



## HIGHLAND COUNCIL

### EDUCATION AND LEARNING SERVICE

#### REVIEW OF THE PROPOSAL TO DISCONTINUE PROVISION OF EDUCATION AT ROY BRIDGE PRIMARY SCHOOL, RE-ASSIGNING ITS CATCHMENT AREA TO THAT OF SPEAN BRIDGE PRIMARY SCHOOL

This report has been prepared following a review of the proposal:

- To discontinue education provision at Roy Bridge Primary School, re-assigning its catchment area to that of Spean Bridge Primary School.

Having had regard (in particular) to:

- Relevant written representations received by the Council (from any person) during the consultation period.
- Oral representations made to it (by any person) at the public meeting held online on 12 January 2022.
- The report from Education Scotland.

This document has been issued by the Highland Council under the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010.

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## 1.0 Background

- 1.1 Highland Council's Education Committee, at its meeting on 17 November 2021, agreed that a statutory consultation be undertaken on the proposal to discontinue the provision of education at Roy Bridge Primary School, re-assigning its catchment to that of Spean Bridge Primary School.
- 1.2 **Appendix A** is the original consultative paper and provides full details of the above proposal. **Appendices B - E** are the appendices to the original proposal.
- 1.3 Roy Bridge Primary School has been mothballed since Easter 2017, when the school roll fell to two.
- 1.4 Having once again reviewed the status of Roy Bridge Primary, it is the Council's view that re-opening the school would have a negative educational impact on any pupils who wished to attend the school. Further details on this are provided in Sections 6 and 10 below.
- 1.5 Roy Bridge Primary School is designated as a rural school under the terms of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010. In that context, the Council has had special regard to:
  - any viable alternative to the closure proposal; alternatives were considered at Sections 6-10 of the Proposal Paper (**Appendix A**) and have been reconsidered again in the light of responses received to consultation – see Sections 5-10 below.
  - the likely effect on the local community in consequence of the proposal (if implemented), with reference in particular to (a) the sustainability of the community, (b) the availability of the school's premises and its other facilities for use by the community. The effect on the local community was considered at Section 12 of the Proposal Paper (**Appendix A**) and is further considered at Sections 8 and 10 below, taking into account representations received during consultation.
  - the likely effect caused by any different travelling arrangements that may be required in consequence of the proposal (if implemented) with reference in particular to;
  - the effect caused by such travelling arrangements including (in particular), (i) that on the school's pupils and staff and any other users of the school's facilities, (ii) any environmental impact. The effects on school transport were considered at Section 10 of the Proposal Paper, (**Appendix A**) and reconsidered again in the light of responses received to consultation – see Sections 6 and 10 below.

## 2.0 Consultation process

- 2.1 The formal consultation period ran from Wednesday 24 November 2021 to Friday 21 January 2022. Written representations on the proposal were sought from interested parties as defined within the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010, as amended.
- 2.2 In accordance with statutory requirements, the following were consulted:

- (i) Parents of pupils attending Spean Bridge Primary School; including parents of pre-school pupils.
- (ii) The Parent Council of Spean Bridge Primary School.
- (iii) Members of Parliament and Members of Scottish Parliament for the area affected by the proposal.
- (iv) Staff of Spean Bridge Primary School.
- (v) Trade Union representatives.

2.3 The proposal document was also advertised on the Highland Council website.

2.4 A public meeting was held online on 12 January 2022. The meeting was advertised in advance on the Highland Council website, Twitter Account and Facebook page, and in the *Lochaber Times*. The minute of the meeting is at **Appendix 2**.

2.5 The public meeting had originally been scheduled to take place in Roy Bridge Village Hall, but was moved to online after the sharp rise in COVID cases in late December 2021, linked to the appearance of the Omicron variant.

2.6 During the public consultation exercise, an alternative to closure was suggested, which would involve re-opening Roy Bridge Primary School as a school offering Gaelic Medium education. A detailed note of the meeting is at **Appendix 2**. It was attended by 15 parents and members of the public, and the Council received no representations from individuals unable to attend.

2.7 On 9 February 2022, Council officials wrote to the respondent who made this suggestion, providing advice on following up the idea. The letter advised that there are less than five children from the Roy Bridge PS catchment attending Bun-sgoil Ghàidhlig Loch Abar, and that based on the current numbers of pupils, and their ages, it would not be viable to offer GME in Roy Bridge Primary School. It continued by advising of the Statutory Guidance on Gaelic Education and the process by which parents can request an assessment of the need for Gaelic medium primary education (GMPE) in their local area. The letter then suggested that an assessment of the level of demand from pre-school children would be an alternative way of pursuing the suggestion of GME at Roy Bridge, and recommended that Bòrd na Gàidhlig and Comann nam Pàrant (Naiseanta) might be further sources of advice. A copy of this letter is at **Appendix 6**. There has been no further feedback or follow up by the community since the letter issued in February 2022.

### **3.0 Review of proposals following the consultation period**

3.1 Following receipt of written representations received by Highland Council and consideration of oral representations made at the public meeting, officials reviewed the proposals.

