

## **CONSULTATION MEETING – GAELIC MEDIUM CATCHMENT AREA FOR NEWTONMORE PRIMARY SCHOOL**

**HELD ON TEAMS – 31 AUGUST 2021 – 6.30pm**

### **MINUTES OF MEETING**

#### **Panel**

Cllr. Bill Lobban - Chairperson  
Brian Porter, Head of Resources  
Ian Jackson, Education Officer, Resources  
Fiona Shearer, Area Education Manager  
Lena Walker, Gaelic Education Support Officer

#### **In Attendance**

Kenny Wright – parent  
Alistair McGill – parent  
Sandra MacKay – parent  
Stuart MacKellaig – parent  
Graham Fraser – Newtonmore Community Council  
Sarah Fraser – Head Teacher Newtonmore Primary  
Marie Robinson – GM Teacher at Newtonmore PS  
Cllr. Muriel Cockburn, Highland Council  
Cllr. Pippa Hadley, Highland Council  
Margaret Mulholland – Gaelic Community Development Officer  
Joan Esson, Education Scotland  
Magaidh Wentworth, CnamP  
Innes MacCuinn, CnamP  
Gavin Musgrove, Strathspey and Badenoch Herald

#### **Apologies**

Ian Adamson, Head Teacher, Kingussie High School

**Chair Bill Lobban** introduced himself as Convener of The Highland Council and Chair of the Local Committee. Cllr Lobban then welcomed everyone to the Consultation for Newtonmore Primary School and apologised for the cancellation of the recent meeting. and explained the protocol for Teams meetings.

**Cllr Lobban** explained to those who haven't participated in a Teams meeting, keep your microphone muted if you aren't actually speaking, as that reduces feedback. You should see a microphone symbol on the bar on the top of your screen, which you can

toggle on and off. Secondly, Teams has a system under which anyone who wants to ask a question or make a point should “raise their hand” to attract the Chair’s attention. You do this by clicking on the hand symbol on the bar at the top of your screen. To keep the meeting manageable asked that anyone who wants to ask a question alerts me by clicking on the “raise your hand” symbol, and by clicking it off once you have finished speaking.

The purpose of the meeting is to discuss the proposal to formally establish a Gaelic Medium catchment area for Newtonmore 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 Brian Porter, Head of Education Resources; Fiona Shearer, Area Education Manager; Ian Jackson, Education Officer, (Resources); and Lena Walker, Gaelic Development Manager.

Ian Jackson will now describe the consultation process and the detailed reasons for issuing the Proposal.

**Mr Jackson** advised that 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 a catchment area 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 3 September, and I would urge anyone who wants to submit views on 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 3 September, 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 Newtonmore Primary, 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 further representations 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 a Gaelic Medium catchment. What is up for debate is its extent of that catchment. The GM catchment we are proposing is the whole of the Kingussie High School catchment. 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 Newtonmore Primary catchment itself, and at the present time we do have children from the other primary school catchments attending GME at Newtonmore. It’s fair to say that this Proposal is simply formalising arrangements which have already been operating in practice.

At this stage in the evening I wouldn’t normally talk in more detail about the proposal, but I’m aware of press reports of local concern around the school’s capacity, so I’ll make a few comments about that before we later go on to the Q and A session. It’s always difficult to try and predict the future, but as far as we can reasonably look ahead, the Council does not consider there is any significant prospect of the school going over capacity. The number of classes in a primary school depends on the number of children and the HC has a set of bandings to determine this. For example, schools with 20-47 pupils are allocated 2 teachers, those with 48-71 pupils have three teachers, and those with between 72 and 96 children have four teachers. Where a school offers both Gaelic and English medium education, the two streams are treated as separate schools and staffed accordingly. For the current year, the school has 77 children in EM and 33 in GM, which means it has 4 English Medium and 2 GM classes. With 33 children in GM, we are quite a long way from the 48 that would be needed for a third GM class.

The vast majority of the children attending Newtonmore PS are from Newtonmore itself, and therefore any rise in GM pupils will be matched by an equivalent decline in children attending EM. Based on the current nursery numbers, we anticipate that in the next two years the school will operate with 3 EM and 2 GM classes, so one class less than at present.

It is theoretically possible that an unexpected and significant increase in GM pupils coming from other parts of the area could create pressure on the school accommodation. There is no particular reason to suppose that the creation of the GM catchment would create a sudden increase in demand for GME, but if this scenario were to arise, the Council would not refuse places in Newtonmore PS to children from Newtonmore itself (whether for GM or EM). The likely solution to such circumstances would be to create additional GM provision in either Kingussie or Aviemore, thereby reducing pressure on Newtonmore PS.

In summary, the benefit of the Proposal is that we're giving clarity to parents in respect of GME, making clear where entitlement exists and where it doesn't exist, and that's an improvement on the existing arrangements based on custom and practice. There is therefore no current evidence to support the suggestion that Newtonmore Primary is in danger of turning away pupils from its own community, due to accommodation pressures.

**The Chairperson** invited Lena Walker to speak about the Gaelic educational issues set out in the Proposal Paper.

**Mrs Walker** advised that Gaelic Medium Education is about bilingualism and that this is about a lot more than two languages. There are 3 main advantages we can speak to, social, linguistic and cognitive. Socially, children have access to two cultures which in turn leads to more tolerance to and more interest in other cultures. Linguistically, they have an earlier awareness of sounds and words with an enhanced language learning ability and this can lead to earlier reading. Cognitively, there are many benefits which are widely published and all 3 advantages are backed by research. Therefore, learning to speak Gaelic is a wonderful opportunity to provide children with the benefits of bilingualism and bilingualism is essential to the survival of Gaelic.

