

Note of Public Meeting held at Inverasdale Primary School at 7pm on 10th June 2015 - To discuss the proposal to permanently close Inverasdale Primary School and reassign its catchment area to Poolewe Primary School

Chairperson: Cllr. Gail Ross, Vice Chair of Highland Council Education, Children and Adult Services (ECAS) Committee

Officials Attending: Brian Porter, Head of Resources
Norma Young, Area Care and Learning Manager (West)
Ian Jackson, Education Officer

Present: Cllr. Richard Greene
47 local residents – Listed in Appendix A

Apologies: Hugh and Dorothy MacLeod, Deo Na Mara, 7 Braes, Poolewe,
Alexander Urquhart, 15 Croft, Poolewe,
Fiona and Graham Mickle, 20 Coast, Poolewe,
Rev Pam and Tony Shinkins, Holmlea, Inverasdale

Cllr. Gail Ross opened the meeting by welcoming the attendees and thanking the local residents for their hospitality. She explained that the purpose of the meeting was to discuss the proposal to formally close Inverasdale Primary School as set out in the recommendation to the published paper, in which Highland Council proposes, subject to the outcome of consultation, to discontinue the provision of education at Inverasdale Primary School and reassign its catchment area to Poolewe Primary School. She explained that, were the proposal to be approved, the proposed changes would take place immediately following the conclusion of the statutory process relating to school closures.

Cllr. Ross explained that other options were identified within the proposal paper, such as re-opening the school or continuing to mothball it, and advised that any other options identified during the meeting could also be discussed. She then introduced the members of the panel, as detailed above, and welcomed Cllr Greene.

Head of Resources, Brian Porter, was then asked to describe the consultation process.

Brian Porter explained that this meeting would be the first stage of the consultation process which The Highland Council has to follow regarding the proposed closure. Appendix B of the published proposal paper sets out the process in detail. He went on to give an overview of the process in relation to this specific case:

20th May 2015 The Education, Children's and Adult Services Committee agreed to start the consultation process.

27th May 2015 The consultation began.

21st August 2015 The consultation period closes. This is the closing date for views to be submitted. Ian Jackson is to co-ordinate the findings, following which the Final Consultation Report will be published on the Highland Council website.

Mr Porter highlighted the fact that the consultation paper was issued to those potentially affected by the proposal and to other nominated parties and made available to the public via local advertisements and on the Council's website, along with details of this evening's meeting. He was delighted to see such a high turnout from a small community.

Brian Porter continued by explaining that a note would be taken of the evening's meeting and, following presentations by council officials, a question and answer session would take place. If any questions could not be answered a response would be made within the final report. He explained that the Council are duty-bound to respond to all queries raised, including those submitted following the meeting and before 21st August. He explained that this is a very thorough process giving everyone a chance to air their views. He went on to lay out the timeline following the closure of the consultation period.

After the 21st August the consultation process moves into a subsequent period, at the end of which The Highland Council would receive a report from Education Scotland in relation to the proposal. The Council must take due consideration of any issues raised by Education Scotland.

The next meeting of the ECAS Committee is due to be held on 11th November 2015, at which it is anticipated that there will be a decision on the future of the school. The Council's report, responding to all points made during the consultation, will be made available to all interested parties at least three weeks prior to the next meeting of the Committee.

On 17th December 2015 a formal meeting of the full Highland Council will take place, during which we would anticipate the Council would ratify any decision taken by the ECAS Committee. If the decision is to close Inverasdale Primary, then following the 17 December meeting the Scottish Government will be notified of the decision and there will be a period during which any parties wishing to do so may make representation to the Scottish Government, if they feel the Council has not followed due process in making its decision. The Scottish Government would consider any such representations and make a decision on whether they wished to "call-in" the proposal. A final decision might be expected around February 2016. Mr Porter commented that this was a long process but one which gave all interested parties an opportunity to voice their opinions and receive responses. In terms of tonight's meeting the key date to be sighted on was 21st August 2015, being the deadline by which any comments or queries had to be raised in response to the published Proposal Paper.

Cllr. Ross then passed the meeting over to Norma Young, Area Care and Learning Manager, to discuss the educational benefits of the proposal.

Norma Young expressed that the education benefits of the proposal had been laid out in the proposal paper. She explained that the proposal had been discussed with

the parents of pupils who currently attend Poolewe Primary School and that there had been a very positive response. The parents were very pleased with the educational provision provided at Poolewe Primary School. The children had done very well when they attended Inverasdale Primary, but the falling school roll had led to the school being mothballed. There is an educational benefit to working in a larger setting, as with more children of the same age the pupils are able to better engage in their learning. Mrs Young made reference to the need for group discussion and collegiate working within Curriculum for Excellence. She re-iterated that the Highland Council's views are clearly laid out in the proposal paper.

Cllr. Ross then asked Ian Jackson, Education Officer, to discuss the community and equality impacts of the proposal.

