**MINUTE OF PUBLIC MEETING HELD AT ACHFARY PRIMARY SCHOOL**

**26 APRIL 2016**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **CONSULTATION ON A PROPOSAL TO DISCONTINUE THE PROVISION OF**  **EDUCATION AT ACHFARY PRIMARY SCHOOL**  **Panel** | |
| Drew Millar, Councillor (Chair)  Brian Porter, Head of Resources, Highland Council  Graham Nichols, Area Care and Learning Manager, Highland Council  Ian Jackson, Education Officer, Highland Council |  |

11 other people attended the meeting, including the local manager of the Care and Learning Alliance, and a representative of HMIE. There were 9 parents/members of the public.

**The Chairperson** began by welcoming everyone to the meeting, by introducing himself as the Chair of the Council’s Education, Children and Adult Services (ECAS) Committee, and also by introducing the officials present. He advised that the purpose of the meeting was to discuss the proposal to formally close Achfary 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 Achfary 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 a set statutory procedure relating to a school closure. Some of those present may have had already had contact with Mr Jackson, who had held a series of informal discussions prior to the Council embarking on the statutory process. 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 purpose of tonight’s meeting is to gather views, and we would try to answer any questions that are raised. Any questions that cannot be answered tonight, and which require further research, will be responded to in due course. 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.

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 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 24 May, and the Council is looking for views to be submitted before that date. Once the public consultation ends on 24 May, Education Scotland becomes 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. The overall timeline is quite elongated.

**Priscilla Leligdowicz** asked if Mr Porter could provide an idea of timescale.

**Brian Porter** replied that the Council anticipates the Final Report will be submitted to a Committee meeting of 9 November. We have to publish the report at least 3 weeks before it is submitted to Committee, to allow for further representations, so the latest date for publication would be 18 October. Following that, the decision of the ECAS Committee has to be confirmed by the full Council, as a school closure decision has to be taken by the full Council, which would meet in December. That is not however the end of the process, as 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. If the decision is called in, there would be a further review process. There is a lot of detail in the process, but an explanation is contained within the paperwork everyone has. As the process moves on we will be in touch again with relevant consultees, to advise them of progress. All told, we expect the process to take until the early part of 2017.

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

Mr Nichols referred to the educational benefits section of the Proposal Paper. He did not wish to rehearse it word for word, but highlighted paragraph 11.2 and in particular numbered points 2, 3, and 9, which set out aspects of educational delivery that were very difficult to achieve in a school as small as Achfary. He set out the detail of the after-school activities available at both Scourie and Kinlochbervie that would be difficult to replicate at a re-opened Achfary. Most of all he highlighted the importance of children having the opportunity for interaction with their peers, both for social reasons and because the Curriculum places a high value on children learning collaboratively and working in groups to self-assess. The overall conclusion was that the proposal offered educational benefits for local children, when compared to a re-opened Achfary Primary

**Priscilla Leligdowicz** commented that there was a high level of cooperation between the schools in the area, and **Carol-Anne Forsyth** asked why the Proposal Paper made such an issue about the relative numbers at Scourie and Kinlochbervie. Until recently Scourie had had the larger numbers and that could happen again. It seemed illogical to favour Kinlochbervie over Scourie on the basis of pupil roll.

**Graham Nichols** replied that he had been outlining the educational benefits of closing Achfary PS. Any subsequent re-assignment of the catchment area was a separate issue.

**Katherine Barnes-Miller** commented that there was general agreement about the closure of Achfary. Even a family with school age children that were currently resident in the catchment on a temporary basis, had said that if they were staying they would not send their children to Achfary Primary. The main issue that concerned people was the re-assignment of the catchment.

The Chairperson commented that the Council cannot possibly say that Achfary will definitely not re-open. The whole purpose of the meeting tonight was to listen to views about that. Any discussion about future catchments has to be within the context that Achfary may not in fact be closed. However, the Council representatives were here to listen to views. He then opened the meeting to the Q and A session.

