Scottish Parent
Teacher Council

Written response to the Scottish Parliament Public Petitions
Committee with regards to PE945 and PE 955

SPTC’s role in supporting the interests of parents

The Scottish Parent Teacher Council welcomes the chance to respond to the above petitions. We would like to begin by making it clear that we see our role as being to support the general interests of parents, rather than to lobby on behalf of one particular group of parents, and to provide parents with honest and accurate information even if this is not always what they want to hear. We make this point because parents’ interests often do not coincide. One clear example of this is that parents will have different views on the benefits of placing requests depending on whether they live in the catchment area of a popular school and see it become very crowded because of placing requests or they are parents who live outside the catchment area and want their child to go to the popular school.

School closure – the issue, conflicting views, the reasons

Similarly with school rationalisation, there will be different perspectives between those who are directly caught up in a school closure/merger and other parents within the same authority area who may suffer a reduction in funding for their child’s school if the school(s) in question is/are not closed/merged. Unfortunately, there is also little understanding by parents of the constraints on local authorities in terms of funding. Those caught up in a school closure often accuse the authority of “closing the school in order to save money”. Local politicians, because they wish to represent the interests of their constituents, often allow this view to go uncorrected. The truth of the matter is that because school funding is tied directly to the number of pupils in schools within a local authority area, then as the number of pupils declines, so the funding goes down and the authority is forced to rationalise school provision in order to stay within budget.

At present many areas are experiencing a rapid decline in school population. Overall there has been a steady decline in the number of live births such that the year group cohort has almost halved since the mid sixties. The picture has been complicated by migration, meaning that the overall population decline has had a different impact in different areas. In general there has been migration out of city areas compounding the population decline there and putting increased pressure, particularly on Edinburgh and Glasgow, to rationalise their school provision. The situation in Edinburgh and the Lothians illustrates this point. Whereas Edinburgh is facing a 25% decrease in its primary school population, as a result of the combined effects of a reduction in the number of births and cut-migration, the surrounding Lothian authorities are facing an increased pupil population. It would be unreasonable, not
least for the expanding authorities, if school funding was not adjusted to take account of actual pupil numbers.

However, we are aware that there is generally a lack of understanding of the issues and of the difficulties created by the need to rationalise school provision, so we recently carried the following article in our newsletter Backchat that we regularly send to PTAs throughout Scotland.

**Education funding and school closures**

When parents are faced with a proposal to close or merge their local school or limit the intake numbers, their first reaction, quite rightly, is to leap to the defence of their school. However, what is happening locally is part of a wider picture and we thought it might be helpful if we put these changes in context.

The bulk of school funding comes in the form of a grant from central government to local government (council tax only contributes about 15% of the money). The size of this grant is determined by what the local authority is required to do to educate a child, any particular local circumstances and the number of children actually in the local authority’s schools; children who go to private schools are not part of the calculation. In recent years there have been two distinct trends. The first is the good news; spending on education has increased in real terms by almost a third since 1999-2000 and now stands at £3,855 per primary pupil and £5,428 per secondary pupil. This increase has gone on staffing (both teachers and support staff), improved buildings, and better equipment, etc. Moreover, the good news will continue as P1 classes will be cut to 25 in August 2007 and S1 Maths and English classes will be cut to 20.

However, the bad news is that the number of school pupils has fallen dramatically and will carry on falling. Edinburgh, for example, expects to have 25% fewer primary pupils by 2013. Moreover, as the number of pupils falls, so the total grant from central government goes down. This means that local authorities have to review their provision - the number of schools, etc. and bring it into line with the decreasing number of pupils. If pupil numbers were increasing, we would expect authorities to open new schools to accommodate the extra pupils. What we are currently seeing is the opposite process.

![Graph showing the fall in the number of live births in Scotland since the 1960s.](image)

- In 1964 (when today’s 42 year-olds were born) there were 104,315.
- By 1976 (the birth-year of today’s 30 year-olds) there were only 64,895.
- The number of live births then stabilised for a while until starting to fall again in the early 1990s.
- In 2004, there were only 53,957 live births.

For more information go to the Registrar General’s website [www.gro-scotland.gov.uk](http://www.gro-scotland.gov.uk).

In education, as in most things, there are economies of scale and it is more cost effective to educate pupils in reasonably sized schools rather than have a few pupils rattling around in half empty buildings. A two pupil secondary school in Shetland illustrates this well: it costs more than £81,000 per pupil to educate these two pupils against the national average of £5,428. It would cost a lot less to send them to Eton. Obviously this is an extreme case and, in rural areas, authorities often have no option but to run small schools because children would otherwise have to travel excessively long distances each day. However, in towns, the argument for mergers and closures are much stronger. Moreover, as authorities are funded per pupil, if they spend excessive amounts keeping small schools open unnecessarily, the money to fund these schools has to come out of the total education budget and there is less money for all the rest of the pupils.

