

Frances Maclean
Chair, Edinbane Parent Council

Bill Alexander
Director of Care and Learning
Highland Council
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9th March 2015

Dear Mr Alexander

Re: NW Skye SSER

Following the ECAS Committee meeting of 14 January 2015, we have studied the webcast of the discussion surrounding the NW Skye Schools proposal.

Firstly, I attach a copy of the Edinbane Community Development Proposal of 12 Jan 2015. It is clear on the webcast that the Chair and yourself were unwilling to discuss the Edinbane community proposal, despite several Members expressing the view that it significantly altered the situation. The proposal still stands, and we feel that it deserves proper consideration. It offers a viable option for Highland Council to continue rural education provision and underpin community development work. The permanent closure of a rural school is surely best avoided if a viable, sustainable solution is at hand.

Secondly, we welcome the ECAS Committee's recognition that Edinbane may not be best served by an amalgamated school in Dunvegan, due to existing travel patterns towards Portree. As such, we welcome the suggestion of consultation on dual-zoning to enable Edinbane families to use MacDiarmid.

We have however grave concerns that this new consultation will not be carried out in good faith. Dual zoning is financially inefficient and Highland Council has demonstrated a clear policy against dual-zoning since 2008. We find it difficult to believe that Highland Council would actually implement dual-zoning, even if the consultation response indicated strong support. It would be disingenuous of the Council to make dual-zoning the subject of consultation, if it is not a genuine and sustainable long-term option.

Our concerns are reinforced by Norma Young's letter of 4/3/15 to parents, which tells us that the option being considered is *"to automatically grant placing requests, with school transport, to MacDiarmid Primary School for any pupils attending Edinbane Primary or Knockbreck Primary, at the date those schools closed"*. This is NOT dual zoning – it is a private arrangement for only the children (and their siblings) who happen to be enrolled at Edinbane at the date of closure. It does not address the long-term issue of Edinbane perhaps being forced into the wrong catchment. Nor does it reflect the discussion that took place at the ECAS Committee meeting on 14 Jan, where Cllr Drew Miller made clear that he could not support the proposal unless the issue of catchments was resolved. We consider it an abuse of procedure to push through a recommendation for school closures without resolving this fundamental issue first.

Furthermore, the Committee's Recommendation iv (to initiate a new consultation on dual zoning) is contradicted by Recommendation iii. It is clear from the webcast of the meeting that what was intended was a consultation on a continuing dual-zoning for families resident in the present catchments of Edinbane and Struan, now and in the

future. The Councillor for Caithness intervened specifically on that understanding to warn that acceptance of dual-zoning for North West Skye would re-open the issue in Caithness, where it had been refused, and elsewhere in the Highland Region. You rejected that, and expressly confirmed that the recommended consultation would be carried out in accordance with the new legislation.

But if the Council takes a final decision now on Recommendation iii to amalgamate the existing catchments, no subsequent consultation on zoning can be carried out competently in accordance with the new legislation. In effect, the issue of dual zoning will have been predetermined by the decision on Recommendation iii. This is the inevitable result of trying to break up what is a single proposal into parts which can be determined separately.

The straight amalgamation of the four catchment zones is integral to the NW Skye proposal. Any alteration to the catchment zone impacts substantially on the whole proposal. The Educational Benefits Statement, for example, relies on pupil numbers being sufficient for a minimum of three classes. If Edinbane and part of Struan catchments are re-zoned, it is highly likely that three classes would not be achieved in the new school,¹ and the EBS would no longer stand.

We see in this week's issue of the West Highland Free Press that Norma Young has assured our local Councillors that there is plenty of capacity at MacDiarmid school. We question, therefore, why Caledonian Economics' "Options Appraisal"² rejected a merger of Edinbane and MacDiarmid (Option J) on grounds that MacDiarmid had insufficient capacity. If those grounds were incorrect, then Option J should be re-visited.

Our understanding is that the full Council will consider the Committee's recommendations at their meeting on 12 March. We do not think it is open to the Council to take a decision on the proposal, or any part of it, before the additional consultation on dual zoning has been carried out in accordance with the new legislation, and in good faith, and proper consideration has been given to the Edinbane Community Development Proposal. In our view the Committee's recommendations for NW Skye are part of a single proposal for NW Skye, which is what went to public consultation, and therefore can only be determined as a whole. If the Council fail to act accordingly, we will challenge these procedural failings when we ask the Scottish Ministers to call in the proposal.

We expect you to draw the attention of the Council specifically to this letter at their meeting on 12 March.

Yours sincerely

Frances Maclean

cc Cllrs Drew Millar, John Gordon, Ian Renwick and Hamish Fraser
Alasdair Christie, Chair of ECAS Committee
ECAS Committee Members
Highland Council CE Steve Barron
Deputy CE Michelle Morris
Dave Thompson MSP

¹ Appendix 8 of Highland Council's Final Report made available on 8 Dec 2014

² Table 7-1, Section 7.3, pages 28-29 of the Report "Portree High School ASG: Dunvegan and North West Skye SSER" by Caledonian Economics, 12 May 2014

Dear Mr Alexander

NW SKYE SSER

As a concerned parent of children attending Knockbreck Primary School facing closure, I presume that you will be able to announce at the HC meeting on 12 March 2015 how you have managed to solve the issue of unacceptably long proposed journey times for children as young as 4 ½ years travelling from the various parts of Waternish to Dunvegan as you clearly stated you would at the ECAS meeting in January.

You will know from the submissions during the 'consultation' period that some children could be spending 1 ½ hours travelling EACH day on mainly poorly maintained single track road. There are no two lane carriageways on Waternish. As someone with a Social Work background, I would presume that child welfare would be quite high on your professional agenda but fail to see how this amount of travelling fits with this. I also understand that the HC policy on school travel is not to exceed 30 minutes.

Mr Ian Jackson admitted at the one and only public 'consultation' meeting that journey distances and times had not been properly looked at and that the Education Dept/CalEc had only taken the shortest distance between Knockbreck School and Dunvegan School and the further flung areas of Waternish which has many side roads had been omitted or ignored.

Councillor Millar has quite rightly recently stated that a new school should be built in Broadford to replace the existing school. He further stated that due to the distance involved, it should not be merged with Kyleakin or Kyle. All these schools are linked by a two lane trunk road with public transport and much CLOSER than Waternish is to Dunvegan.

For your information, I have attached a few photos showing the typical state of the roads in Waternish and how narrow they are. You may notice that there are no bus stop signs. This is because there is no public transport.

From the webcast of the ECAS meeting in January, it appeared that you and Mr Alasdair Christie were very keen to pass the closure proposal as soon as possible despite pertinent questions from some councillors being unanswered and I can only ask why the SSER is not deferred to give time for a proper consultation, particularly as no building work has started and therefore no expensive contract penalties can be imposed. Any properly run organisation always considers all the relevant options and issues prior to making an informed decision NOT the other way about.

Yours sincerely

William MacGillivray