

Dear Sir,

I attended the Public Meeting on 12th January, have studied the Schools Consultation (Scotland) Act 2010, and the Consultation Paper in great detail and don't consider that the present consultation is within either the spirit or the letter of the legislation.

The Act says that it is important for the Authorities to engage constructively with communities in advance of a statutory consultation so that it does not come as a surprise to the Community and addresses the issues that concern them.

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.

The Act also 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 extra curricular 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.

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."

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.

The Guidance to the Act says: " It is essential that authorities seek and achieve high standards both in the information that underpins school consultations and in the consultation documents that are published. These will be examined closely by communities, school staff and parents, and errors in details can easily undermine confidence in a proposal. It is a key learning point from the Commission on the Delivery of Rural Education's work that a failure to provide accurate, high quality consultation documents has led to consultations being abandoned, taking much longer than expected and to increased conflict with communities. Significant inaccuracies in the information in consultation documents for a closure proposal could also be grounds for a decision to be called in by the Scottish Ministers."

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.

It would seem proper to either extend the consultation period or withdraw the proposal and start again ensuring that all parents, pupils, and the community are onboard from the outset not a mere after thought.

John W Fotheringham
Chairman
Spean Bridge, Roy Bridge and Achnacarry SCIO