

APPENDIX 2

Note of a Public Meeting held at the Council Chambers, Lochaber House at 7pm on 29 April 2011, to discuss the proposed closure of the Special Class at Banavie Primary

Chairperson, Cllr. Drew Millar, Vice-Chair of Highland Council's Education, Culture and Sport Committee

Officials attending: Ian Jackson, Education Officer, Ross, Skye and Lochaber
Wilma MacDonald, Area Learning Support Team Leader, Ross, Skye and Lochaber

Present:

Cllr. Eddie Hunter
Cllr. Bill Clark
Cllr. Brian Murphy

Alasdair Brown, HMle

Mrs Maxeau Dunham, Head Teacher, Banavie Primary School
Colette Smith, Principal Teacher, Banavie Primary School
Rosemary Young (Teacher of Banavie Special Class),
Doreen Robertson (Learning Support Auxiliary, Banavie Special Class)

4 local residents

Cllr. Drew Millar explained that the purpose of the meeting was to consult on the proposal to formally close the special class at Banavie Primary School. If agreed, the proposals would be implemented for the start of the new school session in August 2011. He introduced those on the platform and acknowledged the presence of and named the local members present. Cllr. Millar recorded apologies from 4 former MSPs, Peter Peacock, Rhoda Grant, David Stewart and Jamie McGrigor. He then indicated that a note would be taken of the proceedings and ascertained that all who required a copy of the consultation paper had one. He repeated that the purpose of the meeting was to consult on the proposal to formally close the special class at Banavie Primary School and advised that the meeting was part of a statutory consultation in line with the relevant legislation – the Schools (Consultation) Scotland Act 2010. On 10 March 2011 the Education, Culture and Sport Committee had agreed to consult on the proposal. The relevant consultation paper had been issued to those potentially affected by the proposal and to other nominated parties and made available to the public at large. It was also available on the Council's website. An advertisement had been placed in the Oban Times, and the

Lochaber News, to alert people to the proposal, including the time, date and place of tonight's meeting.

Cllr. Millar explained that the consultation period lasts 6 weeks. It began on 21 March 2011 and would close on 20 May 2011. All representations and submissions have to be received by the closing date and should be sent to Rosemary Bridge, Area Education, Culture and Sport Manager, Camaghael Hostel, Fort William. All the comments made at tonight's meeting would be written up as a report. It will be made available to all interested parties at least 3 weeks before the Education, Culture and Sport Committee meets on 9 August 2011 when the results of the consultation will be considered.

Cllr. Millar then asked the Education Officer for Ross, Skye and Lochaber, Mr Ian Jackson, to explain the proposal.

Mr Jackson advised that Banavie PS had hosted the special class for a number of years, and that in the past the numbers attending the special class were higher they are at present. He could personally recall 8-10 pupils attending and others that were present could recall the numbers being 12 or more. Numbers have very much declined since those days. In previous years pupils had been admitted to the class not just from the Banavie catchment but from all over Lochaber, with pupils travelling in taxis from places like Kinlochleven and other outlying parts of the district. In that sense the class, although it was part of Banavie School and was managed by the HT of Banavie School, had operated in enrolment terms much like a special school for the area. The numbers had declined because there had been a change in philosophy in recent years about the placement of pupils with special needs.

Mr Jackson explained that that the proposals being advanced did not in any way mean that Highland Council had less commitment to meeting the needs of children, in fact he argued it was the opposite. To a large extent the proposals formalise what is happening on the ground anyway as all the pupils currently within the class are in P7 and move to High School after the school holidays. Within the last decade a general consensus had developed within educational circles that children with additional support needs are best educated within their local schools, rather than being transported far away to special schools. The aim was to avoid marginalisation of pupils. Relevant legislation was in line with the above policy, and had introduced a presumption in favour of inclusion in mainstream education for pupils with additional support needs. The legislation does recognise that mainstream education may not necessarily be the best option for every pupil, but presumes that cases of children being educated outwith their local school would be very much the exception and would only be done in agreement with the child's parents.

