Summary of news items

- Establishment of the current Parent Council
  - Update on the composition and roles of the Parent Council
- Communication with the Parent Forum
  - The Parent Council faces significant difficulties in communicating with parents and gathering their views so that these can be represented appropriately to the school and Local Authority.
- Format of open Parent Council meetings
  - All formal meetings are open to the public. Come and listen and we plan to offer the opportunity to ask questions
- Follow-on from the Curriculum Review conducted by Argyll & Bute Council and Education Scotland
  - Update on the Curriculum Review Action plan published by the Local Authority in December
- S4 Parent interviews
  - Did you manage to get an appointment to a teacher about your S4 child's options under the proposed new curriculum?
- S3 Curriculum Information Meeting
  - The presentation slides at the S3 meeting were very informative and well received, showing good progress on reviewing the curriculum pathways. Significant questions remain unanswered though.
- Support for the current S4, S5 and S6 pupils
  - The Parent Council has been lobbying for additional support for S4-S6 to make up for the loss of class time per subject in the lead up to critical exams in May
- Reference letters for S5 and S6 leavers
  - The Parent Council is still arguing for a change to the statement given on leaver references explaining why pupils have no exam attainments from 4th year
- Subject prospectus
  - The Parent Council is arguing for the production a prospectus for each subject on offer to senior school pupils, to a uniform standard across the school
- School Performance Indicators
  - Performance Indicators are a key to monitoring progress as the school moves forward with its revised curriculum model. The Parent Council is arguing for more openness and transparency on exam results.
- Please let us know your views
  - The Parent Council needs to hear from parents in order to reflect the full range of opinions on the variety of issues affecting the pupils and their education
- An advertisement from the Parent Teacher Association
  - They are looking for new member sand office bearers. Please apply.

Next Parent Council Meeting: Monday 8 February at 7pm – VENUE TO BE ANNOUNCED
This meeting is open to the public – please come along and find out what the Parent Council is doing on your behalf.
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Establishment of the current Parent Council

This is the first newsletter from the Hermitage Academy Parent Council since its formation on 13th November 2015.

The class representatives and members of the Parent Council were agreed as follows:
S1 - Gilan MacLeod, Sheena Wain and Audrey Parella
S2 - James Robb, Stella Kinloch and Kevin Middleton
S3 - Angela Docherty, Jane Keightly and Elaine Crichton
S4 - Simone Macleod, William Mair and Marnie Riding
S5 - Mike Heath and Ali Beattie
S6 - Lisa Patterson, Juliet Corry and Lindsey Thwaite
In addition, Val Reynard was co-opted as a representative on “Additional Support for Learning”

The following office bearers were appointed:
Chair - Kevin Middleton
Vice Chair - Mike Heath
Secretary - Angela Docherty
Treasurer - Sheena Wain
Vice Secretary - Stella Kinloch

Since its formation, the new Council has been through a turbulent time, discussing the outcome of the Curriculum Review with Argyll and Bute Council, two open-forum Parent Council meetings on 7 December and 11 January, follow-up from the S3 Curriculum Information meeting on 20 January,
and meetings with the Local Authority on 21 December, 18 and 29 January. The pace and pressure of all this has taken its toll, and 4 members have tendered their resignations, leaving some year-groups under-represented.

The position of chair is now vacant, and the vice-chair is operating as acting chair until the next formal Parent Council meeting when a new chair will be elected from among the remaining members. The Parent Council would also welcome applications from parent willing to occupy the vacant roles on the Council, which are:
2 representatives for S2
1 representative for S4
1 representative for S6

Nevertheless, the remaining members are committed to pressing on and assisting the school to restore a stable curriculum model and move forward with establishing the Academy as a top school, not just in Argyll and Bute but nationally.

The parents or guardians of every pupil at the school are automatically a member of the Parent Forum. One of the main purposes of the Parent Council, detailed in the “Scottish schools (parental involvement)act 2006”, is to ascertain the views of the Forum on a wide variety of issues, and represent these to the school and the Local Authority. This does not include individual concerns of parents regarding their own children, which should always be taken up directly with the school, but does cover general, strategic concerns that the Forum may have about the standards and quality of education.

**Communication with the Parent Forum**

One of the major difficulties facing the Parent Council at Hermitage Academy, not just the present Council but the previous Council also, has been its inability to communicate with the Parent Forum. Successive Parent Councils have been unable to establish a presence, identifiable means of contact, or control over page-content on the school website. To circumvent this, the new Council has established its own website, Facebook site, and e-mail address. However, these have still not been advertised on the school website. Overcoming this problem has become a top priority for the Council, and this newsletter is an effort to provide everyone with feedback.