Understanding probably doesn’t make it any easier to cope with a local school closure or merger, but hopefully it does help explain why authorities are acting as they are.
Ongoing population decline

The decline in live births has been the result of a rapidly falling birthrate and this process has been compounded by the fact that, over time, it has resulted in fewer potential parents. It is therefore likely that, unless there is a dramatic change in the birthrate, the current (approximately) 52,000 children being born each year will themselves only produce about 40,000 children when they are adults. Although immigration might have some effect, there would have to be considerable immigration combined with an increase in the birth rate, merely to stabilise the population at its present level. It is therefore reasonable that authorities plan for a declining number of school pupils.

It is against this background that we would like to consider the specific petitions.

Limited Information

We are aware that the report of the Committee Meeting on 19th April gives one version of events—the version seen through the parents' perspective. Inevitably this is a subjective view and it is hard to know what information the local authority provided. However, this version however slanted, makes it clear that the process of consultation must be reviewed if it is to serve any meaningful purpose.

The duty to consult

Whilst there is a politically correct requirement “to consult” it is not clear what this process can or does achieve. Parents tend to understand the process in its most basic form: you asked me if I wanted the school closed; I do not want this, therefore you should not close the school. However, it is not clear that this option is really available for the local authority required to get its education funding back in budget in order to provide for other statutory demands such as free personal care. It is also not clear from the Parliamentary report on the Committee hearings whether clear options were ever laid before parents on which there could be meaningful consultation, or whether the consultations were no more than a case of going through the motions as required by central government. Consultation should not be used by any level of government simply for forms sake or as smokescreen for decisions or as a way of avoiding responsibility for decisions. We would suggest that the Executive and local authorities should discuss how such consultation can be meaningful so that the parameters can be made totally clear to those who are being consulted. The authorities should be completely open about those parameters.

With regards to the two cases, it is worth considering what the options were and what was the scope for movement. In terms of the rebuild at St Kevin’s, the parents put forward a clear alternative – huts in the local area; they even provided costings that compared favourably with the costs for extra transport arising from the local authority’s preference to move the school during building work. However, what is not clear is whether there were other considerations – for example the health and safety risks in keeping the children on site during building work or inadequacy of huts as an educational space over the length of time that it would take to refurbish the school.

In terms of the school closure, there are no obvious alternatives, but there is a lot of unhappiness about what is proposed, some of it arising from long-held antipathy between two communities. It is difficult to judge how significant an issue this might be.
The process of consultation

The parents raised their treatment during various meetings with education officials and councillors and, if their version is true, then these are shocking incidents. Even if the parents had worn the councillors/officials patience very thin, the latter should still have been polite and civil. If the name-calling and insults occurred as reported, then those responsible should be severely reprimanded.

However, there is some evidence to suggest that the parents did not hear/understand what they were told. The report on the consultation in Glasgow illustrates this well. There was clearly a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding about what written evidence would count in the consultation process. Reading the Parliamentary Committee Report, I understand that all written response sheets were considered as part of the formal response to the consultation. On this basis the repeated statements by the official for parents to put their comments (raised during the consultation meeting) in writing on the response sheet should be seen as helpful. However, the Committee Report makes it clear that the parents did not see it like this. They clearly found the official’s repeated exhortations to put their questions on the response sheets as annoying and a way of avoiding answering questions. They were then annoyed to discover that the minute of the meeting would not form part of the official response, only the written response sheets. We would make the following proposals.

1) The authority should explain very clearly exactly what will and will not form part of the consultation response. Our own experience would lend credibility to the parents’ complaint that the documents presented to them were in council language and not easily understandable. Councils have a duty to ensure that they put such information in a clear and easily understood format and language. We also support the view that councils should explain the reasoning behind the closure/merger proposals very clearly. I hope you will agree from the Backchat article re-printed above, that it is possible to explain even complex issues clearly.

2) In the circumstances, we think that it is unreasonable that minutes of consultation meetings are not counted as contributing to the response to a consultation. Whatever, the letter of the law, it is bad practice not to include such minutes.

3) It would seem from these reports that it would be better if such consultation meetings were chaired by someone who is independent, who can recognise when misunderstandings are occurring and can correct these at the time and who can perhaps ensure that the tenor of the meetings remains civil on all sides.

Purpose of the Petition

Reading the report of the Committee hearing, we gained the impression that there were different views on what the final outcome might be. Jackie Baillie is quite clear that she sees the petition as complaining about the process of consultation and that an outcome might be a review/improvement of that process. However, we get the sense that others have an expectation that the petition process might lead to a reverse of the decisions on school closure etc. Again, we think it is very important that everyone, particularly those in positions of authority, make it totally clear what can be achieved by a process and what the limits are.