Mr Jackson explained that it was on the above basis that HC had concluded that after the summer there would be no need for a dedicated special class at Banavie.

In terms of alternative facilities, the nearest special schools in Highland are in Inverness and Dingwall. There is a special class at Caol Primary School, primarily designed for pupils with language and communication difficulties. Highland Council also has proposals to build two new primary schools in the Fort William area and facilities for pupils with additional support needs will be designed within one or both of those.

Mr Jackson concluded by highlighting that the proposals were being taken forward by HC, not just because we are required by law to adhere to the principles of inclusion, but also because we ought to be doing it. In our view, in the vast majority of cases inclusion was beneficial to young people with ASN. When a child with additional support needs is placed in a mainstream school, it is the education authority's responsibility to ensure that the necessary resources are put in place to make that child's placement a success.

Cllr Millar then opened to the meeting to the floor. In the first instance he asked whether anyone would like any clarification of any of the points made in the paper.

A question from the floor was raised by a parent who commented that, before her child had gone to school she had wanted the child to attend Banavie Special Class, but had been advised by the Educational Psychologist that the child should attend a mainstream school where they would be given everything needed, but that had not happened. She did not therefore accept the assurances from the Council about meeting children's needs within the mainstream setting.

Cllr. Millar asked for clarification as to which point in the paper the parent was seeking clarification on. The parent responded by explained that she had been persuaded to enrol her child in a mainstream school against her own better judgement.

A follow-up point made separately argued that appropriate staffing had not been provided for the pupil in question, and that mainstream education for pupils with additional support needs did not work, certainly not in the school in question. The issue was relevant to tonight's discussion because the parent had wanted to enrol the child in Banavie Special class, and now that option was being taken away.

A second question was raised by another parent, who had a child waiting with special needs waiting to go into pre-school at Banavie. She felt that consultation paper was misleading at S3.1 where it had stated that there were no further children "waiting in the wings."

Mr Jackson responded to the first point by advising that it was very difficult to make a detailed comment because he did not know the pupil in question and that in any case it would not be appropriate to discuss a pupil's educational needs in a public forum. Mr Jackson continued by offering to continue the conversation with the parent separately, along with Mrs MacDonald.

Mrs MacDonald suggested that the parent make an appointment to come and see her to continue the discussion in a less public setting.

In response to the second point Mr Jackson commented that when the paper had been drafted, in advance of being put to the Committee in March, those involved had not known of the child mentioned, so there had been no intention to mislead. He added though, that had the pupil been known about, it did not necessarily follow that we would have concluded that Banavie Special Class was the best placement for that pupil. It may be that we would have considered mainstream education appropriate irrespective of whether the special class was to close or not.

The parent commented that she had been in contact with local paediatric services who had told her there were a number of school age and pre-school children with special needs who would benefit from the facility at Banavie. What would happen to them?

Mr Jackson commented that within the Lochaber area there were a significant number of children with additional needs, placed in their local schools. The Education, Culture and Sport Service had a very close working relationship with the NHS, and we were unaware of any representations made by the NHS, to the effect that there are pupils currently being educated in their local schools who should be in a special class setting.

Cllr. Millar advised that the points concerning the accuracy of the paper would be noted, and opened the meeting to general comments and questions.

A question was raised by a member of the public who explained that she was a supply teacher who had previously worked as a technician in speech and language therapy. She commented that she was aware of both parents and NHS professionals locally who feel there are a number of children locally whose needs are not being met. She wasn't able to provide details for reasons of confidentiality, but was confident that the feeling is widespread.

Mrs MacDonald asked for clarification and was advised that the questioner was reporting what she had heard from speech and language therapy meetings and from other paediatric professionals.

Mrs MacDonald asked whether the NHS staff felt that they themselves were failing to meet needs. The questioner responded by commenting that speech and language staff felt that they were not able to meet all needs within the current set up.

Cllr. Millar asked whether these comments were being made in respect of the whole of Lochaber or specifically in relation to Banavie, and was advised they related to the whole of Lochaber.