The contact details for the new Parent Council are presently as follow:
**Website:** [www.HAparentcouncil.co.uk](http://www.HAparentcouncil.co.uk),
**Facebook:** Hermitage Academy Parent Council
**e-mail:** [HAparentcouncil@hotmail.com](mailto:HAparentcouncil@hotmail.com)

Last week, members of the Parent Council met with an Education Officer from Argyll and Bute Council to discuss ways of making progress with overcoming the problems facing the Parent Council in its efforts to fully represent the Parent Forum. It was agreed that Argyll & Bute would fund a series of training courses provided by the national Parent Teacher Council, to be attended by both parents and school staff.

**Format of open Parent Council meetings**

The Parent Council hold private, closed meetings from time to time. However, all the formal meetings are completely open to the public and anyone may attend. The school Head Teacher automatically attends all formal meetings, and the Parent Council may invite individuals with specific skills or knowledge to attend from time to time. There is a standing invitation to Argyll and Bute to send a nominated local councillor, and in 2015/16 this is Councillor David Kinniburgh.
Members of the public may not participate in any votes that may be required as part of a formal Parent Council meeting. However, we are seeking guidance on whether members of the public can ask questions and speak at such meetings. The Parent Council’s view is that this would be a good thing, and as a minimum we plan to include an open-to-the-floor session at the end of all future formal Parent Council meetings.

Follow-on from the Curriculum Review conducted by Argyll & Bute Council and Education Scotland.

Shortly before Christmas, the Local Authority and school produced an Action Plan detailing how it is proposed to implement the changes:


This is an important document for parents. However, it is difficult to understand and the Parent Council was advised before Christmas that a clearer, parent-friendly version would be required. A document on the school website states that:

“"The Senior Phase Review Action Plan is the document that will be used by the school, Education Services and Education Scotland to monitor and evaluate the progress made with the key actions arising from the review.”

“"A summary Action Plan will be drawn up in conjunction with the Parent Council which will be more user friendly for parents and pupils. This will be done early in the new term.”

“"If you have specific questions that you would like answered please contact the School or the Parent Council who will forward these to the school and answers will be posted on the website under Curriculum - Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs).”

So far as we are aware, there has been no progress on a summary action plan. The Parent Council would like to hear from parents who have asked questions directly to the school about the Action Plan. None have been forward to us, and we cannot find the “Curriculum - Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)” section of the website. We would greatly appreciate it if questions about the Action Plan could also be copied to HAparentcouncil@hotmail.com so that the Parent Council is aware of the concerns and comments that parent may have.

S4 Parent interviews.

All S4 parents should have received a letter, dated Thursday 17 December 2015, explaining the changes to the curriculum that are being implemented to enable this year group to sit a National 5 exam in Maths this coming May, and the reduction in Enhancement subject classes that will be offered. Parents were invited to apply by Tuesday 22 December for an appointment with a member of staff to discuss these changes. We are aware that some parents were unable to obtain an interview appointment. If that is the case and you still wish to discuss the implications for your child, we encourage you to contact the school and seek an appointment - if you don’t succeed please let the Parent Council know.

S3 Curriculum Information Meeting

All S3 parents should have received a letter dated 18 December 2015, regarding changes to the curriculum that will affect their child. The letter included an invitation to a Curriculum Information
meeting on 20 January 2016, and indicated that subject choice forms for S3 will be issued in the week beginning 8 February.

The letter indicated that “all S3 pupils will study 6 subjects in S4. English and Maths will be compulsory for all pupils. Pupils will then choose a further 4 subjects. In addition, pupils will continue to attend core PE for 2 periods per week.”

The S3 meeting went ahead on 20 January as planned and the presentation slides were extremely welcome and well received by parents. The slides are available on the school website:


The introduction of an open question and answer session from the floor of the meeting was also an extremely welcome measure, the lack of such having been criticised by parents during the Review process. Teachers were also on hand to answer individual questions. However, many of the questions raised, could not be answered on the night. Answers to some have since been posted on the school website:

http://www.hermitageacademy.argyll-bute.sch.uk/files/1453462833S3OptionsQuestions.pdf

Overall, it is clear that excellent progress has been made in meeting some of the curriculum changes required by the Review process. In particular, it is established that all pupils currently in S3 or below, will have the option to by-pass exam presentation in S4 as in the old curriculum and proceed to presentation at National 5 or Higher in S5. In addition, all pupils will have the option to present at National 5 in S4 and then proceed to Higher presentation in S5. However, it is not absolutely clear (to many parents) that this will apply to all of the subjects on offer.

