

Note of a Public Meeting held at Strontian Primary School at 7pm on 9th June 2014, to discuss the most effective means of improving the current accommodation at Strontian Primary School.

Chairperson: Alasdair Christie, Chairperson, Education, Children and Adult Services Committee

Officials attending: Norma Young, Area Education Manager (West)
Ian Jackson, Education Officer, Ross, Skye and Lochaber
Brian Porter, Finance Manager (Budget Strategy)
Ron Mackenzie, Head of Support Services

Present:

Cllr. Andrew Baxter
Cllr. Bren Gormley
Cllr. Brian Murphy

Approx. 30 local residents

Cllr. Christie explained that the purpose of the meeting was to consult on the proposals and revised options to provide the most effective means of improving the current accommodation at Strontian Primary School. He introduced the Education Manager and the Education Officer and acknowledged the presence of and named the local members present. Apologies were recorded from Cllr. Thomas MacLennan. Cllr. Christie 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 advised that the meeting was part of a statutory consultation in line with the relevant legislation – the Schools (Consultation) Scotland Act 2010.

On 21st May 2014 the Education, Culture and Sport Committee had agreed to consult on the proposals and included a fourth option. 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. Christie explained that the consultation period began on 23rd May 2014 and would close on 11th July 2014. All representations and submissions have to be received by the closing date and should be sent to Ian Jackson, Education Officer, 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 12th November 2014 when the results of the consultation will be considered.

Cllr. Christie then asked the Education Manager for the West, Mrs Norma Young, to explain the proposal.

Mrs Young introduced the background to the consultation in that the views of consultees are sought on a variety of options for improving the accommodation at Strontian Primary School. Options include a major upgrade to the present building, or relocating Strontian Primary School from its present location to Ardnamurchan High School and to retain its separate identity therein. A fourth option has been added to the consultation to include a proposal that a new primary school should be built adjacent to the nursery building as an additional option to be consulted on during the statutory consultation period.

Mrs Young alerted the room to several points in the Educational Benefits Statement namely section 2 which outlines the details of the current Strontian Primary School and pointed out specifically point 2.3 which is specific to the current school rolls and the roll projections to 2027-28 which shows a significant drop in numbers expected. Mrs Young confirmed there was a weakness in accommodation at Strontian Primary School and discussions have taken place with both Strontian Primary School and Ardnamurchan High School. Mrs Young reiterated point 3.4 in that Ardnamurchan High School is currently operating at 33% of capacity with 106 pupils currently attending. Mrs Young clarified that there were 18 classrooms within Ardnamurchan High School, 7 of which are of a practical nature.

Mrs Young outlined the 4 options:

- Option 1: Refurbishment of Strontian Primary School in its current location (point 4.1 in Educational Benefits Statement).
- Option 2: One Demountable Classroom and one classroom within Ardnamurchan High School (point 4.2 in Educational Benefits Statement).
- Option 3: Two Classroom Demountable next to Fire Station (point 4.4 in Educational Benefits Statement).
- Option 4: Two Classroom Demountable adjacent to Ardnamurchan High School near the nursery.

Mrs Young stated that site plans for option 4 were available to the room and costings should be considered similar to those of option 2. Mrs Young addressed the concern of the effects of school transport and staff and school management arrangements and confirmed that it is intended that Strontian Primary will retain its separate identity in the event of any of the options.

Back to Chair, Cllr. Christie, who invited questions from the floor.

Q1. Mrs Ogilvie, Head Teacher, Strontian Primary School – Could the panel confirm the scale of the map is correct as the size of the module buildings appears very small and doesn't match up?

A1. Ian Jackson stated he would be unable to answer and would have to consult with Property and Architectural Services. Chris Miller Craig (Head Teacher

Ardnamurchan High School) commented that the A1 drawings had been printed to A3 for photocopying and that would have affected the scaling.

Q2. Cllr. Bren Gormley – Commented that the process and legislative restrictions has been daunting for locals and that usually in this process there would be a much longer period of consultation and more debate on concerns which would more likely result in a proposal to suit most. Also stated that clarification over the classroom sizes etc. was vital and that there is a lot more work to be done over the next few weeks.

