

CONSULTATION MEETING – GAELIC MEDIUM CATCHMENT AREAS FOR PLOCKTON AND LOHCARRON PRIMARY SCHOOLS

HELD ON TEAMS – 9 March 2022 – 6.30pm

MINUTES OF MEETING

Panel

Cllr. Ian Cockburn - Chairperson
Ian Jackson, Education Officer, Resources
Don Esson, Area Education Manager

Also Attending

Cllr. Isabelle Campbell
Cllr. Alex MacInnes
Susan Galloway, HT, Plockton HS/Plockton PS
Jennifer Maclean, HT, Kyle and Kyleakin Primaries
Kirsteen Hotchkiss, HT, Lochcarron and Applecross Primaries
Shona Paterson, Community Learning and Development Officer, Highland Council
Jim Whannel, BnaG
Innes MacCuinn, CnaG
Lisa Marie McDonnell
Carrie Gill
Karen Macrae
Krissie Lothian
Ngaire Mackerlich
A representative of Dornie Community Council

Apologies: Lena Walker, Gaelic Development Manager
Alison MacLennan, Head Teacher, Auchtertyre PS
Melanie Sinclair, Depute Head Teacher, Plockton 3-18 cluster.

Chair - Cllr. Ian Cockburn introduced himself as Chair of the Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh Area Committee. He welcomed everyone to the meeting and explained the protocol for Teams meetings.

Cllr. Cockburn - The purpose of the meeting is to discuss the proposal to formally establish Gaelic Medium catchment areas for Plockton Primary School and Lochcarron Primary School, as set out in the recommendation to the Proposal Paper.

The Proposal has been issued as a result of statutory guidance on Gaelic Education, produced by Bòrd na Gàidhlig. The Council officials present tonight are Don Esson, Area Education Manager and Ian Jackson, Education Officer, (Resources). Ian Jackson will now describe the consultation process and the detailed reasons for issuing the Proposal.

Ian Jackson

As indicated by the Chairperson, the Council is required to introduce GM catchment areas under the terms of Statutory Guidance issued by BnaG. The setting up of catchment areas involves a statutory consultation, of which this meeting is part. We are currently in the initial phase of that consultation, which is due to end on Friday 29 April, and I would urge anyone who wants to submit views in writing to do so by that date. The purpose of tonight's meeting is to gather views, and we will try to answer any questions that are raised.

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. Once the public consultation ends on 29 April, Education Scotland becomes involved. They will look at the Proposal Paper, the note of the meeting tonight, and any written representations, and will form a view on the educational benefits of the proposal. Education Scotland will contact Plockton and Lochcarron Primary Schools, and they will be keen to hear from any parents who wish to make their views known. The Council has to take account of Education Scotland's view on the educational benefits and respond to any points raised by their report, as well as any representations received as a result of the consultation process. Following the completion of that stage, the Council will prepare a Report reviewing the consultation exercise and present it to the Council's Education Committee. The Review Report will be published at least 3 weeks before it is submitted to Committee, and anyone who responded in writing to the initial consultation will be invited to make "further representations" during those 3 weeks. Any that are made are submitted to the members of the Committee, either in advance or tabled on the day, so that members are fully informed of any issues that may have arisen. Members will also see copies of the original responses and the note of this meeting.

Because of the Statutory Guidance we mentioned earlier, the Council has to set up Gaelic Medium catchments. What is up for debate is its extent of that catchment. The GM catchment we are proposing for Plockton PS covers the catchments of Plockton PS, Kyle PS, Kyleakin PS, Auchtertyre PS and Loch Duich PS. We do not propose to include the Glenelg catchment due to the travel time and distance between Glenelg and Plockton. Up to now there has been a "custom and practice" arrangement in respect of any children who wanted to attend Gaelic Medium education from outwith the Plockton Primary catchment itself, and at the present time we do have children from outwith Plockton attending GME at the school. To an extent therefore, this Proposal is simply formalising arrangements which have already been operating in practice for Plockton PS.

In respect of Lochcarron, we are proposing to set a GM catchment that is the same as Lochcarron's EM catchment. The only other school that might be included is Applecross PS, and again we propose to exclude that catchment due to the distance and travel time between Applecross and Lochcarron.