The Parent Council is aware of a number of outstanding questions raised by parents regarding these very welcome developments. Briefly, these are:

- Can a pupil take a National 5 in S4 and then drop that subject and pick up another to proceed to National 5 or Higher in S5? The Q&A advice is maybe, on a case by case basis

- There is a view among many parents that selecting 6 subjects for study in S4 (including the compulsory Mathematics and English) is too few, whilst 6 subjects is too many in S5. Regarding subjects in S5, the anecdotal experience of current S5 and S6 parents is that 6 is too great a burden for all but a few very able pupils. Evidence from exam performance in 2015 suggests that any increase in the number of Higher passes attained by the school was at the expense of A or B grades. In any case no employer or further education establishment expects 6 Highers in one sitting.

- There is disquiet among some parents at the complete removal for Enhancement subjects from the curriculum.
  
  The previous curriculum was heavily criticised for over-emphasis of enhancements (6 classes per week in S5 for pupils trying to work for 6 SQA presentation subjects), but the new curriculum seems to have gone to the opposite extreme. Some flexibility to offer Enhancement subjects that result in a National 4 qualification could be of great benefit to some pupils.

The Parent Council has made representations to the school and the Local Authority on these issues. We assume that they are being considered and note that the S2 Curriculum Information meeting which was scheduled for 27th January was cancelled at short notice. The explanation from the school is as follows:
“The school are still in discussion with the Education Authority and Education Scotland regarding the planned Curricular Structure for S3 next year. It is expected that this will be finalised shortly and details of the re-arranged meeting will be publicised. All information will also be available on the school website.”

The Parent Council has no further insights to convey as to nature or progress of these discussions.

Support for the current S4, S5 and S6 pupils.

The Parent Council has made repeated representations to the school and Local Authority seeking support for the current S4, S5 and S6 who have been exposed to the old curriculum model which denied them the opportunity to present for national 5 exams in S4.

For the current S4, the school is able to offer National 5 presentation in Maths this year, but other subjects are unable to complete sufficient of the syllabus in time as they have been working towards presentation at National 5 or Higher in 2017.

For the current S5, pupils have been offered the opportunity to reduce the number of enhancement subjects in return for supervised self-study and it was reported at the Parent Council meeting on 11 January that a significant proportion has taken up this offer.

For the current S6 pupils, reduction in enhancement subjects was also implemented.

The Parent Council has made representations to the Local Authority to make available one-off additional resources to the school in 2016 to provide additional teaching support for current S5 and S6 in their preparation for exams in May. These pupils have until recently had to carry the burden of 6 classes per week of enhancement subjects, compared to only 4 classes per week of each of their six exam subjects. In contrast, S5 next year will receive 5 classes per week per subject and no enhancement classes. The Local Authority agree with the merits of the request, and we are assured that they are looking into what can be done to help. We look forward to the results.

Reference letters for S5 and S6 leavers

A further important issue affecting S5 and S6 concerns the statement that the school is adding to references and further education applications explaining the absence of 4th year exam attainment by the current S6 pupils. The text provided by the school (as cited in the letter to all S6 parents on 17 December) reads:

“Hermitage Academy is a comprehensive school with an urban and rural catchment area. Under the new CFE (Curriculum for Excellence) structure, S5 students have followed a two year course of study, sitting their first examination diet in S5. Following this model (enter student name) was presented for (enter no.) Highers, (enter no.) National 5’s and (enter no.) National 4’s at the end of S5.”

Following representations from parents, the Parent Council requested the following amendment to make it absolutely clear that these pupils had no opportunity to sit exams in 4th year:

"Hermitage Academy adopted a Senior School Model under the new CFE in which all pupils bypassed SQA presentation in 4th year, and took their first nationally assessed examinations in 5th year. For this reason, pupils obtaining Higher qualifications in 5th year had no opportunity to acquire a prior attainment record in these or any other subjects at National 5 level."
Unfortunately the Parent Council suggestion was not taken into consideration. It is now too late for the current S6 as the closing date for Higher Education applications has passed. However, the Parent Council will continue to press for a more clearly worded statement to form part of references provided in 2016/17 for the current S5, and suitably adapted for the current S4.