Q3. Mrs Ogilvie, Head Teacher, Strontian Primary School – Made various points relating to the proposals. At present, the current school has flexible working spaces consisting of 5 classrooms which are used for teaching, music lessons, art, learning support, drama and many more activities. She stated the accommodation was not brilliant but was flexible and with the other options there is very little flexibility especially option 4. Mrs Ogilvie also commented on the necessity to have a designated Head Teacher's office. At present the office is shared by HT and 2 clerical staff and it forces a "hot desk" method of working which puts constraint on both the head-teacher and the clerical assistants. She also commented that whilst option 2 has a large office in the plan, the office has 3 windows. Parents require privacy while meeting with the head-teacher.

Q4. Robert Dunn, Parent – Commented there was much confusion over the plans and asked for some clarification. Also pointed out that Appendix 7 was incorrect.

A4. Ian Jackson outlined the proposals on the whiteboard and explained them clearly. It was confirmed by the panel that indeed Appendix 7 was incorrect however there was very little difference between the figures.

Q5. Helen Tait, Parent – Ms Tait raised several points relating to the current status and the proposals for Strontian Primary School.

- Current building has a serious lack of storage and it would appear all options do not address this.
- Playground – Location in Option 2 is a north facing playground with walls and a hill surrounding and is not bright enough and feels like a prison.
- All options have less toilet facilities; option 2 has one unisex toilet for 23 pupils which is unacceptable.
- Option 3 has no Head Teacher's office and no learning support room. There would be no opportunities for active learning. Could we look at purchasing additional land?

A5. Chris Miller Craig, Head-Teacher at Ardnamurchan High School stated that there were options regarding office space at Ardnamurchan High including the existing nursery and sharing with the secondary clerical staff. He also commented that he and Mrs Ogilvie have had and will continue to have discussions regarding rooms, office space, dining, timetables and many other matters which need to be considered. Cllr. Gormley agreed there was a lot of work to be done in terms of utilising and sharing space.

Q6. Chris Miller Craig, Head Teacher AHS – With separate demountable huts will there be a provision for undercover walkways considering the climate and the age of the children?

A6. Cllr. Christie confirmed there would be discussion round walkways and paths and that CMC has made a very valid point.

Q7. Jamie Tait, Parent – Observed that Option 4 is just a copy of Option 3 moved across the road. Commented that there is a possibility to combine Option 2 and Option 4 and this would have advantages? Also raised the issue of lack of parking and infrastructure costs. The costs shown for Options 3 and 4 were not a true comparison with those for Option 2, because those for Options 3 and 4 included a car park not shown in Option 2. However Options 3 and 4 had no more need for a car park than Option 2.

A7. Cllr. Christie agreed that a combination of Option 2 and Option 4 could be advantageous and stated he would undertake a view of costings etc. This was a very valid point and he would refer to it as Option 5 in the meantime. Option 5 is to move the set of demountable units closer to the school within the grounds and take land ear-marked for car parking to use as a playground.

Q8. Chris Evans, resident – What will be the options on indoor space? Will there be any facilities for children to have an indoor play area?

A8. Norma Young confirmed there is no additional internal space and space inside AHS will be utilised. Mrs Ogilvie confirmed that currently SPS have the option to use the school/community hall for supervised play in bad weather, but this would not be available if the school were re-located.

Q9. Helen Tait, Parent – Commented that the proposal made by the Parent Council in September 2013 looks similar to the new Option 5.

A9. Ian Jackson stated that an extension to the nursery, as per previous plans, was not possible however a demountable unit was an option.

Q10. Jamie MacIntyre, Parent – The paper makes reference to Option 2 providing an extension to the current playground. However the plan shows no such extension. Can the plans for the playground be confirmed?

A10. Ian Jackson commented that the proposal to upgrade Strontian PS to “A” for suitability couldn’t be achieved with the current playground and an extension to the playground would be needed.

Q11. Robert Dunn, Parent – The option for refurbishment of existing school was earlier budgeted at an estimated £200,000 however under the current option the cost is estimated at £920,000. Can more information be provided on costings as it is a substantial difference?

A11. Cllr Christie stated he is also querying the reason for the difference and suspected it would mean the difference between a Category A and a Category B school. Ian Jackson added that the revised option involves a full refurbishment which will include stripping back all walls and rewiring the entire school which would be a substantial cost.

Q12. Cllr. Andrew Baxter – Will there be significant disruption to Ardnamurchan High School during any works and is it possible for any works to be completed in school holidays?

A12. Cllr Christie confirmed there will obviously be decant issues. Ian Jackson also agreed that with Option 1 there will be considerable disruption and it would be highly unlikely that the works could be completed outwith term time. Robert Dunn, Parent, added that he had spoken with Cllr. Foxley who had indicated that it would be an option to relocate pupils for the duration of the works.