3.2 The feedback from the consultation was considered by a range of Council officials. This ensured that the Council met the requirements of the 2010 Act.

- 3.3 The outcome of this review process is reflected in the response, conclusion and recommendations outlined below.

#### **4.0 Responses received**

- 4.1 A list of those who responded in writing during the public consultation is at **Appendix 3**. There were 5 written responses (not including the pupil questionnaires). Copies of these responses can also be found at Appendices 3i-3v.
- 4.2 The views of P4-7 pupils at Spean Bridge Primary School (which included the pupils living within the Roy Bridge catchment area) were sought by means of an age adapted questionnaire. Appendix 3vi summarises their views, which are also discussed at Section 5 below. It was not possible to consult the younger pupils due to COVID complications at the time. Since Roy Bridge PS has been mothballed in since 2017, P1-3 pupils will never have attended the school, and the consultation on closure may not have been particularly meaningful for them.

#### **5.0 Overview of Issues raised during the consultation period**

- 5.1 Of the 31 pupils who returned questionnaires, 2 thought the Council should permanently close Roy Bridge Primary School, whilst three thought should be re-opened. Continued mothballing was by far the most popular option amongst the pupils, with twenty-six pupils indicating this was their preferred option. The detailed feedback from pupils suggested that the main interest of the children was around continued use of /access to the play park at Roy Bridge.
- 5.2 Education Scotland Inspectors who visited the school reported that the children who spoke with HM Inspectors spoke positively about their experience at Spean Bridge Primary School. They identified the importance of maintaining friendships already established there. Children described the benefits of having access to a range of lunchtime activities and clubs. They particularly enjoy using the school's large sports pitch.
- 5.3 The arguments advanced by the pupils in favour of continued mothballing, and those in favour of re-opening the school, are set out at Issues 1-3 below. The responses encountered by Education Scotland are set out at paragraph 7.3 below.
- 5.4 There were 5 written responses received from other stakeholders, only one of which was from a current parent of pre-school or primary age children.
- 5.5 Three of the responses were mainly taken up with alleged procedural errors in consultation or factual errors in the Proposal Paper. The remaining response addressed the possibility of re-opening Roy Bridge PS in order to offer Gaelic Medium education – see paragraphs 2.6 and 2.7 above.
- 5.6 The public meeting was attended by a total of 23 people, including 14 parents and other members of the local community (see **Appendix 2**). A total of 15 questions are recorded in the note along with the associated answers.

- 5.7 The main arguments put forward are summarised below, together with the responses from the Council. Where different responses raise similar issues, these have been “grouped” for the purposes of the response.

## 6.0 Responses to the Issues raised in Public Consultation

- 6.1 Arguments advanced by the children in favour of continued mothballing are set out at Issue 1 below, and addressed at Response 1.

### Issue 1

“I would like to be able to carry on playing in the old school playground.”

“I would be separated from really close friends (if it re-opened) but I still want to be able to play in the playground.”

“I don’t want my best friends to leave.”

“Make it into something else instead of a school but leave the playground.”

“I want to use the playground but not lose my friends.”

### Response 1

Retaining the school playground for public use seems to be an important issue for children living in Roy Bridge. This is discussed further at Response 12 below.

- 6.2 Arguments advanced by the children in favour of re-opening Roy Bridge PS are set out at Issues 2 and 3 below, and addressed at Responses 2 and 3.

### Issue 2

“At the moment the school is big enough when we are all here but when the houses get built the older classes could go up there.”

“It could be part of Spean Bridge Primary School and P5, P6 & P7 could go there.”

### Response 2

This would effectively mean Spean Bridge PS operating as a single school over two sites. Highland Council would not want to do this unless it was unavoidable.

Whilst it would mean using the Roy Bridge building for education, it would still be a closure of Roy Bridge as a separate school.

Highland Council thinks there will be enough room at Spean Bridge to cope with any increase to the number of pupils, who might come from new housing.

The Highland Council assesses all of its schools for building Suitability and Condition, in line with Scottish Government guidelines. Schools are assessed on a scale with the ratings “A” (good) “B” (satisfactory), “C” (poor) and “D” (bad). Roy Bridge Primary School was rated as “B” for the educational suitability of the building and “B” for building condition.

Roy Bridge Primary School is rated as “B” for the educational suitability of the building and “B” for building condition. Spean Bridge Primary School is rated as “A” for the educational suitability of the building and “A” for building condition. Moving children from Spean to Roy would therefore mean moving them to poorer quality accommodation.

Any suggestion to move the upper stage classes at Spean Bridge across to the Roy Bridge school building would require a statutory consultation.

### **Issue 3**

“I would like to go to a different school to meet new friends and go to the park.”

“It is fun to skate around but most of my friends will go to Spean”

“I would like to be in a smaller school.”

### **Response 3**

Although the Council can understand the attraction of a smaller school, we think Roy Bridge would be too small. The school was mothballed in 2017 when the number of children at the school fell to just two. Children would not make new friends there as all the children from Roy Bridge already attend Spean Bridge.