**Michele Garner**, Childcare Practice Manager for the Care and Learning Alliance, made a comment in respect of paragraph 10.2 of the Proposal Paper, to highlight that there were now 4 children in Scourie Nursery, rather than 3 as stated. **Ian Jackson** responded by commenting that the 4th pupil had arrived after the paper had been written, and that published papers of this nature could only ever capture a snapshot of the position.

**Katherine Barnes-Miller** explained that she was a resident of Achfary, and that she is employed as a Pupil Support Auxiliary at Scourie Primary. She commented that, in its day, Achfary Primary had been great. Her own daughter had attended the school and gone on to be successful at Kinlochbervie High. However, the community simply did not have the numbers anymore. If a family with children were to move to the village, then re-opening Achfary would mean nothing more than putting siblings in a school with no other children, which would not be good for them. Realistically, there was no prospect of lots of families moving in that would make the school viable. Everyone in the community was in agreement about the proposed closure, and if anyone wasn’t they would have popped up by now to make their voice heard.

**Priscilla Leligdowicz** explained that she too was a resident of Achfary. She was attending the meeting on behalf of her husband, who was a member of Scourie CC but who could not attend due to ill-health. She wanted to make the point that, if the building reverted to the Estate owners, there might be a prospect of increased community use. Although there were not many people in the community, they would like to use the building, and if the school were closed the Estate might consider upgrading it.

Mrs Leligdowicz also commented that she did take issue with one of the justifications for closure given in the Proposal Paper, that *“No children have attended Achfary Primary since the end of session 2011-12.”* The reason for that was the school was mothballed, so the statement raised a “chicken and egg” scenario.

**Katherine Barnes-Miller** commented that the school had been kept viable by pupils from Scourie who had attended Achfary on placing requests. Those children moved back to Scourie after the resolution of a particular issue of concern, and that left just one pupil in Achfary School. When the school was mothballed that pupil was told their catchment would henceforth be Scourie, so she did not see why there was now any doubt about the reassignment of the catchment. The then Head Master at Scourie was also told that he was in charge at Achfary. Kinlochbervie Primary does not have bigger numbers or better classrooms than Scourie. It is not better in any way. Both Kinlochbervie and Scourie are good schools. However, Scourie is the natural catchment for Achfary.

**The Chairperson** suggested it was a good thing that the Proposal Paper provided options to comment upon. Coming as an outsider to the area, it was beneficial for him to hear the views of local people. He had commented in his introduction that the Council was interested to hear the views of local people on the reassignment of the catchment. If there was a clear message from the consultation that Scourie should be the catchment, then elected Councillors would need to take account of those views. He was only a single councillor, but in his opinion the others would be foolish to ignore a clear view expressed during consultation.

The Chairperson continued by commenting that it was very important for members of the community to submit written views in response to the consultation. When the Final Report is presented to the Committee, elected members will be given a booklet with a copy of all responses received. Members will therefore have an opportunity to read all the comments received, and it is vital that anyone with an opinion submits it in writing.

**Carol-Anne Forsyth** advised that, as Chairperson of the Scourie PS Parent Council, she had emailed the other parents at Scourie about the proposed closure, and everyone who responded agreed with the proposal. Firstly, it was a waste of Highland Council money to keep a building mothballed when there were no children in Achfary and no likelihood of any children in the next 2/3 years. Numbers in Scourie are dropping and this has also happened in the past to Kinlochbervie. Closing Achfary would be of benefit to maintaining the rolls of Scourie and Kinlochbervie. Keeping Achfary open would be a waste of money when Highland Council is making cuts everywhere else.

**Dylan Bentley** asked how the Suitability and Condition ratings are calculated. He himself was happy with Scourie School. As part of the consultation, could all the parents of Scourie be contacted for their views?

**Carol-Anne Forsyth** commented that she had already spoken to some parents and would be contacting all the others. **Dylan Bentley** asked whether those views would be officially recorded, and **Brian Porter** confirmed that all views expressed in consultation would be recorded and responded to.