Q13. Chris Evans, Resident – Introduced self as a member of the Sunart Community Council. She stated their AGM is on June 23rd and would like clarification on a few points. She attends several groups and Community Council events within Ardnamurchan High School and is concerned there will no longer have the space available should the SPS pupils move in. Would other accommodation for the Community Council be made available?

A13. Cllr Christie commented that the concerns would be noted and feedback would be provided following discussion with everyone involved.

Q14. Neil Roberts – Under Option 1, would it be possible to prioritise the work and do over a number of years to keep disruption to a minimum?

A14. The Panel commented that it would be more disruptive and costly to do the work in stages or over a number of years.

Q15. Jamie MacIntyre, Parent – What is the rationale in financial sustainability with regard to having no permanent structure?

A15. Current roll stands at 38 and is due to fall significantly. A modular structure provides flexibility and gives options for every eventuality.

Q16. Several parents asked where the roll projections had come from.

A16. The Panel confirmed that estimated projections come from various sources including planning applications, number of births locally and projected house building plans. Cllr. Christie confirmed that the estimates are based on the best information available.

Q17. Helen Tait, Parent – Lochaline Primary school has a current roll of Approx. 20 pupils however and they have a brand new school with 2 classrooms. She also commented that the projected figures indicated a cost of £2500 per sqm for a temporary building. However she has made enquiries and has been quoted £1500

per sqm for a temporary domestic building, surely for £2500 per m² we could have a permanent structure?

A17. Ron Mackenzie discussed costs from previous projects in Highland; e.g. the High School in Inverness was of a similar price per m² to that projected for Strontian.

Helen Tait suggested that added weight to the argument that a permanent structure could be obtained for the cost HC were suggesting for a temporary one.

Ron Mackenzie again referred to the need for a flexible structure, given projected falling rolls.

A parent from the floor commented that it would be more logical to build a 2 classroom school, nothing fancy, which would have a 30year plus lifespan, as opposed to expensive modular units which will only last approx. 15 years.

Q18. Mrs Taylor, Parent – Both Lochaline and Ardgour, who both have smaller school rolls than SPS, have in recent years had new purpose built schools with 2 classrooms, storage, toilets, nursery, Head Teacher's room and plentiful accommodation.

A18. Neither Lochaline PS nor Ardgour PS have a secondary school nearby which has spare accommodation, bearing in mind that AHS is operating at 30% of capacity.

Q19. Louise Cameron, Chair of AHS Parent Council – Commented on various points raised. She did not accept that AHS could accommodate 300 pupils and keep the high standards of education it currently has, so to say it is operating at 33% capacity is unfair. Across a range of issues the population of Ardnamurchan are being treated as a low priority. Highland Council is full of rural communities who struggle and these communities need support, not negativity. Feels that with restrictions and adversities such as Ferries, Jobs etc. the HC need to offer more support and make the rural communities as attractive as possible so more want to live there.

A19. Ron Mackenzie stated that HC want to upgrade provisions for Strontian PS and want to find the best sustainable option for everyone and want to get the communities what they deserve. Norma Young agreed with RM and explained again that having viable space in the secondary school gives more options. HC are committed to make the best use of all space.

Q20. Robert Dunn, Parent – People who are considering moving to the area will obviously be checking out schools etc. before making a decision and at present other areas of the Peninsula are more attractive due to the schools. Doesn't feel like a demountable unit will be appealing to new families looking to relocate to the area.

A20. Norma Young will arrange for photographs of the demountable units to be distributed and reiterated that they are of a very high standard and are very attractive. Families will see a sustainable school unit. Roy Bridge Primary School has a similar unit which has been very successful.

Q21. Pauline Brady, Parent – It is the belief of many that combining the schools will have a detrimental effect on the primary age pupils due to the differences in behaviours etc.

A21. Norma Young stated that she does not accept there be a detrimental effect and many schools now operate with a 3-18 campus. It has been very successful in Kinlochleven. Different playtimes and lunchtimes will be introduced for the appropriate age groups.

Cllr Andrew Baxter agreed about the success of the 3-18 campus has been in Kinlochleven. The success of the integration there has been phenomenal. The children have benefitted tremendously and he sees no need for concern with AHS and SPS.

Q22. Cllr Bren Gormley - Commented that these are all conversations which should have been had previously. He commented that falling rolls are due to various factors not least the lack of affordable and mid-range accommodation. If these issues are resolved the numbers will rise. Commented on the massive benefits of integration for pupils and teachers alike.