- 6.3 The arguments advanced in written responses are set out at Issues 4-12 below, and addressed at Responses 4-12.

### **Issue 4**

The village has many young families, but the closure of the school would drive many away to other areas. It would be difficult to manage a child attending a school 3 miles away.

For people who live in Roy Bridge, it is a hassle to get to Spean Bridge.

### **Response 4**

Roy Bridge PS has been mothballed since Easter 2017, and since then young children in the village have attended Spean Bridge PS. Pre-school

children did this even prior to 2017, since there has never been a school nursery in Roy Bridge.

School age children from the Roy Bridge catchment are provided with free home-school transport to Spean Bridge PS. Although this does not apply to after-school activities, these would have to continue in Spean Bridge even if Roy Bridge PS were re-opened. All the available evidence suggests that the numbers attending a re-opened Roy Bridge PS would be insufficient to allow after-school activities to take place there.

#### **Issue 5**

Having a school in Roy Bridge would ensure that children would have other children of their own age, to play with and develop together.

#### **Response 5**

On the contrary, it was lack of numbers at Roy Bridge that caused the school to be mothballed, when the roll fell to two. Children at Roy Bridge did not have other children of their own age to play with and develop together. All the work undertaken by Highland Council prior to the formal consultation suggests that very few, if any, parents would remove their children from Spean Bridge School and place them in a re-opened Roy Bridge Primary. This information is further reinforced by the low number of responses from parents in response to the formal consultation.

#### **Issue 6**

The Council have allowed very little time to allow the public to get their thoughts together.

Parents of children not yet at school have been given no notification of the plans.

The consultation has been centred around Spean Bridge parents.

Although the Education Officer was fully aware of the community of Roy Bridge's continued concerns about the future of their primary school having personally attended the packed Community Council Meeting of 1st September 2019 the first the Community knew about the current proposal was an advert in the Oban Times on the 6th January 2022, some 43 days after the consultation started, about a Public Meeting to be held on 12th January on a Proposal to discontinue the provision of education at Roy Bridge Primary School with a closing date for submissions of 21st January 2022.

The Consultation Paper which is a pivotal document in the process and should have been widely available was even unknown to the Chair of the Spean Bridge Primary School Parent Council until the Public Meeting on the 12th January. Posting it on the Highland Council Website and Fort William



Library may fulfil legal requirements technically, but expecting the community at large to find it there without prompting surely a fallacy.

Spean Bridge, Roy Bridge and Achnacarry SCIO who took on the principal responder role during COVID 19 lockdowns were able to ensure that all homes in our 995 square kilometre area knew of our services by conducting mail drops through Royal Mail so surely Highland Council could have adopted the same procedure to ensure everyone in the Roy Bridge Primary School Catchment Area were aware of this new proposal with its attendant literature.

To assist the community the Education Officer should have elaborated on what constituted other suggestions. At the Parent Council Meeting of 12th March 2020 wrongly attributed to that of 7th May 2019 in Ci the minutes say: "Support was vocalised for community transfer if possible. In place of the community council the local SCIO would be consulted". Needless to say although Highland Council is well aware of our contact details we have heard nothing.

I understand that mothballing is only meant to be a temporary measure and 5 years is longer than the legislation would normally expect, but as the guidance to the legislation says it expects authorities like Highland Council to seek and achieve high standards and conduct rural school closure proposals in a fair and transparent manner, and I don't believe they have acted fairly in their dialogue with the community of Roy Bridge.

On reviewing the proposals as a member of the community within the Roy Bridge Primary School catchment area, it is clear that there has been a degree of consultation with the current Parent Council at Spean Bridge PS as well as other parents of primary age children via the Spean Bridge PS noticeboard. However, there appears to have been only a token attempt to involve the wider community. An advert was placed in the Oban Times of 6 January advising of a public meeting on 12 January, just six days later. Rather than being postponed when it became clear that Covid restrictions prevented an in-person gathering the meeting went ahead via Zoom, a medium not accessible to the whole community. A previous face-to-face public meeting in September 2019 had been well attended and opposed final closure but the opportunity for widespread local involvement was not available on this occasion.

I feel that an extended consultation period would ensure that the wider community are given the opportunity to have its say.

### **Response 6**

All parents of children attending Spean Bridge Primary School were notified of the closure proposal by individual letter, and this included parents of pre-school children. This of course included all parents from the Roy Bridge PS catchment whose children are attending Spean Bridge PS, including the Chairperson of the Spean Bridge PS Parent Council. All staff at Spean

Bridge PS were also notified by individual letter. Additionally, the closure proposal was publicised on the Highland Council website. The public meeting received additional publicity on the Highland Council's Facebook and Twitter accounts.

It was unfortunate that at the time of the consultation the Spean Bridge, Achnacarry and Roy Bridge Community Council was not in operation, and so could not be included in the consultation. However, given the wide circulation of the Proposal within the rural communities of Spean Bridge and Roy Bridge, the Council was surprised to hear claims that people had not heard of the Proposal. This might reflect the low level of interest from parents themselves. Of the 5 written responses received, only one was from a parent of school age or pre-school age children.