The Parent Council cannot stress too strongly how important this issue is. University, training and employment applicants from Hermitage Academy now face questions about the lack of SQA attainment from their 4th year of secondary education, and in a competitive education and job market they are potentially disadvantaged as a result.

The Parent Council will continue to reflect the views of many S5 and S6 parents who are seeking a formal letter from the school or Local Authority that leavers can retain as evidence in the future.

*The Parent Council seeks to pass on the experience of current S6 and S5 parents who urge S3 parents to take this into consideration when completing subject and presentation pathway choice forms in the next 2 weeks.*

**Subject prospectus**

The Parent Council is responding to observations from parents that many other schools provide a prospectus for each subject on offer in the school to assist pupils and parents in making choices in S3. We note that there is some information in the “Curricular Areas” section of the school website, but it is extremely variable between subjects. The Parent Council would like to see these information sections standardised, and to include information on future destinations resulting from subject study.

**School Performance Indicators**

An area which came in for particular inspection in the Review was exam performance of Hermitage Academy relative to its virtual comparator in the SQA Insight system. Performance Indicators such as this are important for establishing confidence in the school, demonstrating progress against targets and encouraging parents in the catchment to send their children to the school.

The sad fact is that almost the only information on 2015 SQA exam performance released by the school so far has been an increase in the number of pupils gaining 5 or more Highers – which is a the statistic used in some simplistic league tables. Access to subject specific and grade specific information has been denied, to the extent that a Freedom of Information Request was used to obtain more data. There are more details of 2015 SQA results (by grade rather than by subject) in the Argyll & Bute Community Services Committee Minutes from 10 Dec 2015 than there are from the school, but unfortunately these do not make for particularly positive reading as far as Hermitage is concerned. However, all this information will be in the public domain via SQA by mid-2016, so it’s hard to see why there should be such a problem with making them available to current parents sooner.

See the Community Services Committee Minutes at [http://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/moderngov/documents/s105091/SQA%20December%202015%20V5%2026112015%20Pre-Agenda%20of%20the%20Community%20Services%20Committee.pdf](http://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/moderngov/documents/s105091/SQA%20December%20%20V5%2026112015%20Pre-Agenda%20of%20the%20Community%20Services%20Committee.pdf)

The point is that these data are really important in enabling parents and pupils to make informed subject choices, and so that the Parent Forum can judge progress by the school towards the goal of raising educational standards and performance.

The Parent Council will continue to press for greater openness on exam performance measures.
Please let us know your views

It is very difficult to establish the views of the whole Parent Forum – the Parent Council needs to ensure they present a balanced view on all issues. The Parent Council would like to hear views on all issues, both positive and negative, from as many parents as possible to enable them to make fair balanced representations to the School. Experiences from Parents of S6 pupils currently applying for employment, training and higher education places would be particularly helpful at this time. If you have any questions, comments or issues that you would like the Parent Council to raise, please contact us at:

Website: www.HAparentcouncil.co.uk,
Facebook: Hermitage Academy Parent Council
e-mail: HAparentcouncil@hotmail.com

Finally – an advertisement from the Parent Teacher Association (which has a different role from the Parent Council)

Opportunity for close involvement with Hermitage Academy!
Three positions in the Hermitage Academy PTA/Fundraiser coming up in May 2016!
  • We offer great job satisfaction by raising money for our Children.
  • Enjoy deciding which Club will be supported with how much money!
  • Make a change to our children's school day by supporting the Clubs!
  • Three positions coming up at the AGM in May 2016:
    Chairperson: You need great communication skills and enjoy holding the strings together.
      • You are in close contact with other parents, teacher, office- and Mitie staff.
      • You will head decision making about spending 1000s of £££
      • and you will distribute lots of chocolates and flowers!
    Secretary: You are a fantastic communicator and love emailing and phoning? This is for YOU!
      • You will get the PTA biggest fundraiser, the Christmas Craft Fair, of the ground. Main working time September to November.
      • You will attend 5 meetings a year and sent out invites and take minutes.
    Treasurer: You need to know all about money!
      • You will run the 100 Club/monthly draw and sent out cheques to lucky winners!
      • You will prepare floats and book money for fundraising events (4 a year)
      • You will book cheques for the Christmas Craft Fair in October and November
      • and You will pay out cheques to the school Clubs, to support our children!

Are you interested?
Please look up the more detailed job descriptions or contact Miriam Sutter (PTA chair)
j sutter@btinternet.com