The Statutory Guidance recommends that catchment areas be developed to provide clarity for parents about the entitlement to GME for their children and it is important to note that provision of GME is demand lead by parents.

The Highland Council Gaelic Language Plan is a statutory document, following the requirements of the Gaelic Language Act, where Highland Council makes a clear commitment to increasing Gaelic useage, increasing the number of Gaelic speakers, enhancing the profile of Gaelic and generating a positive image of the language. For that reason, the Highland Council has a strong focus in Gaelic Medium Education.

**The Chairperson** then explained Mr Porter, Mrs Shearer, Mr Jackson and Mrs Walker were available to answer questions.

**Q1** – (Stuart MacKellaig) – The only question I have in respect of this proposal is the decision of Newtonmore as the school of choice for GME. Why was Kingussie not chosen? It has a lower school roll than Newtonmore and has a larger plot to expand into for the future that Newtonmore does not.

**A1 (Brian Porter)** – This consultation exercise is not about establishing new Gaelic Medium provision, it's about formalising the catchment for the existing provision. The established provision is in Newtonmore and any change to that would have its own consequences. The majority of the pupils who are accessing GME are from within the Newtonmore catchment, and so any change to current arrangements for GME could result in the displacement of those pupils. This is about more than just the physical

environment of the school. The reality is that we have this established provision within Newtonmore and that the majority of the GM pupils reside near the school. This is a process to formalise a catchment, to provide clarity to parents going forward. As indicated earlier, we do not believe the numbers indicate that a capacity impact will arise at Newtonmore Primary. Notwithstanding that, what we will do, is invest and address capacity issues where they do exist, and this would be considered should the situation arise.

**A2 (Sarah Fraser)** Gaelic Medium has been established at Newtonmore for approximately 30 years, and the reason why it was established in Newtonmore as opposed to Kingussie was due to parental demand in this area, as far as I am led to believe.

**Q2 – (Stuart MacKellaig)** Given that Newtonmore Primary School on more than one occasion has reached its capacity, and Kingussie Primary hasn't, it is clear, whilst appreciating that the majority of GM pupils are from Newtonmore and that this isn't about GME versus EME, it is essentially about the cuts made from 6 classes to 3 classes for English Medium, and also the potential for the school to have too many pupils. Any way you cut it, introducing pupils from other areas raises the possibility of there being an over-subscribed school.

**A3 – (Brian Porter)** – Speaking from experience, for context, we have 20 GME primary provisions. Statutory Guidance requires us to create catchments for GME and we have completed 11 to date. In past exercises we have experienced similar legitimate comments and questions that arise, but we haven't seen the situation where the formalisation of the catchment leads to a sudden change on the ground. We haven't seen, in other locations, a significant influx of GME pupils from other locations. Often, as in the case of Newtonmore, the majority of the pupils accessing GME are resident within the school catchment anyway, so if GME were not on offer the pupils would still be attending the school. There is often a fairly limited impact from other schools within the ASG. Ian made the point that from our own modelling, we do not expect that the concerns you express would arise here. Were that to be the case, as unlikely as it may be, we would step up to address the need for additional capacity.

**Q3 – (Stuart MacKellaig)** – Finally, to finish my point, the Proposal made it clear the Council were looking to reduce the number of classes and move teaching staff accordingly. My question is therefore, once these cuts have been made, it is possible to say to the public in general, that regardless of what movements occur in GME or EME, that no Newtonmore resident will be affected, if a child is sent to Newtonmore. That was the major missing point in the proposal. I find it quite strange that whilst this is such an important point, it has not been included in the Proposal, that no Newtonmore resident will ever be affected by the influx of more children into the school, regardless of whether they choose GME or EME.

**A4 – (Bill Lobban)** – That commitment was made at the start of the meeting.

**A5 – (Ian Jackson)** – We are not looking to reduce the number of English medium classes at Newtonmore Primary. There are certain bandings that attract a certain number of teachers and our *forecasts* are that if the current pattern of increases in Gaelic Medium continues, that will lead to a reduction in the number of children attending English Medium, and a fall in the number of English Medium classes from 4 to 3. That's if the forecasts are realised - there is no intention to produce this effect. It is purely a matter of parental choice. In terms of your second point - and I appreciate that you joined the meeting as I was already making my earlier remarks - we didn't include that statement because we didn't see it as an issue. We saw no prospect of that situation arising therefore we saw no need for it to be covered in the paper. As it's been raised as a local concern, which is quite legitimate, I had included in my introductory remarks the commitment that we will not refuse any child from the Newtonmore catchment a place at Newtonmore PS as a result of pupils coming in from elsewhere for GME. If the number of children from Kingussie and Aviemore attending Newtonmore for GME was sufficient to cause a capacity issue for Newtonmore, then the obvious solution would be to look towards introducing additional GME provision for the ASG, for example at Kingussie.

**A6 – (Fiona Shearer)** – To reiterate what Ian was saying, there is no intention to reduce the number of classes. The predicted fall in the number of the EM classes is simply a reflection of the projected roll. Regardless of GME or EME, children are entitled to go to their catchment school. So, if a child moves into a school mid-session and the classes are full and are set for the year, they would still be guaranteed a place as soon as one becomes available. Across the board, we look at projected and forecasted roles. We review each year based on school roles in February, May and again in August for up to date figures and set classes for each school year. There is no intention to cut or reduce classes for Newtonmore families.

There being no further comments, Bill Lobban thanked everyone for coming. Cllr Lobban reminded everyone that representations should be sent to Ian Jackson, email [Education.Consultations@highland.gov.uk](mailto:Education.Consultations@highland.gov.uk) (address circulated in the letter), or via the online form, to arrive **no later than Friday 3 September 2021**.

Cllr Lobban advised 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.