The documents were available not just at Fort William Library but also at Spean Bridge Primary School itself.

In publicising the Proposal, the Council has at all times complied with the requirements of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010.

### **Issue 7**

The Council has set about forcing children out of Roy Bridge School.

### **Response 7**

The Council categorially denies this suggestion. Parents moved their children from Roy Bridge to Spean Bridge by means of placing requests, submitted of their own free will.

The roll figures for Roy Bridge PS from 2008 to its eventual mothballing were:

2008-09	33
2009-10	29
2010-11	25
2011-12	23
2012-13	18
2013-14	19
2014-15	20
2015-16	12
2016-17	6

The original enrolment of 6 at the beginning of session 2016-17 fell to 2 by Easter 2017.

### **Issue 8**

I would suggest that the Proposal Paper is factually inaccurate that the proposal does not properly consider Gaelic medium education and pupil

numbers from the Roy Bridge catchment attending Gaelic medium education in Fort William. Without these figures the document is incomplete and does not properly illustrate the current situation regarding education provision for children from the Roy Bridge area. In order to present correct information regarding education provision for children from the Roy Bridge catchment accurate numbers for pre-school and Primary Gaelic medium education need to be included and factually presented. Parents of children living within the Roy Bridge catchment but attending GME need to be included in the consultation.

### **Response 8**

The mothballing of Roy Bridge Primary in 2017 did not arise because of a shortage of pupils in the school catchment, but because parents of pupils from the Roy Bridge catchment made placing requests for their children to attend school in Spean Bridge. A very small number of pupils from the Roy Bridge catchment, less than five at the time of writing, currently attend Bun-sgoil Ghàidhlig Loch Abar (BSGL). Clearly parents who make the choice send their children to BSGL do so because they are seeking GME, and would be uninterested in sending their children to a re-opened Roy Bridge PS that offered only English Medium education. The issue of offering GME at Roy Bridge itself is considered at Issue/Response 9 below.

### **Issue 9**

“... The existence of Bun-sgoil Ghàidhlig Loch Abar makes it unlikely that there will be demand for another Gaelic Medium nursery in Roy Bridge”. I would suggest that this statement is unfounded and would ask for evidence. From 2000 to 2012 I was involved in the development of Gaelic medium preschool provision in Roy Bridge. There was significant demand and we established a Gaelic medium nursery under contract to Highland Council. This is acknowledged in the Consultation document. Parents from Fort Augustus and Fort William as well Spean Bridge, Roy Bridge and surrounding areas attended the provision. It was evident that, with the right support, there was the opportunity for this pre-school provision to grow into Primary provision in due course. With the advent of Bun Sgoil Ghaidhlig Loch Abar it is correct that there is now alternative provision however the travel time from Roy Bridge is prohibitive and the size of the nursery is very much urban rather than rural. I understand that there may also be pressure of numbers at BSGLA. If Highland Council were to open a Gaelic medium nursery in Roy Bridge it is likely that it would be well attended. Like BSGLA and all other Gaelic schools, over time, numbers would grow. Children would come from both Roy Bridge and Spean Bridge and surrounding areas and pressure on facilities in Spean Bridge and in the Gaelic nursery in BSGLA would be eased. When GM nursery education ceased in Roy Bridge in 2012 it was due to the need for additional support from Highland Council, particularly with staffing. With the advent of BSGLA parents are much more aware now of the benefits and opportunities that GM education presents. I would suggest that there is opportunity now to reintroduce GM nursery provision which would very quickly grow into Primary provision. The travel requirement is excessive

for these younger age groups and there would be numerous benefits if there were local provision.

### **Response 9**

As mentioned at Response 8 above, there are currently less than five children from the Roy Bridge PS catchment attending Bun-sgoil Ghàidhlig Loch Abar, (we do not normally provide details of children when numbers are less than five). Based purely on the current numbers of pupils, and their ages, it would not be viable to offer GME in Roy Bridge Primary School.

Statutory Guidance on Gaelic Education has been published by Bòrd na Gàidhlig, which lays down a process by which parents can request an assessment of the need for Gaelic medium primary education (GMPE) in their local area. Given the current numbers from Roy Bridge attending Bun-sgoil Ghàidhlig Loch Abar, it may be that an assessment of the level of demand from pre-school children would be an alternative way of pursuing the suggestion of GME at Roy Bridge. This information was provided to parents (see Appendix 6) but no request for GMPE at Roy Bridge has been forthcoming.

As no request for GMPE has come forward from the community, there is every reason to suppose that re-opening Roy Bridge PS as a school offering GME would result in a school with a very low roll, most probably in single figures. By contrast, at the time of writing Bun-sgoil Ghàidhlig Loch Abar is expecting 134 pupils in its P1-7 classes for session 2022-23. Bun-sgoil Ghàidhlig Loch Abar therefore offers larger numbers that are much better for language learning. It also offers an immersive Gaelic language experience that would not be offered at a school that provided both Gaelic and English medium education, should that option be suggested. We would therefore see some merit in GME in the area being provided at Bun-sgoil Ghàidhlig Loch Abar, and the Council has invested heavily in providing that facility.