Mr Jackson explained that information about these issues is contained within the Proposal Paper and appendices. He went on to say that terms of community impact, it is self-evident that the community has made extensive use of the building since the school was mothballed. This is detailed at 9.1 and 9.2 of the Proposal Paper, and Mr Jackson commented that the results could be seen upon entering the building. The Council have an Asset Management Policy which they would have to follow before disposing of the property, in the event that the school is closed, but, as detailed in the paper, the Council would be keen to discuss that further with the community.

In terms of community use, Mr Jackson felt that the level of activity undertaken by the community suggests to Highland Council that they have very clear plans about using the building as a public space, a visitor attraction, and as a means of making the history of the area accessible.

Mr Jackson explained that in respect of transport, The Council's assessment is set out in 5.12 and Section 7 of the Proposal Paper. He acknowledged that whenever a school is closed, pupils end up travelling further than they would have, but that the Council feels in this case that the disadvantages of longer school transport are offset by the educational gains already described by Mrs Young.

Mr Jackson then handed the meeting back over to Councillor Ross.

Following the statement by Ian Jackson, Cllr. Ross asked the attendees whether any clarification was needed on any factual points in the Proposal Paper or on what had been discussed so far. There being no queries at this stage, Cllr Ross opened the floor to questions.

Question 1: Lesley Timings, 18a Coast - Part-time Project Advisor to the Stakeholder Groups making use of the school building.

- (a) It seems from the wording of the Proposal Paper that Highland Council are supportive of community use of the school building. Given that, can Highland Council offer any assurances that (once the statutory process has been completed) the community will get first choice over the use of the school and becoming a community owner of the building? Can the community be given an idea of the cost of purchasing the building if it is decided to dispose of the

asset, as it is hard to raise funds and apply for grants without an idea of the cost?

Answer:

Cllr. Ross stated that she expected to receive this question given the current circumstances of Inverasdale Primary School. It was the first question that occurred to her when she herself read the paper in her role as Vice-Chair of the Committee. She explained that Highland Council is however obliged to follow the process already discussed, and referred the question to Brian Porter.

Mr Porter explained that the council are locked into the timeline of the process and cannot consider the future use of the building until the formal decision to close has been reached.

(b) Lesley Timings - Is that the December meeting of the Council?

Answer:

Brian Porter - Yes in terms of the Council's process, albeit that the proposal could be called-in by the Scottish Government, if someone challenged us on due process. In that sense it could be around February 2016, before we got confirmation from the Scottish Government about call-in. After this point Highland Council can then take a decision on the future use of the building. He explained that could be no discussions about future use before that point as, whilst the council are supportive of the community use, they cannot pre-judge the outcome of the consultation process. If there is a formal declaration of disposal of an asset the first thing Highland Council looks for is whether there is a strong community interest. Mr Porter highlighted the fact that Highland Council gives a strong sense of their support of community use in the Proposal Paper. The Council is aware of the superb facility that exists at the school, and of the aspirations of the community. Typically the Highland Council is supportive of community acquisition of surplus buildings, where the community provide a strong business case, but at this stage we cannot pre-judge the outcome of the school closure consultation.

(c) Lesley Timings - At what point can the community make a written request seeking assurances about future community ownership? That is going to be very important in terms of applying for grant funding.

Answer:

Brian Porter explained that this was linked to the final decision of the consultation process, as the outcome shouldn't be assumed. Mr Porter asked for time to reflect on this further and his comments would be included in the final paper.

Cllr. Ross suggested that the community drafts a business case in readiness.

Brian Porter commented that some of that work was already happening. He agreed that it would be worthwhile for the community to undertake whatever work they were able to pending the outcome of the consultation, so that matters could be progressed

quickly if a decision was taken to close the school. He advised that the Asset Management Project Board, an internal Council group which ultimately considers these kinds of proposals, has been given a marker on the community interest in this building, so the Council was doing what it could without prejudicing the process.

Question 2(statement): Fiona Davidson, 19 Coast

Mrs Davidson expressed the view that the school building is vital to the community. They are passionate to make use of the building as a community space. She went on to say that a 'ball-park' figure of the costs involved would be much appreciated, for fundraising purposes.

Question 3: Bob Rogers, Inverasdale

How long would the community have to raise the necessary funds, once a decision is made?

Answer:

Brian Porter – The more work that can be done by the community in preparation the better. This would need to be looked into.

Robbie Bain, Ward Manager, advised that there is precedent for communities being given more time to raise money. He went on to say that if a decision to close was approved, there would then be a separate report to discuss the disposal of the asset. Any legal process resulting from this report is unlikely to be concluded for the 2016 trading season and, as such, he suggested the community seek reassurance about the permission for them to make continued use of the premises, at least for that season.

Cllr. Gail Ross asked if it would be possible for The Highland Council to give some assurance that if the community's business case were accepted, they could put down a nominal deposit towards purchase.