I'm aware that in the lead up to this meeting there have been some comments about the nature of the transport to the GM provision at Plockton. It won't be long before the Chair opens the meeting for questions and comments, and people are free to make comments about the transport, but I would stress that this consultation is about creating catchment areas, and it's not about the transport arrangements within that catchment. I don't personally deal with the detailed arrangements for transport but these will vary over time, and none of us can say what those arrangements will be like in say 10 years from now. We can however pass on any concerns about transport to our colleagues.

The Chairperson then explained that Mr Esson and Mr Jackson were available to answer questions.

Q1 – I am a parent of a child who attends the GM class at Plockton, as well as a child at Sgoil-araich. Although Ian has said that the consultation is about a defining a catchment and not about transport, it does say in the Proposal Paper that transport will be via the High School bus. Whilst I don't have an issue with defining a catchment area, I have an issue with the clause that's being added in about the transport arrangements. If the consultation is not about transport, then why is that caveat included in the consultation?

A1 – Ian Jackson - That's a fair point actually. What we were trying to do with the Proposal Paper was not mislead parents. The transport is subject to tender and the precise arrangements will vary according to the number of pupils travelling and their home addresses. The Council normally tries to balance convenience with efficiency, and that comment was included in the Proposal Paper to make it clear what parents might expect. However, your point is well made.

Don Esson – I agree with Ian that it's a good point. In a sense we are formalising what's been in place for the local area, and that's the same with the transport, which is already in place. As an authority we have to look at Best Value, as well as our carbon footprint, but we fully appreciate where you are coming from.

Cllr. Campbell commented that officials had provided advice to parents about transport, via email. **Don Esson** added that the Council was happy to address any other queries raised via email.

Q2 – It might be beneficial for me to set out some of the correspondence we've already had with Don and Ian. There's a group of parents that are from the Loch Duich and Auchtertyre catchment areas, who have been highlighting the concerns

that we have about the transport. We don't necessarily have an issue with the catchment area, because we recognise that Plockton has been running for a long time as the GM school for the area, but all of the primary school children have to change buses at the High School, and some of the children have to change buses twice on their route. Also the journey time is over an hour. There's a bit of irony in saying that the distance from Applecross to Lochcarron is deemed too far for children to travel, when it's a similar distance to the journey that some children have to travel from Loch Duich and Auchtertyre, though I do acknowledge that the children from Applecross would have the Bealach to cope with, which is a special circumstance.

We feel that the current transport for Loch Duich and Auchtertyre children is not necessarily safe, and that accidents could happen to children when they change buses. The changeover at the High School is supervised by High School pupils. Are they really equipped to carry out that role? We feel that if the Loch Duich and Auchtertyre children could get onto the minibus that is already travelling down to the primary school then it would save them having to change buses and make their journey shorter. It would be putting the primary school children first, before considering the High School children. At the moment it feels the other way around, and that the primary school children are just an add-on. The whole point of creating the catchment area is to encourage parents to send their children to GME, and I feel the transport is a barrier to that. I had to reduce my work hours to permit me to send my children to GME, and that has had financial implications for us as a family. Not all families would have that option.

The Chair commented that the officials present were not the best people to deal with transport queries, as they were from the Education Service rather than the Transport Department. Different people would have to be at the meeting to resolve transport queries.

He added that the Council was currently looking at all of its transport arrangements and the cost of transport contracts. However the core issue for this meeting was the catchment area, rather than how the transport arrangements worked with that area.

Q3 – The transport arrangements are a big part of the catchment area. Leaving aside the changes etc, the actual distances are a big factor. Plockton is at the extreme end of its own proposed GM catchment, and given that, there have to be suitable arrangements for transport. I'm not necessarily saying the catchment area is too big, but the transport is something that has to be taken into consideration. What happens if an area is outwith the GM catchment? Does that mean those children would have no entitlement to Gaelic medium education?

A3 - Ian Jackson - To answer the last point, the Council's school enrolment process is based on the principle of catchment areas. Every address in Highland is allocated to an English Medium catchment and we are expanding that to define those areas where we can offer Gaelic medium education. Anyone with a GM catchment will

have the right to enrol in GME in the relevant school and to receive school transport, assuming they qualify on distance. If you are outwith a GM catchment you would not have the right to enrol in GME or to receive transport, and would have to put in a placing request to attend GME. Whilst it's not for me to say how parents should respond to the consultation, I would recommend that people think carefully before suggesting that a particular area is taken out of the proposed GM catchment, and that's for the reasons given.

