

MINUTE OF PUBLIC MEETING HELD AT DALWHINNIE VILLAGE HALL
23 FEBRUARY 2016

**CONSULTATION ON A PROPOSAL TO DISCONTINUE THE PROVISION OF
EDUCATION AT DALWHINNIE PRIMARY SCHOOL**

Panel

Drew Millar, Councillor (Chair)

Brian Porter, Head of Resources, Highland Council

Callum Mackintosh, Area Care and Learning Manager, Highland Council

Ian Jackson, Education Officer, Highland Council

10 people attended the meeting, including the Head Teacher of Newtonmore Primary, the Head Teacher of Gergask/Kingussie Primaries, a representative of HMIE, and a journalist from the Strathspey and Badenoch Herald. There were 6 parents/members of the public.

The Chairperson began by welcoming everyone to the meeting and by introducing those on the Panel. He advised that the purpose of the meeting was to discuss the proposal to formally close Dalwhinnie Primary School, (as set out in the recommendation to the Proposal Paper). The proposed change, if approved, will take place immediately after the conclusion of the statutory process relating to school closures. Other options identified in the proposal paper are re-opening the school, or continuing to “mothball” it. The Chairperson explained that we could also discuss any other options or alternatives to closure which those present would like to raise. We would also welcome the community’s views on the best way to re-assign the catchment area of Dalwhinnie Primary School in the event that a closure is approved.

The Chairperson then asked Brian Porter, Head of Resources for Care and Learning, to describe the consultation process.

Mr Porter explained that the meeting was part of the statutory procedure relating to a school closure. The Council always undertook informal discussion about such proposals in advance of that statutory process and had held a series of informal discussions prior to embarking on the statutory process. He emphasised that we were at the start of the formal process rather than at the end of it, and that the process was designed to gather the views of those affected. The school has been mothballed since the end the 2011/12 session and we are obligated to keep mothballed schools under review. Guidance relating to the relevant legislation makes it clear that mothballing is a temporary measure.

The formal process is outlined in Appendix 3. It has a number of stages and gives ample opportunity for views to be expressed to the Council before any final decision is made. The consultation period itself runs up to 18 March, and the Council is

looking for views to be submitted before that date. Once the public consultation ends on 18 March, Education Scotland become involved. They will look at the Proposal Paper and the note of the meeting tonight, and will form a view on the educational benefits of the proposal. The Council has to take account of Education Scotland's view on the educational benefits as well as any representations received as a result of the consultation process. There is a very clear obligation on the Council to consider each and every one of the comments received, including those made at the meeting tonight. Thereafter, the Council will form a Final Report, which will be submitted to Committee. Currently, we anticipate the Final Report will be submitted to our August Committee, although that might change depending on how much time we require to consider the comments received as a result of consultation. We have to publish the report at least 3 weeks before it is submitted to Committee, to allow for further representations, so again there are many checks and balances built into the process. Ultimately, Scottish Ministers have a right of call-in for any school closures proposals, so even after the Council has made its decision there is a further period in which people can raise concerns with the Scottish Government, and any such representations might lead to Scottish Ministers calling-in the proposal. All told, we expect the process to take at least 12 months. We will responding direct to relevant consultees.

The Proposal Paper sets out a proposal to close the school, but clearly there are other options and these are identified in the paper. People are entitled to express their views on those other options, or indeed any others that the Council should be considering.

The Chairperson then asked Callum Mackintosh, Area Care and Learning Manager to explain the educational aspects of the proposal.

Mr Mackintosh explained that his role was to focus on the young people, and the educational benefits of the proposal. Highland Council is of the opinion that educational accommodation should be of a standard that sustains educational performance. As well as that, children should have the opportunity for interaction with their peers, and it is felt that, due to the small numbers of children in the Dalwhinnie catchment, pupils would be benefit from being with larger peer groups in other schools. As well as the social benefits, the Curriculum for Excellence places a high value on interaction between children and on pupils being able to work in groups to self-assess. The main consideration is ensuring that the children benefit from these opportunities.

Mr Jackson commented that Section 11 of the paper contained further detail on the educational aspects of the proposal.

The Chairperson then opened the meeting to the Q and A session.

Mr Robert Cumming, Chairperson of the Gergask PS Parent Council, commented that, from the perspective of people in Laggan, there was an acceptance that

Dalwhinnie PS should close, not least because of the need to support Gergask Primary, a school that is itself at risk due to its small roll.