### **Issue 10**

If there were GME provision in Roy Bridge a wider catchment would be expected. It is notable that there are currently several HC Consultation papers ongoing regarding the creation of GME catchment areas for schools e.g., Acharacle, Glenurquhart. A hypothetical catchment for Roy Bridge Primary as a GME Primary might enable those within the hypothetical catchment to be consulted and included in the formal Consultation. The narrative at Option 3, points 8.1 and 8.2 of the Consultation paper should be amended to reflect this.

The carbon footprint and financial costs associated with transportation of children to GME provision need to be explored and clearly documented. We are living in times of change. Carbon footprint and impact on climate change has become a key consideration. We are also emerging from a pandemic. Have guidelines on educational provision been amended to reflect these changing times? A classroom that was once deemed suitable for 25 children

might in future be deemed suitable for less children in order to enable social distancing and adequate health and hygiene considerations for staff and pupils. Journey times that were once acceptable may no longer be acceptable in future. Where bigger was seen to be better in recent years, might it be the case that, with new challenges, smaller rural schools become more desirable regardless of whether or not there might be slightly higher per capita running costs?

I would urge Highland Council to give full consideration to the above points prior to reaching a conclusion on the future educational provision in Roy Bridge and surrounding area.

### **Response 10**

As mentioned at Response 9, it is open to parents in the Roy Bridge area to make a request for Gaelic Medium Primary Education, and the availability of this has been publicised to parents. No request has been made in response.

It is approximately 12 miles from Roy Bridge Primary School to Bun-sgoil Ghàidhlig Loch Abar, so a very small number of pupils are travelling 24 miles per day between the two locations.

The proposal to close Roy Bridge PS makes no comment on the general desirability of small schools as opposed to large schools. As previously mentioned, this specific proposal has only been advanced because the Roy Bridge parents, of their own free will, submitted placing requests or their children to attend Spean Bridge PS.

### **Issue 11**

The Act says the authority should ensure the proposal paper provides sufficient detail on areas likely to be of concern to communities. This would include a clear travel plan for pupils, including identifying safe routes to the new school location and providing clarity, where relevant, on school transport that will be provided and traffic management around the school site(s).

I note that Highland Council have provided School Transport by Shiel Buses, but nothing about alternative travel, and parents themselves have to make travel arrangements for extracurricular activities when it falls out with the bus departure time. It also states that the cost of transporting the pupils is £36,195. This is however a public bus which would continue to operate along the route even if Roy PS was to reopen so the savings would be less. Another inaccuracy as the current school service is not part of a public service and would be discontinued if the school reopened.

### **Response 11**

Children from Roy Bridge have been provided with school transport ever since Roy Bridge School was mothballed in 2017, and these arrangements have worked well. Response 4 comments that the available evidence on the

numbers of children who would attend a re-opened Roy Bridge PS cast considerable doubt on whether after-school activities could take place there.

The issue of the savings figure is covered under “Omissions and Inaccuracies” in Section 9 below.

### **Issue 12**

The proposal paper should also be clear on the authority’s plans for the future use of any school building and associated facilities that will be released by the proposal. It is reasonable for communities to be concerned whether a school building would have another public purpose, be available for the community, sold or might remain vacant for a significant period, and authorities should provide as much certainty and transparency as possible. The only certainty given in the paper is “Other suggestions have been made for the future use of the building in the event of the closure proceeding. Subject to the Council not having any operational need for the building, Highland Council would be keen to work with the local community over the future use of the building and site. Any such proposal would however have to be progressed within the terms of the Council’s current asset management policy.”

Future use suggestions for the school buildings and site made to Highland Council to date have not been specified, either within the Consultation paper or at the Zoom meeting. Furthermore, the play equipment gifted to Roy Bridge PS by Corrour Estate a significant expense soon before the school’s mothballing may have alternative uses at its existing site or at Spean Bridge PS.

### **Response 12**

It is not possible for Highland Council to provide the community with guarantees about the future use of the school building, as to do so would pre-empt the outcome of the consultation. The Proposal Paper specified that in the event of the merger proceeding, and subject to the Council not having any operational need for the building, Highland Council would be keen to work with the community of Roy Bridge to see whether some or all of the current school building could be turned over to community use. Any such proposal would be progressed within the terms of the Council’s current asset management policy.