Mr Jackson re-iterated that he was not aware the ECS Service had received any representations about the above issues. Any such representations would be taken seriously but he didn't feel that making such comments in private and without raising them with ECS was the most helpful approach. He was also unsure of the relevance of the comments to the proposal about Banavie PS. The special class at Banavie catered for children with severe and profound needs and comments from speech and language staff about needs not being met might be more applicable to the types of pupil attending the special class at Caol, which was designed for pupils with communication difficulties.

The questioner commented that the observations about needs not being met extended to all types of needs.

Another member of the public suggested that staff within the NHS might just be reluctant to "go public" with concerns that could harm relations with colleagues and possibly get them into trouble with their line managers. This was particularly the case given the possible future integration of Highland Council and NHS Services for Children.

A parent commented that the workload of the speech and language therapist was too onerous as they had to cover too wide a geographical area.

Cllr. Bill Clark raised the fact that some questioners had challenged the accuracy of the paper. He advised that elected members had taken the decision to consult on the basis of the information provided to them, and might have taken a different decision had they known of other information. He asked whether the parents who had these concerns had approached their local councillors for action, and if so whether action had been taken.

Cllr. Millar commented that the discussion had already clarified the reason why the statement about there being no children waiting to be enrolled had been made, and that was because officials had not been aware of any at the time the paper had been drafted.

One of the parents who had spoken earlier commented that she had gone round in circles trying to get the appropriate support for her child, and had attended meeting after meeting, but without success. Cllr. Millar commented that we had already arranged for her to meet with Mr Jackson and Mrs MacDonald.

A comment was made to the effect that parents are very often unaware of what options are open to them for their children, and often felt quite intimidated by professionals. It was suggested that there has been a long-term plan to close the Special class at Banavie, and it was for that reason that parents had been discouraged from enrolling their children there. The proposal had been advanced without knowledge of the number of children in the area that needed support, and there might be other children in the area who, if they had been allowed to enrol in Banavie, might now be getting the help they need.

Cllr. Millar said he was very disappointed to hear these comments. However, he advised that he has been involved in the education committee for 12 years and the proposal being discussed now was the first time he had heard of any suggested changes to Banavie special class. He could therefore give an assurance that there had been no secret plan to close the facility, going back several years.

Cllr. Millar also commented that the Highland Council was proposing to put more money into special needs education, specifically targeted to where the need is. He commented that was something members were keen to see happening quickly. Particular problems should be discussed with officials privately after tonight's meeting, to try to find a resolution. He was very disturbed to hear some of the comments that had been made tonight by parents of children with special needs.

Cllr. Hunter commented that when he had been Head Teacher of Banavie PS there had been 12 pupils in the special class, all with severe and profound needs. Even at that time the climate in education had begun to change to one where, as much as possible, integration was made with the mainstream. The policy coming from national government was that the children should be integrated into mainstream with the support that they needed to have to allow this to happen. The commitment that Highland Council needs to make, both from a legal and educational perspective, is to provide pupils with the support they require. That support might take the form of staffing or other resources, and if we are not meeting this requirement it is something we have to address.

Mr Jackson endorsed the comments made by the three elected members, commenting that the Council had both a legal and a moral duty to meet the needs of children, and that we would have to investigate and respond to any individual concerns where parents felt that was not happening. More generally Mr Jackson commented that there was a substantial team of staff, both teachers and auxiliaries, who are allocated around schools to meet needs as they arise. There is an extensive ongoing exercise involving individuals like the Area ECS Manager, Education Officers and Educational Psychologists, to examine and assess needs and target resources accordingly.

A parent commented that, whilst she acknowledged the Council's commitment to inclusion, and the benefits of that, there was a danger that following such a policy too rigidly could mean that we lose focus on the needs of an individual child. She had been told that it would not be appropriate for her child to be placed in full-time mainstream education, so what would happen for those periods when it was not appropriate for the child to attend mainstream classes? She had been told of two cases where pupils had left the area because of our inability to offer special educational classes. She would not be happy with any suggestion that her child should have to travel to Inverness to attend classes on a part-time basis.

