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To: cal adminmid

Cc: Ross Waldie; Fergus.ewing.msp@parliament.scot; drew.hendry.mp@parliament.uk; john.swinney.msp@scottish.parliament.uk; Bill Alexander; Bernadette Cairns; Ken Gowans - Member

Subject: Proposal to close the Black Isle Education Centre

Dear Sir/Madam

I am writing to express my concerns over the proposed closure of the Black Isle Education Centre. I can understand that perhaps the building currently used and also the location at "Raddery" on the Black Isle is not ideal. However the service to young people, currently experienced by my son, is absolutely crucial to his further development. I understand that the costs of running this service are huge at the moment, but I am quite sure with a bit of proper planning these could be reduced significantly.

Some back ground to our experience of the education system by our family.

----- began his education at Inshes Primary School. At the time, we as a family were unaware of his additional needs. However, starting school soon opened up a huge amount of issues for. He was soon diagnosed with Autism, we now realise he has a particular sub type of PDA (Pathological Demand Avoidance). This meant that he did not present as a 'typical' case of autism. He is chatty, sociable, has good eye contact and loves to try new things (sometimes!). However his difficulties lay in understanding social situations, understanding relationships, being extremely literal, and not being able to work out just what was expected of him in this school situation. He also has a particular dislike of authority and very much likes to feel as though he has some control over what is happening. Not having this leads to MASSIVE anxiety and out of control behaviour.

Therefore, at Inshes Primary School (deemed very suitable for children with additional needs in this area) ----- behaviour became increasingly difficult to manage. They tried and failed many, many strategies that are approved to help children with autism. The staff there really did try to accommodate his needs but it was becoming unsafe for him to be in that environment. He was there P1 and P2, he was lashing out at staff and children, he was hiding in the school grounds for lots of the school day. Most frightening thing for me was that he was running out of the school and down on to a main road (age 5).

He was then moved to 'Applegrove' which was an old Janitors House within the grounds of Drummond School. There was only him and one other pupil taught there and after one year (P3) with several ups and downs, this set up was also deemed unsuitable.

For P4 ----- and his peer were moved into special school, Drummond School. Through all of these changes ----- self esteem was really low due to feelings of failure and not being able to achieve. He was also developing quite a severe mistrust of adults outwith the family. At Drummond School it took some time to settle with several ups and downs, but eventually he did settle there and was happy and achieving for about a year (he was there for two and a half). This success was achieved by staff working hard on his self esteem and his relationships within the school. He had many sporting successes as this is his area of strength. He is also intelligent and managed maths, english, cooking, music and art.

However, what followed was a horrific unravelling of this success over a year which ended with ----- becoming mentally and physically unwell. He had permanent migraines caused by

anxiety, he was not sleeping and not eating. I had to remove ----- from Drummond School, for his own safety, after he put his arm through a glass window unsupervised by staff. There were several factors that lead to the decline, these included:

Success in sport being removed by PE teacher, who thought that she knew how to discipline him.

Arrival of new headteacher with his uncaring/inexperienced attitude and his new rules to enforce.

Disintegration of relationships with staff and peers due to increasing anxiety and behavioural consequences.

After I removed him from school ----- was at home with me for six months. I had to give up my nursing career to be at home for him. Thankfully he got better at home, he was eating, sleeping and headaches disappeared. For us as parents though it was soul destroying to see our sociable, active, able little boy stuck at home with what he described as 'no future'. I, myself had to then try to seek out some education for my son (Is that really fair for either of us??). I contacted our local primary school and they agreed to ----- attending social time with his peers on a Friday afternoon, but this was now the last term of P7 for him and them. After some consultation with Highland Council they raised the Black Isle Education Centre (BIEC) as an option. I had never been aware of this as an option and I don't think that parents in my position are, as it is a well kept secret. Therefore I believe that actually the service could benefit MANY children that I know are struggling in mainstream and the special school setting.

Anyway, now we are up to speed you will understand my huge anxieties with the closure of this centre. ----- has attended for a year now and during this year he has made some real improvements. He has developed some good relationships with staff and he is learning to manage the relationships he doesn't find so easy. He has been learning well and attending the HUB at Millburn Academy for some short spells. He has only managed to attend Millburn for one hour one day and two hours on another day. He has found this stressful but is managing it in small doses with the support of staff from BIEC.

The success of this BIEC placement is down to very understanding, experienced staff that are able to give the time needed to be able to maintain a good relationship with ----- . They have also tapped in to his special interest which is mountain biking. They have been able to adapt his learning around cycling, bike maintenance, building ramps and working out jumps. They even arranged for him to meet a local professional mountain biker which boosted him no end. They also have lots of available activities which is a huge positive for --- . They have been kayaking, out on beach and woodland trips.

Although only part time at the moment, two half days at the moment. (Which I do feel it would be of benefit to increase.) BIEC has provided structure and purpose for ----- . Boosted his self esteem and provided some much needed respite for me. If the service at BIEC is to change then the amount of activities, specialised staff and their ability to be adaptable to

each young person needs to be preserved perhaps in another more suitable location. But there is definitely a need for this service. You cannot under estimate the effect these previous failings have had on ----- and us as a family.

The proposal to close the school talks about the young people being accommodated within their local school with support?? Why do you think they are not there in the first place? - it didn't work!! As far as I can see there is no plan to continue the provision as it is just now only to 'include' the children in their local mainstream school. I would have serious reservations about (trying) to force ----- back into that kind of setting as next time he may not recover from the damage done. I would like to see a plan put in place to continue this valuable service before any changes are made to the current provision.

Yours sincerely