## **7.0 Summary of the issues raised by Education Scotland**

- 7.1 In line with legislative requirements, Education Scotland was invited to submit comments on the Council’s proposals. A copy of the report from Education Scotland is appended – **Appendix 4**. A Gaelic language version is at **Appendix 5**.
- 7.2 In their report, Education Scotland recognise that positive benefits have derived from the operational merger of Roy Bridge Primary School and Spean Bridge

Primary Schools since Roy Bridge Primary School was mothballed in 2017. Children work regularly in cooperative learning groups of various sizes. Being part of an age-appropriate peer group of sufficient size allows children to participate in a range of social interactions and a broad range of curriculum activities. Their development of skills for learning, life and work benefits from discussions and dialogue with peers of the same age and stage. The opportunity to participate in sporting, musical and artistic activities is enhanced. The current arrangements allow for smooth transition for children moving from the nursery class into P1. When compared to the current Roy Bridge Primary School premises the accommodation at Spean Bridge Primary School has the potential to provide a better learning environment. This includes access to facilities such as a large sports pitch. HM Inspectors agree that there are potential educational benefits if the council's proposal goes ahead, and that the proposal supports the council's duty to ensure Best Value. Education Scotland note that information gathered by the Council indicates that should Roy Bridge Primary School reopen, enrolment would remain very low

- 7.3 Education Scotland noted that the children who spoke with HM Inspectors spoke positively about their experience at Spean Bridge Primary School. They identified the importance of maintaining friendships already established there. Children described the benefits of having access to a range of lunchtime activities and clubs. They particularly enjoy using the school's large sports pitch. Both parents and children spoke of the positive benefits of having access to Roy Bridge Primary School's grounds for leisure activity use. They believe that this provides a vital safe area in which children can play, skate and cycle, particularly as there is no safe cycle route between Roy Bridge and Spean Bridge.
- 7.4 Education Scotland further noted that the few parents who spoke with HM Inspectors indicated their sadness at the potential loss of a school within the village of Roy Bridge. They expressed concern about the safety of school transport with children being picked up and dropped off near a busy road in Roy Bridge. There were mixed views as to whether they would enrol their child at Roy Bridge Primary School should it reopen.
- 7.5 Education Scotland noted that Staff who spoke with HM Inspectors support the proposal to close Roy Bridge Primary School. They recognise the impact of the declining roll and feel that reopening the school would be unsustainable. Children attending Spean Bridge Primary School for their nursery provision settle well, with parents choosing to maintain this through transition into P1. Staff identified that around half of the children within the Roy Bridge Primary School catchment would still require school transport should the school remain open. They felt that the additional travel time of five to six minutes was not excessive.
- 7.6 Lastly, Education Scotland noted that low parental interest in committing to sending children to Roy Bridge Primary School to enable it to reopen, demonstrated that reopening the school is not viable.
- 7.7. Two issues were identified for further consideration, and are set out below.

**Issue 13**

The council has clarified that, should there be sufficient future demand for Gaelic Medium Education, that they would follow legislation to determine the need for a local provision. The council's final report should include this clarification and details of how they will promote Gaelic Medium Education with parents. This is a statutory duty.

**Response 13**

Highland Council is the largest provider of Gaelic Medium Education in Scotland. Our Education service has over 200 schools in total, covering a geographical area nearly the size of Belgium. The area is a mix of urban, semi urban and rural areas and we have ambition to provide opportunities for Gaelic across the whole region. Over the last year, the Council has increased the profile of Gaelic, invested in the team, established a Gaelic Committee and Gaelic is embedded in the Council's Executive Leadership Team, led by an Executive Chief Officer. This reflects that the Council is committed to growing and developing the GM and GL Education sector; Gaelic learning and curriculum development; and Gaelic culture and communities.

The Council plans to focus on growth in ELC and 0-3, curriculum development, support to ASN, and focus on language use within our communities for both our children and our fragile communities to ensure Gaelic has a sustained and strong presence. These are the key priorities within our projects over the next year and beyond.

Challenges include our geography, demographics with a declining population and the protection of our fragile Gaelic communities. Growth in GME is impacted by a lack of probationer allocation teachers, difficulty in recruiting Gaelic teachers and a narrowing of curriculum choice at the senior phase.

The Highland Council's third generation Gaelic Language Plan 2018-2023 was submitted to Bòrd na Gàidhlig on September 18th, 2017. The Plan has been developed under the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005. The Highland Council has received statutory approval from Bòrd na Gàidhlig.

The Plan has 6 priority areas. The specific Strategic Commitments within Priority Area 3 (Gaelic in Education) are:

- Contribute to national strategic partnership initiatives and policy formulation across Gaelic education.
- Ensure that Gaelic education is embedded in The Highland Council's Strategic Education Improvement Planning.
- Build on established partnerships to continue to grow a professionally organised and trained staff to support the 0–3 Early Learning and Childcare sector.
- Develop 3–18 Gaelic Education through a systematic and sustainable approach to increase the percentage of Gaelic Learners in establishments.



- Work with partners to review the learning materials and learning resources provided to support Gaelic Education.

Within the local ASG for this Proposal, Lochaber High School is able to promote the Gaelic ethos to all pupils, across the ASG, through transition, curriculum and events. The Council also promotes the GMPE procedure to parents via its website, where full details of how to apply are available.

#### **Issue 14**

Should the proposal go ahead, the council should work with the community to explore how to make best use of the former Roy Bridge Primary School. It should explore with the community their wish to ensure continued access to the safe play space provided by the school grounds.

#### **Response 14**

The Council is happy to make this commitment.