Cllr. Millar and Mr Jackson both offered the parent a guarantee that her child would not be sent to Inverness against her wishes.

Mrs MacDonald commented that, when children were enrolled within Banavie special class, they were enrolled either in the special class or in mainstream. However in recent years the special class had evolved into something that was much more inclusive. As the children came through the system, those in the special class were included at every opportunity within the school, so the special class is now something different from what it was. If a child, from the Banavie catchment, is enrolled in that school, the Education Authority has to meet the Child's needs as far as possible. If she was able to, she could quote many examples of other children and other schools, where the children have quite significant needs, but where those children have an excellent educational experience.

Mr Jackson commented that, whilst a consultation exercise involved listening to people's views, the authority was trying to get away from the idea of a separation between a special class and the remainder of a school.

A parent reiterated that the focus should be on the individual child and that mainstream education did not suit every child. The presence of a qualified and properly trained special needs teacher was vital for some children.

Mrs MacDonald commented that all of her staff had a qualification. Mr Jackson explained that the Area Learning Support Team comprised both teachers and auxiliaries. Certain tasks, for example administration of medicines or personal care, were more appropriate for auxiliaries. Taking forward a child's educational attainment might involve a learning support teacher, working in conjunction with the class teacher and under the supervision of a school's Head Teacher.

Cllr. Millar reiterated that the authority intended to put more money into targeted support for children with additional needs over the course of the forthcoming year, to ensure that children's needs will be met. He advised that the comments made tonight would be well noted and the members present would no doubt bear them in mind when the outcome of the consultation exercise was reported to Committee.

Cllr. Murphy asked the concerned parents whether their children's needs had been recorded in a statement. One parent advised that her child had received one to one support in playgroup and nursery, but that someone had decided they didn't need this level of support in school. She would have liked to have enrolled her child in Banavie but had been talked out of it by staff from the authority. If Banavie special class was kept open parents would have more confidence in the quality of education on offer for their children.

Cllr. Millar suggested that the parent meet with Mrs MacDonald and Mr Jackson immediately after the meeting, in order to try to find a resolution to the particular concerns raised. Both officials said they were more than happy to do so.

Cllr. Clark said that, if the parents were still unhappy after the consultation exercise and following the meeting with officials later tonight, they should approach their councillors, who would take their issue up in an appropriate way and in Inverness, which is where all the decisions were taken.

Cllr. Millar advised that he thought the issue should be resolved locally. He referred to a not dissimilar issue that had arisen in Skye, and which had been resolved through local members and officials' meeting with the parents. Taking the matter to HQ would be very much the last resort.

Cllr. Millar then asked if there were any more comments on the closure of Banavie Special Class.

Mrs Rose Young, who had not previously contributed, offered some comments from the perspective of a teacher who had been covering Banavie special class this year since the retirement of the previous teacher. She had no "axe to grind" as she herself had retired 2 years ago. Prior to that she had taught for 3 years at the special class at Caol for children with communication difficulties, and before that had taught for 18 years in a mainstream school and for 18 years in a special school. In her view the needs of the child had to take preference over the particular doctrine in fashion, and some children definitely gained from having their needs met within a specialist environment. Having taught at Banavie, she wanted to highlight the outstanding educational experience offered by the staff there. Inclusion was wonderful, but parents should have the option of specialist facilities as well, and offering these did not mean rejecting a child.

Cllr. Millar referred to Section 2.2 of the draft committee report, and the provision of a new resourced base within one of the new build primary schools in the Fort William area.

A parent asked what exactly was meant by a resourced base.

Mrs MacDonald advised that a number of schools across Highland were considered "Resourced Schools". In order to cope with meeting children's needs in an area with many widely scattered rural schools, extra resources were put into certain schools, which provided a central but relatively local point where children with specialist needs could have those needs met. Where perhaps a rural, one teacher school would have difficulty meeting needs, a child could travel a relatively short distance - not the long journeys to Inverness feared by parents - to another school, perhaps on a part-time basis. In considering such a placement the authority would take into consideration the child's age, needs and ability to travel. There are some children who may be 30 or 40 miles from such a facility, and where it is not appropriate for them to travel. In such cases provision simply has to be made locally.