Brian Porter expressed that if the Council proceeds to closure and if a business case were put forward, it would be as flexible and amenable as possible regarding payment.

Question 4: John Barlow, Camusbain

(a) Are the panel able to say who built the school, when it was built and who paid for it to be built?

Answer:

Ian Jackson explained that The Highland Council Legal Department would hold the Title Deeds to the property, although he didn't know whether that would provide details of when the school was built.

A suggestion of 1876 as the opening date was made from the floor.

- (b) John Barlow - as time goes on can the community just develop the right to the building after continual use?

It was agreed that Brian Porter would consult with Highland Council solicitors and the answer will be included in the final consultation paper.

Question 5: Guy Dreisbach-Pollington, Inverasdale

As this building already belongs to the community, why do they have to buy it back at all? Mr Dreisbach-Pollington expressed the view that the community have more right to the building than The Highland Council.

Answer:

Brian Porter explained that The Highland Council has a process which it has to follow in these circumstances. As custodians of the asset they have a duty to ensure that the future use is considered in a thoughtful way.

- (b) Mr Dreisbach-Pollington – why is there any monetary value involved in the Council selling this building to the community?

Brian Porter – I don't know what the financial arrangements would be. To some extent we are pre-judging a scenario here.

Ian Jackson explained that, in law, there exists an entity known as The Highland Council, which is the legal owner of the building, and the Council has certain responsibilities in terms of how it disposes of taxpayers' assets. He acknowledged the moral point which was being made.

Question 6: Jock Ramsay, Naast

Mr Ramsay explained that a while ago he had put forward a request to the Community Council that a statue to Kay Matheson could be erected within the school grounds. Would this process interfere with that request?

Answer:

Ian Jackson explained that Highland Council remain the owners of the building until such time as it is disposed of. It would therefore be for the Council to take a view on the request, so in the short-term this would need to be raised with Brian Porter. In the longer term, if the building were transferred to community ownership, the community owners could take the decision, but in the short term any changes to the building would have to be referred to the Highland Council as owners.

There being no further questions at this stage Brian Porter re-iterated that the deadline for submissions was 21st August, and that all comments should be addressed to Ian Jackson. He went on to remind the attendees of the procedure following this deadline, outlining again the pertinent dates and timescales.

Cllr. Gail Ross then passed the meeting over to Councillor Greene for his comments. Cllr. Greene thanked Cllr Ross for chairing the meeting and all the councillors and attendees. He reminded those present that very often favourable comments did not get submitted, and urged the attendees to give some thought to that.

Cllr. Greene also wished to record his thanks to Cllr. Ross for coming down from Caithness to chair the meeting, and also the officers for travelling to attend.

Cllr Ross thanked all attendees and formally closed the meeting.

APPENDIX A **LIST OF ATTENDEES**

Mr and Mrs Rogers, Ardvreck, Inverasdale
Anna Ella, Nicky Ella-Kirk, Allan Kirk, 1 Coast, Inverasdale
Hamish and Trish MacDonald, 1 Camusbain, Cove
Amy MacDonald, 15 Cove
Don Nicholson, 10 Coast, Inverasdale
Christine MacIver, Quidinish, Inverasdale
Greg and Marie Lambert, Ach Da Thearnaidh, Inverasdale
John and Liz Nicholson, 9 Coast, Inverasdale
Duncan Chisholm, 11 Stirkhill, Inverasdale
Anne Macrae, Schoolhouse, Torridon
Gemma Urquhart, 10 Cove
Brian Aitkins, 8 Midtown, Inverasdale
Isobel MacLean, Dundale, 22 Coast, Inverasdale
Fionna Hutchinson, 3 Firemore Cottages, Inverasdale
Rose Raine, Stirkhill, Cove
Jane Caddick, Ault Eoin Thomais, Cove
Anna Raine, Hillside, 8 Stirkhill, Cove
Helen Davies, 17 Coast, Inverasdale
Alison Marshall, Seascape, Sand, Laide
Guy and Esther Dreisbach-Pollington, 35 Midtown, Inverasdale
Stuart and Sandra Nairn, The Slipway, Inverasdale
Margaret Denny, 15 Cove
Alasdair Wright, 14 Midtown, Inverasdale
Fiona Davidson, 19 Coast, Inverasdale
Sybil Cameron, 18 Midtown, Inverasdale
Hannah MacLeod, 3 Braes, Inverasdale
Lesley Timings, 18a Coast, Inverasdale
R J Williamson, 16 Cove, Inverasdale
Allan and Anne MacKay, Melvich, Inverasdale
Bruce Hudson, Caladh, Aultbea
Eileen Urquhart, 11 Naast, Inverasdale
John Barlow, Foura, Camusbain, Cove
Allan Perris, Bruach Ard, Inverasdale
Robbie Bain, Highland Council

A Maclver, 7 Midtown, Inverasdale
Ro Silvester, 57 Broadway, CV5 6NS
Zoe Slater, 57 Broadway, CV5 6NS