Wednesday, 23rd March 2022

Cove and Kilcreggan Community Council - Response to A&B Councils Empowering Educators Proposal.

**Overview**

The proposal by Argyll & Bute Education Department - Empowering Educators - was presented to Cove & Kilcreggan Community Council in January 2022. This was quite late in the consultation process and as such has meant that the level of engagement between the Community Council and local parents and residents has been difficult.

In addition, the proposal and process seem to have been shifting during the process which has made it difficult to present a consistent, fact based, consultation process to concerned parents.

Cove & Kilcreggan CC however appointed one their members to coordinate local dialogue and also set up an online consultation with Argyll and Bute Council as per the consultation tools.

**Statement & Findings**

The Community Council of Cove and Kilcreggan submit that it was wholly inappropriate for the responsibility of engagement to fall on the shoulders of the Community Council. It was not appropriate for a group of unpaid part-time volunteers to have to help coordinate a very complex and sensitive consultation.

This abrogation of responsibility by A&B Council concerned the Community Council. We are not education professionals and putting the CC in between the parents and A&B had the potential to cause serious harm to the reputation and perception of the CC’s by the local residents.

That being said, when the CC took into account its responsibility to try and represent the views of the community and feed that back to the local authority, we did our very best to engage with the local parents in order to allow them the opportunity to hear a balanced set of views.

Our feedback from our constituents and therefore the formal response of the Community Council of Cove & Kilcreggan is as follows:

1. Engagement - we feel it was highly inappropriate to expect a Community Council to lead any part of the consultative process. This should have solely fallen upon the Education Department to engage with parents and consult via local meetings, online sessions and one-to-one parent sessions.
2. The proposal seems to lack any empirical data to base its assumptions on.
3. The primary drivers for the proposal are not proven and lack evidence to support their assumptions
4. The consultation process was too complex, and many parents felt that it was deliberately kept that way to minimise real engagement. This was a worrying aspect of the process.
5. The need for change was predicated on an assumption that A&B wanted to be prepared for forthcoming Education Reforms that were being planned. The Scottish Government were already engaged in plans for major reforms from June 2021 - these recommendations were scheduled for release to the Scottish Education Minister in February 2022. The overwhelming concern that we heard from parents and parent councils was that A&B had been very premature and assumptive in suggesting that their Empowering Educators proposal would anticipate the recommendations of the Ken Muir report.
6. Furthermore, the Scottish Government have now stated that there will be a national discussion on the future of Scottish Education - and have accepted fully the recommendations of Prof Ken Muir. The move to national discussion should surely now supersede any local plans that Argyll & Bute Council have - until such times as it can proven that A&B indeed have correctly pre-emptied and anticipated the proposed reforms.
7. The Ken Muir report makes it clear that pupils should be at the heart of any reforms and the future of pupils is paramount. The parents raised the concern that the Empowering Educators proposal put Head Teachers at the centre of the proposal and not pupils.
8. The proposal also stated categorically that the result would be more teachers in teh classroom. But the proposal also contradicts this statement by saying that all Head teachers will move into non-teaching roles. There was no evidence of how more teachers in classrooms would be achieved.
9. The difficulty in recruiting Head Teachers was cited as a serious problem and also a driver for the proposals. But the consultation process has offered no data or empirical evidence of this. In fact, the concerns being raised with the CC suggest that the proposal could indeed make the recruitment process more difficult due to the limit on career progression making working in A&B less attractive for qualified staff. They can simply look to another neighbouring authority with a more traditional Headship model and relocate.
10. The proposal also cites the declining population as a factor driving the proposal. Many parents raised the concern that this was a red herring. We have a major housing crisis across the authority and that means people are unable to start a family and stay in the areas they grew up in. Lack of affordable housing is having a crippling effect on the area but cannot be offered as a driver for radical changes to the way in which our schools are run.
11. Declining pupil numbers was also given as a main driver for change. There was no evidence of this and in fact the forecast of declining pupil numbers seemed to be based on opinion and no evidence was given.
12. A number of other CC’s have experienced ‘withholding’ of information when making Freedom of Information requests from A&B Council. This has caused great concern amongst parents in our area causing them to doubt the validity of the proposal.
13. Parents raised concerns that the presentations and video they were given as part of the consolation were full of nothing more than ‘slick and glossy’ marketing speak and totally lacked any evidence upon which the assumptions had been based.
14. Parents were also concerned that an extortionate amount of money had been spent on the consultants who are effectively a PR consultancy and not education specialists.
15. The underlying feeling was that this was a money saving exercise and nothing else.
16. During the TEAMS consultation process many parents were asked to engage with an existing Head Teacher who was challenged about his motives for being part of the process of consultation. Parents felt that he was only participating because he was promised one of the new Executive Head Roles - something he strenuously denied. But we have since discovered that he has now been given a second school to manage. It feels that parents’ suspicions might have been well founded.
17. The online TEAMS call that was arranged by Cove & Kilcreggan was certainly more productive and C&K CC were grateful that we had Louise Connor (a central figure in the proposal) and Wendy Brownlie the newly appointed Head of Education for A&B on that call. However, many parents were concerned that there was a degree of vagueness about many of the answers and also felt that due to a sense of being “beleaguered” that the process was losing momentum and backing.
18. Cove & Kilcreggan CC have also been copied in on a great deal of email correspondence regarding the responses from other CC’s and Parent Councils. These emails have highlighted a number of legal issues that relate to the contracts of Head Teachers which suggest that the Teachers Union are concerned with contractual issues relating to the realignment of HT roles. This appears to be a complex issue, but our concern is that none of these issues were offered, as a matter of balance, within the proposals.
19. The proposal has been raised as an issue in the Scottish Parliament by Jackie Baillie MSP and the responses were less than adequate leaving parents further confused and disillusioned.

**Conclusions**

The resounding conclusion, based upon local parental feedback, is that Cove & Kilcreggan Community Council cannot support this proposal going forward in its current form.

We conclude that the consultation process has been very one-sided with parents being asked to accept major changes without being able to see the detail upon which to make an informed decision.

Their concern was that by agreeing “in principle” to these proposals without seeing the detail, they would effectively be giving their assent for the proposal to go to vote in chambers in due course without further consultation.

It was also a great concern to the Community Council that local ward Councillors were not fully briefed on the proposals and were unable to give guidance and advice to the Community Councils. In fact the representative of C&K CC was actually giving briefings to other neighbouring CC’s and ward Councillors to ensure that they were able to engage with parents and Parent Councils.

It is the opinion of Cove & Kilcreggan Community Council that the consultation process is flawed, lacks sufficient detail to allow parents to make properly informed decisions and does not constitute best practice in terms of the consultative processes.

We therefore respectfully submit that unless there are further evidence-based proposals and full and appropriate consultation to be carried out by the Education Department that we cannot support the Empowering Educators proposal.

These conclusions are the combined views of the members of our community after due consultation.

**Cove & Kilcreggan Community Council.**