### **8.0 Effects on the Community**

- 8.1 Paragraphs 12.1 and 12.2 of the Proposal Paper set out the Council's assessment of the effects of closure on the local community, and advised that Highland Council would be keen to work with the local community to see whether the current school building and site could be turned over to community use.
- 8.2 The future of the site and building was one of the main issues that arose in the consultation exercise. As previously discussed, the Council cannot prejudge the outcome of the current consultation by agreeing any future use of the building at this stage. In the event the closure is approved, the Council would welcome a community bid for the future use of the building and site.
- 8.3 The consultation exercise did not identify any other effects on the community from the proposal.

### **9.0 Alleged omissions or inaccuracies**

- 9.1 Section 10.1 of the Proposal Paper at Appendix A commented that *"Currently, pupils from the Roy Bridge PS catchment are transported to Spean Bridge PS at an annual cost of £36,195. This is however via a public bus which would continue to operate along the route even if Roy Bridge PS were to re-open, so the actual transport saving from re-opening would be less than the figure set out above."*
- 9.2 One of the responses to consultation highlighted that this was an inaccuracy as the school transport between Roy Bridge and Spean Bridge is not by means of a public bus. Highland Council agrees that this was an inaccuracy in the original Proposal Paper.

- 9.3 A new version of the Financial Analysis attached to the Proposal Paper has been prepared and is attached at **Appendix 7**. The revised analysis shows an annual saving of approximately £84,000 per year, compared to a re-opened Roy Bridge PS.
- 9.4 The Council has carefully considered the impact of this inaccuracy on the Proposal but has concluded it does not represent a material consideration relevant to the Authority's decision as to implementation of the proposal. School transport contracts are subject to award via a regular tendering process, which means that costs relating to future school, transport can never be more than estimates.
- 9.5 More significantly, the proposed closure of Roy Bridge PS is not being advanced on financial grounds but instead due to the lack of viability of Roy Bridge PS, following the voluntary decisions of parents to move their children to Spean Bridge PS.
- 9.6 Separately, it has been suggested that the paper was inaccurate in that it did not consider the numbers of children from the Roy Bridge catchment who attend Bun-Sgoil Ghàidhlig Loch Abar in Fort William – see Issue 8 above.
- 9.7 Roy Bridge PS did not offer Gaelic Medium Education before the school was mothballed, so the small number of children attending GME in Fort William, who are all enrolled at the Bun-Sgoil Ghàidhlig Loch Abar, is not relevant to any consideration of Roy Bridge PS re-opening as it was before Easter 2017. Highland Council does not therefore consider the exclusion of GM pupils to have been an inaccuracy in the Proposal Paper.
- 9.8 The suggested alternative to closure, of opening Roy Bridge PS as a school offering GME, is considered further at Paragraph 10.7 below.

## **10.0 Further Review of Alternatives to Closure**

- 10.1 Throughout the consultation the Council has had special regard to the provision for rural schools within Section 12 of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010. In particular, the Council has had special regard to the following:

- any viable alternative to the closure proposal;

Sections 5-8 of the Proposal Paper identified and discussed the following alternatives to closure:

- i. To continue with the current “mothballing” arrangement.
- ii. To re-open Roy Bridge PS with its current catchment area.
- iii. To re-open Roy Bridge PS with an expanded catchment area.

- 10.2 In respect of option (i) above, Roy Bridge PS has now been mothballed since Easter 2017, and continued mothballing has little to recommend it. In terms of option (ii) above, since the school was mothballed, consultation, both informal

and during the current statutory period, has provided no evidence that a re-opened Roy Bridge PS would attract enough children to make the school viable. This view has been endorsed by Education Scotland.

- 10.3 In respect of option (iii) in paragraph 10.1 above, paragraphs 8.1 and 8.2 of the original Proposal Paper set out the reasons why an expanded catchment area would not be a viable option for Roy Bridge PS.
- 10.4 Having reconsidered each of the alternatives identified at Sections 5-8 of the Proposal Paper, the Highland Council has concluded that the alternatives to closure would not deliver the educational benefits of the proposal.
- 10.5 One further alternative approach was suggested during the consultation exercise:
- Re-open Roy Bridge Primary School as a school offering Gaelic Medium education
- 10.6 This suggestion has been fully considered by the Council, with the results set out at Responses 9 and 10 above. For the reasons set out, the Council again does not consider this a viable option.
- 10.7 The Council has also reconsidered the likely effect on the local community in consequence of the proposal (if implemented), with reference in particular to; (a) the sustainability of the community, (b) the availability of the school's premises and its other facilities for use by the community;

The potential community impact of the proposal was considered at Section 12 of the Proposal Paper and is further considered at Section 8 above.

As set out at paragraphs 2.6 and 2.7 above, the Council has considered a suggestion that we re-open Roy Bridge Primary School as a school offering Gaelic Medium education. In February 2022 officials wrote to the respondent who put forward this proposal, setting out the process by which this could be pursued. There has been no further feedback or follow up by the community since the letter issued in February 2022.

