

# **Council's Education Convener hits back at government minister over Gaelic school**

**Edinburgh's education chief has hit back a Scottish Government minister who called on the council to make 'progress' on finding a location for the city's new Gaelic secondary school.**

Plans to build a city centre high school where pupils and teachers primarily speak Scotland's native tongue were mooted in the SNP's manifesto, but have stalled after no suitable site could be identified.

Delays to the project were highlighted in The Scottish Parliament by Education Secretary Shirley-Anne Somerville who expressed 'disappointment' at the lack of progress and consultation with parents.

Cllr Joan Griffiths said the cabinet secretary's stance was "really regrettable", as she confirmed a review of commercial sites around the centre is underway. She added however that any land purchase would need to be funded by the Government.

In January the local authority shelved a consultation on alternative proposals to construct the Gaelic school on a shared campus with the new Liberton High, after a parent council insisted the facility "needs to be central" to ensure youngsters from across the Lothian region can attend.

Following further investigation council officials have maintained this is the option with the “strongest rationale” and warned further delays to the project could impact the growth of Gaelic Medium Education (GME) at primary and secondary level.

Speaking during a Holyrood debate on the future of Gaelic and Scots last Tuesday, the Cabinet Secretary said: “We’ve worked with the council to try and find a suitable site,” adding no Scottish Government-owned properties were available.

“I do think therefore we need to see early progress by the council,” Ms Somerville said, “and I was disappointed to find certainly at the time I met the parents that The City of Edinburgh Council had not met with them since the local government elections and I have written to the council to encourage them to do so.”

Responding to the remarks this week, the council’s education convener Cllr Joan Griffiths said: “I was disappointed to hear about the Cabinet Secretary’s comments given the extensive work the Council has carried out to identify a suitable site and it’s really regrettable the Scottish Government is taking this stance.

“I would be happy to meet with her again to discuss plans for a GME school, but it was the SNP election manifesto from last year which clearly stated a commitment for the new GME school in the city centre: ‘A central location is necessary to ensure it is accessible from major public transport hubs to allow the new standalone school to serve the wider Lothian region’.

“The council had identified the Liberton High School site as a suitable location for a new GME school and clear educational benefits were identified. The proposal was to move forward with a statutory consultation in March this year for our positive plan however this didn’t happen as supporters of a

new school were looking for one in the city centre on the back of the SNP manifesto commitment.

“Our officers have reviewed all available sites in detail on a number of occasions, and have reported this to Committee, but none are suitable to support a new school. We’ve worked with the Scottish Government to find a site but they have no sites that they can make available.

“Despite these obstacles we’re now commissioning an independent property consultancy to carry out a review of commercial sites that might be available in the city centre to see if there are any that could meet the SNP manifesto commitment. Once this is complete we will update the Scottish Government as to how much any preferred sites would cost to purchase as there is no Council funding to buy any sites.

“The quality of education remains our main objective for the growth of Gaelic in the city and that we have continued to make improvements across many aspects from transitions to the curriculum. While a bespoke building has been the objective for many, our children and staff now enjoy the facilities of the newly opened Darroch annexe as well as the improvements to the Gaelic primary school.”

by Donald Turvill

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