**Priscilla Leligdowicz** suggested that, if Kinlochbervie was chosen to receive the Achfary catchment, there would be fears locally about the future of Scourie Primary.

**Dylan Bentley** commented that, if in the future a couple of families moved to Achfary, those numbers could be very important to Scourie. He asked why we were changing the catchment from Scourie to Kinlochbervie.

**Ian Jackson** commented that Highland Council had no plans to close Scourie Primary. Whilst no-one could say what would happen in years to come, any school closure proposal has to go through the same process that is underway for Achfary, and that should be some reassurance to parents. On the question of catchment, he commented that as Achfary Primary is not closed, it still has a catchment. The Council was not proposing to move part of the Scourie catchment into Kinlochbervie. It was the Achfary catchment that was being discussed.

**Carol-Anne Forsyth** reiterated that the arrangement at the time Achfary was mothballed was that pupils should attend Scourie. If a child turned up in Achfary tomorrow they would be offered a place in Scourie Primary, not Kinlochbervie.

**Graham Nichols** commented that Katherine Barnes-Miller had accurately described the history. Pupils had been attending Achfary on placing requests, and when they decided to move back to their designated school in Scourie, that left only one pupil in the Achfary catchment. When the school was mothballed the parents of the one remaining child indicated a preference to attend Kinlochbervie, but the Council were only willing to provide transport to Scourie.

**Katherine Barnes-Miller** asked whether the current meeting was the only one to be held as part of the consultation. When this was confirmed, she highlighted that there were no representatives from Kinlochbervie School or community at the meeting, indicating that Kinlochbervie felt little connection with Achfary.

**Ian Jackson** returned to the earlier question about the Suitability rating for Scourie, which had not been answered. He advised that the Council is required by the Scottish Government to assess all its schools for Suitability, and to rate them according to a scale of A-D. The assessment considered the design of the school and what facilities it had, and encompassed the classrooms, the gym hall, the office and other ancillary accommodation, and the playground. Disabled access was an important part of the assessment. There are guidelines for the award of ratings. He added that the Highland Council aims to have all its schools rated as at least “B”, so some thought needs to be given to addressing any lower rating.

**Carol-Anne Forsyth** asked why, in the light of this, the Council had not addressed the disabled access issues at Scourie Primary when the nursery conversion had taken place. Disabled access was created for the nursery as part of that project, but was not extended to the school. Surely it would have been more efficient to have addressed the access issues across the school building, rather than returning to Scourie at some point in the future.

**Brian Porter** advised that he would look into the matter further.

**Steve Rudley** challenged the comment in the Proposal paper, that Scourie was “marginally” closer to Achfary than to Kinlochbervie. It was quite a bit closer. He also challenged the roll projections, suggesting that it was impossible to project primary school rolls to 2030.

**Ian Jackson** commented that the further into the future the figures go, the less robust they become. The Council feels it has reasonably robust data for the next few years. Figures for future years are based on historic rolls plus anticipated housebuilding, which is why they tend to rise over time.

Some discussion followed about the accuracy of the projections for Scourie Primary. There was general agreement that the roll projections for the next few years were as accurate as they could be.

**Carol-Anne Forsyth** highlighted an error at paragraph 19.2, which referred to funded school transport from Scourie. This was acknowledged as a typing error that should have referred to Achfary.

**Dylan Bentley** asked whether there was a trigger number for the roll at Scourie, at which the Council would look to invest to raise it to a “B” rating.

**Ian Jackson** commented that there was no trigger number, but that there were a lot of schools, and limited funds.

**Carol-Anne Forsyth** commented that in that case we should not have wasted money on the Achfary building for the last 3 years. If Achfary had been closed 3 years ago the money saved could have been invested in Scourie Primary. There was also the matter of the £125K invested in converting a room in Scourie into a nursery, with 4 sinks for a minimal number of children.