- 10.8 The Council has further reconsidered the likely effect caused by any different travelling arrangements that may be required in consequence of the proposal (if implemented) with reference in particular to (a) the effect caused by such travelling arrangements including (in particular), (i) that on the school's pupils and staff and any other users of the school's facilities, (ii) any environmental impact, (b) the travelling arrangements are those to and from the school of (and for) the school's pupils and staff and any other users of the school's facilities.

The impact of the proposal on travel time was considered at Sections 10 and 16 of the original proposal paper and again at Responses 4 and 11 above. Since Roy Bridge Primary School has been mothballed since Easter 2017, implementation of the proposal would not require the introduction of any different travelling arrangements for pupils or staff. Whilst it is accepted that the

travel times would be shorter were Roy Bridge PS to re-open, the travel times to Spean Bridge are not excessive and are well within the normal range of school journeys in Highland.

## **11.0 Procedure for Call-in by the Scottish Ministers**

- 11.1 As set out in The Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010, Highland Council is required to notify the Scottish Ministers of its decision and provide them with a copy of the Proposal Paper and Consultation Report. The Scottish Ministers have an eight-week period from the date of that final decision on 22 September 2022 to decide if they will call-in the proposal. Within the first three weeks of that eight-week period, the Scottish Ministers will take account of any relevant representations made to them by any person. Therefore, anyone who wishes to make representations to the Scottish Ministers can do so up until midnight on 12 October 2022. The Scottish Ministers will have until midnight on 16 November 2022 to take a decision on the call-in of the Closure Proposal.
- 11.2 Anyone wishing to make a representation to the Scottish Ministers requesting them to call-in the decision to close Roy Bridge Primary School is asked to email [schoolclosure@scotland.gov.uk](mailto:schoolclosure@scotland.gov.uk) or to write to **School Infrastructure Unit, Learning Directorate, The Scottish Government, Area 2A South, Victoria Quay, Edinburgh EH6 6QQ** by midnight on 12 October 2022.
- 11.3 Until the outcome of the eight-week call-in process has been notified to Highland Council, it will not proceed to implement the Proposal. If the Scottish Ministers call-in the proposal, it will be referred to a School Closure Review Panel.

## **12.0 Legal issues**

- 12.1 Throughout this statutory consultation Highland Council has complied in full with the requirements of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010, as amended.
- 12.2 As provided for in section 1 of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980, it is the duty of the Council to ensure adequate and efficient provision of school education within Highland, such education to be directed towards the development of the personality, talents and mental and physical abilities of children or young persons to their fullest potential (Standards in Scotland's Schools Etc. Act 2000). As with all Council duties, the Council also has a duty to make arrangements to secure best value, and in securing best value the Council is required to maintain an appropriate balance between, inter alia, the quality of its performance of its functions and the cost to the authority of that performance (Local Government in Scotland Act 2002, section 1). Each of the above, and all other legislative requirements, have been taken into account in the preparation of this Report.

## **13.0 Financial Implications**

- 13.1 Advice on the financial implications of the proposal was issued as Appendix E to the Proposal Paper, and a revised version is now at Appendix 7.

## **14.0 Equality Impact Assessment**

- 14.1 An Equality Impact Assessment was issued with the proposal paper and can be found at Section 14 of the Proposal Paper. The consultation exercise did not identify any additional equality issues.

## **15.0 Conclusion**

- 15.1 The consultation process has complied fully with legislative requirements and has provided an opportunity for all parties to identify key issues of concern. These issues have been fully considered and the Council's response detailed in sections 5, 6, 7, 8 and 10 above. For the reasons set out in detail in sections 5-10 above, Highland Council considers that implementation of the closure proposal is the most appropriate response to the reasons for the proposal.
- 15.2 The most significant reason for closure is that all the available evidence suggests that the number of children who would attend a re-opened Roy Bridge Primary School would be too low to make the school viable, and that there would consequently be educational disadvantages arising from such a decision. Other factors include the length of time that Roy Bridge Primary has been mothballed. Lastly, Spean Bridge Primary School is itself a rural school.
- 15.3 Education Scotland staff visited Spean Bridge Primary School, to speak to parents, pupils and staff. They also had the opportunity to review in detail the proposal document and all written responses. They recognise that positive benefits have derived from the operational merger of Roy Bridge Primary School and Spean Bridge Primary Schools since Roy Bridge Primary School was mothballed in 2017. They also noted that low parental interest in committing to sending children to Roy Bridge Primary School demonstrated that reopening the school is not viable.
- 15.4 The Executive Chief Officer (Education), on reviewing all of the submissions, the note of the meeting, and the Education Scotland report; and having had special regard to alternatives to closure, to the community impact and to the impact of travelling arrangements; concludes that the proposal offers educational benefits and that implementation of the Proposal in full is the most appropriate response to the reason for formulating the Proposal. The reasons for this conclusion are set out at Sections 5-10 above.

## **16.0 Recommendation**

- 16.1 It is therefore recommended that Highland Council approves the proposal to discontinue education provision at Roy Bridge Primary School, re-assigning its catchment area to that of Spean Bridge Primary School.

Nicky Grant  
Executive Chief Officer (Education)  
**15 August 2022**