Mrs Sue Phillips, a parent at Newtonmore PS, commented that she is a resident of Dalwhinnie and that her son used to attend Dalwhinnie Primary. She agreed that the school should close. Three or four children is not enough to provide an adequate school experience; even 10 is not enough, and there would be no prospect of a re-opened Dalwhinnie School getting even 10 pupils. She preferred Newtonmore to Gergask as prior to mothballing, Dalwhinnie had been clustered with Newtonmore, and her son was well-integrated with the Newtonmore PS pupils. She also prefers the road to Newtonmore, in comparison to the road to Laggan. She has a daughter due to start P1 at Newtonmore in August, although she can't say whether other people might prefer Gergask.

The Chairman commented that part of tonight's meeting was to gauge local opinion about the re-allocation of the catchment.

Mr Porter commented that, without wishing to over-generalise, the feedback from the informal consultation had suggested a general acceptance of the need to close Dalwhinnie PS. The main question that arose was around the most appropriate receiving school. The paper does make clear that either of the receiving schools, Gergask or Newtonmore, would offer educational benefits compared to Dalwhinnie.

Mrs Phillips asked whether, on that basis, parents could have a choice of school following the closure of Dalwhinnie.

Mr Porter advised that we would have to define a catchment area for the Dalwhinnie community, within either Gergask or Newtonmore.

Mr Cumming commented that the view of the Gergask parents was slightly more nuanced, in that they argued the catchment could be split. Clearly if someone was located at Etteridge they would not want to go to Gergask, but if someone was located in Dalwhinnie itself they might wish to, particularly in light of an anticipated 10 years of roadworks on the A9.

Mr Jackson commented that the debate arose from the fact the two schools were nearly equidistant from Dalwhinnie, and that parents will have their own preferences. Highland Council has to come down with a recommendation in the paper and our normal policy is that transport arrangements follow the catchment designation. There are arguments in favour of either school being designated as the receiving school, and we would have to see what comes out of the consultation.

Mr Andrew Harper, Chairperson of Newtonmore Primary School Parent Council, commented that he felt parents of school age children would tend to have more business in the Newtonmore direction, and so Newtonmore PS might be more convenient. He asked at what age children qualified for school transport rather than parents undertaking

Mr Jackson advised that children qualify for school transport from P1 onwards, provided they live beyond what is termed the “statutory walking distance”, which is defined as 2 miles for children aged below eight and 3 miles for children aged 8 and above. Obviously therefore children from Dalwhinnie would qualify for school transport to either Gergask or Newtonmore. The Council has a transport unit which organises the logistics of the transport, which can be organised several ways. The most efficient way is by school bus, although if there are children who live in particularly remote locations then we sometimes organise “parent contracts” under which parents are paid to transport their children. The Council doesn’t normally allow parent contracts on the same route as a bus route, as that would represent a “double whammy” for the taxpayer. Funded transport from Dalwhinnie would be on offer, but the form that transport takes would be decided by Highland Council’s Transport Unit.

Mr Harper asked whether a children’s play area could be provided for Dalwhinnie in the event the school were closed, and whether there could be some investment in the accommodation at Newtonmore and Gergask schools, as recompense to the area for losing the school at Dalwhinnie.

Mr Jackson commented that there was an excellent play area within the grounds of the primary school, and that Mr Harper’s suggestion was something that might be looked at in the context of disposal of the property after a closure had been confirmed.

Mr Porter commented that we could not provide a definitive answer at this stage, but that it was a very valid point that would be considered.

Mr Harper commented that if children were not going to benefit from a school in Dalwhinnie, then they should benefit in some other way.

Mrs Fiona Docker, a parent and resident of Dalwhinnie, commented that her children attend Gergask Primary. Would Dalwhinnie have to be in the Gergask catchment for her to qualify for school transport?

Mr Jackson commented that Highland Council operates a policy of having a designated school for each address. If we decide that Dalwhinnie is to come within the Newtonmore catchment, then funded transport would only be provided to Newtonmore. If the decision was to allocate Dalwhinnie to the Gergask catchment, it would be the opposite position. Because different families have different preferences, somebody would lose out.

Mr Cumming asked whether there were ever any exceptions to the Policy. Mr Jackson replied that exceptions were rare but did exist.

Mrs Phillips commented that she could not afford to take her children to either school unless the transport was funded. Her daughter was about to start P1 but it would be inappropriate to put her onto a bus with secondary school pupils.

The Chairperson commented that this does happen in other areas.

There being no other comments, the Chairperson reminded those present of the closing date for responses – 18 March – and of where responses should be sent, either via letter or via email. A record of this meeting would be made available at least 3 weeks before the meeting of the Education, Children and Adult Services Committee on 25 August 2016, as well as all the submissions. The members of the Committee would have a chance to see the note and all other representations before the meeting.

MEETING CLOSED.