

Note of an Informal Discussion at a Meeting of Spean Bridge, Roy Bridge and Achnacarry Community Council – 3 September 2019

There was a good crowd of people present. Cllr. Ben Thompson and Cllr. Denis Rixson were there, as was Kim Bentley (Head Teacher of Spean Bridge and Invergarry Primary Schools)

I explained that the Council was required, under statutory guidance, to keep the status of mothballed schools under review. I started to talk about the possible future of the school and about the possibility of closure, but all the suggestions from the audience were about how the school might be re-opened, and how that could be achieved. I advised that within Highland Council I was not a level that could make a decision on such an outcome. However, I acknowledged that we had come to listen to the community's views, and commented that we would only consider re-opening the school if we had very good evidence that there was sufficient demand from parents, who would have to commit in writing to taking children out of Spean Bridge PS and re-enrolling them in Roy Bridge. I suggested that any such requests should be made to Kim, who would collate them and send them to ourselves (Kim advised me afterwards that only two of the people who spoke at the meeting were parents of children currently at Spean Bridge PS. Most of the speakers were people who had historical links to the school).

I was asked what number we would need to re-open Roy Bridge but responded by saying there were no set number. We would consider the evidence if and when it arrived.

I highlighted that prior to being mothballed, Roy Bridge PS had not had a nursery class, and that if the school were re-opened it would be as it was before mothballing, with no nursery.

There were a few questions about refurbishing the former schoolhouse, which was used for a time by a partner centre nursery, and using it as classroom accommodation for a re-opened school. I advised that the modern demountable had been perfectly good accommodation and I saw no need for any additional accommodation. There had also been a classroom in the old building which could be used as a second classroom if necessary. The Council would not wish to create any more accommodation than was required.

A question was asked about whether there was a time limit on mothballing. I advised there was no set time limit, just that it be kept under regular review. I commented that it obviously wasn't good for a building to be kept empty for an extended period. This led onto questions about maintenance. I said the Council had a duty to keep the building wind and watertight, but beyond that the Roy Bridge building was not a priority for investment, for obvious reasons.

There were quite a lot of questions about the potential roll at both schools. I commented that the issue with sustaining Roy Bridge was not due to a lack of children in the catchment, but because the parents had chosen to send their children to Spean. I was asked whether, if Roy Bridge re-opened, the parents of Roy Bridge children would be required to send their children to that school, as the catchment

school. I advised that in my opinion they would not, since they had enrolled their children in Spean on the basis it was the local school at the time, and it would be “changing the goalposts” to order them to Roy Bridge. I also highlighted the right of parents to make placing requests, which THC are required to grant unless there are particular legally defined reasons for refusing them.

Views were expressed that likely housebuilding in both communities would lead to capacity issues at Spean and that it was therefore a “no-brainer” to re-open Roy Bridge. I disagreed with the comments about capacity issues at Spean but acknowledged that roll projections were “crystal ball gazing”.

Cllr. Thompson asked whether the parents at Spean Bridge had a say. I responded that re-opening Roy Bridge could happen without any consultation, since it was merely opening the doors of a school that already exists. If a closure proposal was advanced, we had to consult parents at any “affected school”, which would include Spean Bridge PS. A re-opening of Roy Bridge would potentially affect Spean PS, since a substantial move of pupils to Roy Bridge could result in Spean losing a teacher. Also it might affect the HT arrangements.

The CC Chair summarised the meeting by saying there was no community support for closure, and that THC should either re-open the school, or at least continue to mothball it. That was a fair summary of the meeting. I asked for a copy of the minutes, when they are produced.

Ian Jackson
4 September 2019