**Brian Porter** responded that the comment about mothballing was a legitimate point, but that the Council’s process had been to mothball, with dialogue with the community at the time. A decision to move to formal closure in 2012 might have been seen by the local community as precipitate, and the Council had wanted to monitor the demographics of the area before coming to a final view on the future of the school. Arguably we might have brought the closure proposal forward sooner, but we were there or thereabouts with the 3 year guideline figure suggested by the Scottish Government.

**Neil MacDonald** commented that the current process must be the easiest school closure ever undertaken, since everyone is in agreement with the proposal, and the Council does not even own the school building. The only issue of concern to people was the reassignment of the catchment. Moving the Achfary catchment to Kinlochbervie does feel like a nail in the coffin for Scourie Primary. Kinlochbervie should not be favoured over Scourie, or Durness for that matter. There was concern locally that the Council would be tempted to create a single school in Kinlochbervie for the entire area. That would be “nice and tidy” for the Council, but would mean children from the other catchments having excessively long journeys to school, all the way from Kylesku in the south to Eriboll in the north. Unapool School was closed 15 or so years ago and with Achfary going too, the area will have lost 2 primary schools out of an original 5. Communities that are struggling do not need school closures on top of everything else.

**The Chairperson** reiterated that he and the Council officials were at the meeting to gauge local opinion. There was no pre-judgment involved and that is why was important that views were expressed, both at the meeting and in writing. When the councillors come to take their decision on the proposal, they will do so after consideration of the comments received.

The Chairperson added that he would defend the Council over the decision 3 years ago to mothball rather than close Achfary, as he has had experience of a school where there was only 1 pupil, but where local people expressed the view that the school should be kept open, so the school was mothballed rather than closed. He repeated that it was imperative that those present set out their views in writing. He added however, that we were not proposing the closure of Scourie Primary.

**Katherine Barnes-Miller** asked whether it would be better to submit one letter or many different letters.

**The Chairperson** said that personally, as someone who had to read all the responses, he would prefer a single letter, as long as it was signed by everyone. There are about 40 councillors on the Committee and every one of them will receive copies of all responses, so a single letter would save paper. However the decision lay with each individual.

**Aileen MacDonald** asked whether it was still possible that the recommendation relating to catchment might change. **The Chairperson** confirmed that was so.

**Carol-Anne Forsyth** asked whether there would be another meeting with parents at Scourie to discuss disabled access to the school.

**The Chairperson** suggested that the parents get in touch with the 3 local ward members, and invite them to a future Parent Council meeting to outline their concerns.

**Carol-Anne Forsyth** asked what would happen to the money saved by closing Achfary Primary.

**The Chairperson** advised this would be treated as part of the Council’s overall revenue budget.

**Katherine Barnes-Miller** suggested there should be another meeting about the change to the Scourie catchment. Surely changing a catchment area should be subject to the same process as closing Achfary.

**Brian Porter** commented that the Council was not changing the Scourie catchment. The Proposal paper contained a suggestion about the future of the Achfary catchment, and there would be an eventual recommendation about this to the Committee. Whilst there was a clear consensus at tonight’s meeting, he did not know whether there would be other written representations with a different view. That was why it was important that those present followed up their comments tonight with written responses.

**Ian Jackson** commented that Education Scotland would be visiting the school as part of their assessment of the Proposal, and that there was an opportunity for parents to make views known to the Inspector. He also highlighted the fact that the Final Report will be published at least 3 weeks before the Committee that considers it, and that is to allow further representations to be made, concerning the content of the Final Report.

**Sally Stewart** advisedthat the Education Scotland Inspector would make contact with the Head Teachers prior to his visit, and would offer the Chairperson of the Parent Council an opportunity to meet.

There being no other comments, the Chairperson reminded those present of the closing date for responses – 24 May – 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 9 November 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. Following the decision of the Committee, the minutes would be submitted to the full Council for ratification, most likely in December.

MEETING CLOSED.