If there are concerns about travel times, one possibility would be for parents to look for some form of new GM provision within the locality. There is a procedure for assessing such requests. If a certain number of parents were to request GME in their local school, Highland Council would have to consider that, and that might be a better solution than simply removing certain areas from the GM catchment.

Going back to the earlier question, we know there is shortly to be a tendering exercise for the school transport routes. The new tenders are due to come into effect next April, but there's a long lead-in process to that. We need to pass on the message that, in respect of the new tenders, parents in the area are very concerned to have an improved arrangement in terms of how their children are transported to Plockton for GME. One of those improvements could be through use of the Glenelg bus.

Q4 – I just want to clarify that I am not advocating reducing the catchment area. I'm not trying to cut myself off from transport! More consideration though should be given to what the transport within the catchment involves for children as young as four.

A4 – Ian Jackson – The purpose of a consultation is to listen to local views. That's why we are here tonight, to hear views, take them away and consider them.

Don Esson - We recognise the huge commitment of the parents to GME, and the huge logistical issues around accessing it. We welcome any suggestions for ways in which we can enhance provision and support GME, including by means of transport.

Q5 - Cllr. Campbell asked whether the focal point for GME had to be in Plockton, or could it be in one of the other schools that was more accessible?

A5 – Ian Jackson – I think Highland Council would be very loath to move the provision from Plockton to any other school, and in fact that would require a statutory consultation as it would represent the closure of the GM department at Plockton Primary. What might be more realistic would be to add another provision within the ASG, on top of Plockton. There might be some downsides to that, in terms of reducing the numbers at each GM provision, but it could potentially be done. I would say that possibly Kyle Primary doesn't have suitable accommodation for expansion into GME, particularly with respect to the nursery. Auchtertyre might possibly be a

better location, but there's a variety of factors we would have to look at, and there's a process for that.

Cllr. Campbell – Additional provision is actually what I meant.

Q6 – I agree that additional GM provision might result in a reduction of pupils at Plockton, but there's also the potential to attract more pupils to an additional provision. After the summer there will be 6 pupils starting GME at Plockton from Loch Duich and Auchtertyre, but of course if they were in new provision they would lose the advantage of learning from the older pupils. In terms of nursery, there is the "issue" of capacity at Plockton Nursery. Myself and other parents have not been able to send our children to sgoil-araich when we wanted to, and I believe there were only 5 spaces available for after this summer. This needs to be looked at if GME in Lochalsh is going to expand.

A6 – Ian Jackson – You raise a number of good points. You're right about the capacity of the nursery at Plockton, and if there is demand from parents, the Council would have to look at additional provision with an open mind.

Q7 – Cllr. Campbell – I have great concerns about the suggestion that the pupils change buses under the supervision of senior pupils. I would like to ask Don and Ian whether they knew about this?

A7 – Don Esson – We have been advised by the Transport Unit that the pupils are supervised when changing buses at Plockton High, as well as at any other changeovers. Also, as mentioned, the retendering process provides an opportunity to re-examine our arrangements.

Q8 – In the past parents have been told that it's not feasible to put on specific buses for GME in this area, but I was just wondering whether this had actually been costed out? Has any specific funding source been investigated that could help out – such as ring-fenced funding for specifically for Gaelic education? I know there are funds available for promoting GME.

A8 – Don Esson – I know that the Transport Unit have looked at the cost implications of putting in dedicated transport, and they are very significant. All LAs face huge funding challenges, but we could investigate the possibility of additional funding from Bòrd na Gàidhlig. At the moment I don't know.

Jim Whannel, Director of Education at Bòrd na Gàidhlig, advised that the Bòrd does not have any ability to fund educational provision. However, the LA can apply to the Scottish Government for funding under Gaelic Specific Grant, so that might be an avenue for the LA to consider.

The Chair commented that if we were setting up a Gaelic catchment, we need to sort out the transport for that catchment. A lot of good questions had been raised tonight and Don and Ian will take these away for further consideration.

I would like to thank everything for coming. Can I remind everyone that representations should be sent to Ian Jackson, email Education.Consultations@highland.gov.uk (address circulated in the letter), or via the online form, to arrive **no later than the 29^h of April 2022**.

Finally, I am to advise you that the record of the meeting will be made available at least 3 weeks before the meeting of the Education Committee where it is intended that the report of the meeting, plus any submissions/representations and the view of Education Scotland on the proposal, will be considered.