The parent commented therefore that a Resourced Base was not a special class.

Mrs MacDonald explained that this was exactly the point. Special classes involved pupils enrolling separately from mainstream. In practical terms the special class at Banavie had in recent years evolved into a Resourced Base, where the child received what they needed from the facility, and was included in mainstream wherever possible.

A parent asked why the special class at Banavie could not be kept open as a Resourced Base.

Mr Jackson explained that at the moment we had something called a “special class” which as Mrs MacDonald had pointed out involved separate enrolment from the mainstream school. The legislation required Highland Council to consult on any proposal to change the status of a special class within a mainstream school. However the proposal did not mean that children with additional support needs would be straitjacketed into every mainstream class whether or not they could cope with that. The current accommodation would still be available to the school and Mrs MacDonald and Mrs Dunham would be working together to make the best use of that.

A parent put forward a hypothetical scenario in which a child had received development assessments that indicated he or she was entirely unsuitable for mainstream education, and asked what would happen then?

Mrs MacDonald advised that the child would be enrolled in a mainstream school and we would need to make appropriate provision. That might involve the creation of a specialist facility. Mrs MacDonald commented that it was her job to look at children, see what they required, and make alterations and adaptations as necessary. We would not go against the advice of our health colleagues.

Cllr. Hunter commented that inclusion did not mean that all children were placed in the same class with the same support. It means that the necessary resources must be put into a class to support that child, and very often that was a much more expensive option in terms of staffing, equipment, and commitment by the Council.

A parent commented that budgets often seemed to be the stumbling block in terms of appropriate resources being provided.

Cllr. Millar commented that budgets relating to additional support needs were always under pressure. That had been noted by members and was why the Council was planning to put more resources into targeted support for children with additional needs, as he had mentioned earlier.

A parent asked whether additional needs staffing was paid out of a school's budget or the Council's budget

Mr Jackson commented that the money was all the Council's as schools were part of the Council. However he appreciated that what the questioner was driving at was whether the costs of meeting additional needs had to be met from a school's allocated budget. Mr Jackson confirmed that these costs were met centrally within the Council and not from a school's allocated budget.

The questioner then raised a particular query with respect to funding for her own child's support.

A member of the public commented that by closing the special class the authority were in danger of losing the wealth of experience built up at Banavie, as well as a focal point for meeting the needs of children with severe and profound needs and a community for those children. It was all very well to talk about not taking children out of their home communities, but if the children are unable to communicate with the children from within those communities, they will be isolated and without a peer group within their own schools.

Mrs MacDonald commented that she agreed there was an unmet need in the particular respect of communication with peers, and this was something she had already brought up with the Additional Support Needs Manager for Highland. She felt there was a need to create an environment where children with communication problems could spend some of their time and improve their skills along with others. It wouldn't however be possible to have all those children in the special class at Banavie.

A parent commented that pupils with additional needs were often better placed with other children at a similar cognitive level. She felt that there was no point in placing a child of 10 years with other 10-year olds, if that child's cognitive ability was more like a 5-year old.

In respect of loss of staff experience, Mr Jackson commented that the staff affected will be redeployed, and their experience utilised in another appropriate setting.

Cllr. Millar reminded those present that the final date for the submission of representations was the 20 May and should be sent to Rosemary Bridge, Area Education, Culture and Sport Manager, Camaghael Hostel, Fort William. He repeated that all the comments made at tonight's meeting would be written up as a report. It will be made available to all interested parties at least 3 weeks before the Education, Culture and Sport Committee meets on 9 August 2011 when the results of the consultation will be considered. He advised that every member of the Education, Culture and Sport Committee would receive a copy of the meeting note and the written representations made.

Cllr. Millar thanked everyone for their attendance.