A22. Ron Mackenzie took the opportunity to remind the floor that AHS is a PPP school with an annual charge funded from the Revenue budget rather than Capital expenditure. Revenue funding is the one thing Highland Council does not have much of, and this brings additional restraints to any suggestions that would impact on the AHS building.

Q23. Mrs Ogilvie, Head Teacher, Strontian Primary School – Would like to confer with Bren re working closely with AHS and confirmed that the teaching staff already have good, established connections. Understands that AHS is under capacity however still has to provide all core education. MO queried how much time and space will be made available for SPS pupils as most spaces are always currently in use. Need very significant discussion around timetables etc. to allow SPS pupils to access all facilities.

A23. Chris Miller Craig, Head Teacher, AHS – Confirmed that AHS are totally committed to providing education for their pupils, and that staff also offer many extra-curricular activities. While the school may be running at low numbers, every course is still offered. This means that although class sizes are small there aren't a lot of spare rooms. However he remains committed to making the best of any decision for the benefit of the communities on the Peninsula.

Q24. Cllr Brian Murphy – Commented on Ms Cameron's points earlier and commended her valid points and commitment to the local community. We shouldn't be too hung up on roll projections etc. as they will almost certainly be wrong. We need to support the rural communities and believes SPS deserves a permanent school, not demountables which could prove to be problematic for leaks/draughts etc. Need to look at the future for Strontian and the common belief that a bridge will be over the Corran Narrows in the next 20-30 years which will increase the population dramatically and transform the roll projections. We need to listen to and put trust in the community's views.

A24. Cllr. Christie agreed that a bridge would certainly change dynamics. However it is speculation at this time.

Q25. Mr Thomson, Parent – If AHS had been built as a demountable, it would be nearing the end of its life, surely SPS needs a permanent structure and a permanent identity.

A25. Cllr Christie commented that all options raised issues and a permanent structure would raise its own issues.

Q26. Chris Miller Craig, Head Teacher, AHS – We are almost here discussing an Option 6. Officially AHS has no view and is advising. There is a need to bear in mind there are 4 players involved, AHS, the Sunart Centre Management Committee, SPS and PPP partners. If a new build is to be an option, it needs to be considered in relation to AHS. Is it possible to build a new school and join with AHS eventually when PPP handover is complete in 2027?

No comments from the panel or the floor.

Q27. Robert Dunn, Parent – Is it possible to amend Option 1 with option of building a new SPS in 10/15 years time. Other primary schools took a long time, let's look forward and decide on a long-term solution.

A27. Cllr Christie stated that costings etc. will be looked at and while he can't commit to anything, all opinions will be considered.

Q28. Jamie Tait, Parent – Doing things in a phased way costs more, let's get the right option now and build a new school.

A28. Cllr Christie stated he understands the views expressed. However he did not want to raise expectations. HC has hundreds of buildings in a poor state and the waiting list to build a new school would be significant. It could involve an extremely long wait.

Q29. Jamie MacIntyre, Parent – Disappointed that Options 3 and 4 have electric heating etc. We should be looking at biomass heating for any new development. Mrs Ogilvie, Head Teacher SPS, agreed, commenting that the fuel costs for SPS and Dalmhor house were astronomical. Mrs Ogilvie also took the opportunity to speak to the floor and state that the education of children does not depend on buildings, it's the relationships within the buildings which matter and these will remain.

Q30. Brian Evans, Sunart Community Council – The consultation period is due to end on the 11th July 2014 however there is no Sunart CC meeting before then therefore won't have an opportunity to discuss the options raised tonight.

A30. Ron Mackenzie confirmed that everything discussed will be published as part of a report and will be provided to all concerned parties.

Q31. Helen Tait, Parent – Does the process end now or will there be more consultation with the public?

A31. Cllr Christie confirmed that all new information will be taken away and looked at and worked on. The Report will be published at least 3 weeks before the November Committee date and all views will be encapsulated.

Cllr Bren Gormley commented that tonight has been a wide ranging discussion and there are many steps to come. We all want the right solution and if we are not ready for committee stage we will not proceed.

There being no further questions, Cllr. Christie reminded those present that the final date for the submission of representations was the 11 July 2014 and should be sent to Ian Jackson, Education Officer, 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 12th November 2014 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. Christie thanked everyone for their attendance.

ENDS