. The consultation would involve parents, Education Scotland and The Scottish Government.

Orla Hobson, treasurer of Gaelic parents association Comann

nam Pàrant, told councillors: “Our overarching message to you is this: Take the time to develop a coherent plan for GME with realistic timescales that parents can have confidence in and can help you deliver, undertake much greater meaningful engagement with families and create a proposal which is in the best interests of GME children and of GME itself.”

Comann nam Pàrant secretary, Harriet Barker, added: “Parents do not want you to vote to proceed to statutory consultation on these current proposals. In our most recent survey, which ran from 8 pm on Thursday, January 20 and closed yesterday, January 23, at noon, we asked parents: “Based on the proposals in the council’s report, do you think that the Education, Children and Families Committee should approve a statutory consultation commencing on the 31st of January 2022?”

“Out of 248 people who responded, 11 per cent said they were unsure, 12 per cent said yes, 77 per cent said no. We also asked: “On the basis of the information you have received to date, how confident are you that the council’s proposals will lead to the delivery of a GME high school that will meet the needs of your child and children? Five meaning very confident, one meaning not at all confident.”

“Out of the people who responded, six per cent were reasonably or very confident, eight per cent were ambivalent, 86 per cent had little or no confidence.

“Vote to proceed to statutory consultation and you bring forward a proposal that has no significant support from the GME community it seeks to serve.”



Bun-Sgoil Taobh na Pairce

Seamus Spencer, co-chair of the parent council of Bun-sgoil Taobh na Pàirce, Edinburgh's only Gaelic language primary school, said parents are reluctant to support the creation of a co-located secondary school in favour of "language protection".

He added: "At this juncture I don't think we want a stop-gap stage to think about what we need 20 years down the line. If you look across secondary school roles in the city there is a school with a role which is almost equivalent to what the Gaelic population of James Gillespie's High School is at the moment.

"We have had a lot of correspondence around active travel and the importance for that and really it needs to meet the needs of the population across the city, and as we know, outwith Edinburgh.

"I think it really needs to be central and we know that there's been resource offered to further explore that, we know it's difficult of course, we know the council hasn't built a school on non-council land for over 30 years probably, there

are many things that are novel about this proposition but that is not a reason to rush through it, that's a reason to get it right."

Furthermore, Mrs Barker argued having the site outside the city centre would restrict the availability of Gaelic education to children across Edinburgh and the Lothians.

"The experience of children at the school and their ability to access extracurricular activities is of course impacted by having a location that is not central," she said.

Mr Spencer added the proposals need to be "viable and attractive" to parents, with the school in a "central and accessible location".

But the council's Executive Director of Children's Services, Amanda Hatton, said there is "not a site that balances educational benefit and availability".

"The advantage of going to consultation is that gives every parent in the city to express their views on the proposals that are outlined and indeed any other proposals that they may wish us to consider as part of the consultation," she added.

Ms Hatton said The Scottish Government has agreed to consider "partial funding" of a feasibility study to reconsider city centre sites.

However, she said: "We are confident that we have considered those sites and they they are not viable or available in the timescale that means we can expand GME."

Quizzed on the consequences of not going ahead with the consultation as planned, she replied: "If we delay today then we are into pre-election period so we wouldn't be able to go out to consultation prior to an election.

"Then we'd be in a situation where we'd have to go to consultation with a new administration and a new committee so

clearly we'd have to go through that process, all of which builds in the potential for significant delay.

"We really want to move to additional primary provision and we want to be able to move to secondary provision and if we delay that we risk not being able to do that."

Despite her warnings, the committee voted not to go ahead with the statutory consultation to "allow further discussions between the council and the GME community and to allow the council to provide further additional information on the present sites and any other sites that will support the quality of education as set out in the educational benefits section of the report".

Education convener, Cllr Ian Perry, said: "Clearly this is not an ideal situation and a lot of it's not of our making or of the GME representatives making, but we've heard what you've said and we think further consultation with the council will be helpful both from the council's point of view and your point of view.

"We're setting up a new secondary school and obviously there are a lot of challenges in that, but what we cannot lose sight of is the education we're trying to provide. We think that to pause this just now and give you, the parents and the council further opportunity to discuss both the educational benefits and the available site would be beneficial both to yourselves and ourselves."

by Donald Turvill, Local Democracy Reporter

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