

MINUTE OF PUBLIC MEETING HELD AT MOUNT PLEASANT PRIMARY SCHOOL
25 JUNE 2019

CONSULTATION ON A PROPOSAL TO CREATE A GAELIC MEDIUM CATCHMENT AREA FOR MOUNT PLEASANT PRIMARY SCHOOL

Panel

Raymond Bremner, Councillor (Chair)
Norma Young, Area Care and Learning Manager (West)
Ian Jackson, Education Officer, Highland Council
Dolina Grant, Gaelic Community Learning and Development Officer

Apologies: Jacquelyn Jennett, Area Care and Learning Manager (North)

19 members of the public attended the meeting, plus Cllr. W. MacKay (Ward 3), Suzanne Urquhart (Head Teacher of Mount Pleasant Primary School), Joanne McHale (Bòrd na Gàidhlig) and another member of the school staff.

The Chairperson began by welcoming everyone to the meeting, by introducing himself and the officials present. He commented that there were a few things to get through during tonight's meeting. The meeting had originally been called to discuss the proposed creation of a Gaelic Medium (GM) catchment area for Mount Pleasant, but he also wanted to set some serious time aside for certain other pressing matters that had arisen in the meantime. He proposed to deal with the catchment area issue first before moving onto more general issues around Gaelic Medium education (GME) in the local area. Copies of the Proposal Paper and appendices were distributed. The Proposal Paper has been issued as a result of statutory guidance issued by Bòrd na Gàidhlig (BnaG). The Chairperson then asked Ian Jackson to describe the consultation process.

Ian 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 was part. We were in the initial phase of that consultation, which was due to end on 30 August 2019. The purpose of tonight's meeting is to gather views, and we would try to answer any questions that are raised. Any questions that cannot be answered tonight, and which require further research, will be responded to in due course. There is a very clear obligation on the Council to consider each and every one of the comments received, including those made at the meeting tonight.

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 30 August, 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 visit Mount Pleasant Primary in the autumn, and they will be keen to meet with 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 take a Final Report to the Care, Learning and Housing Committee of the Council. As part of the inclusive process, the Final 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. After considering the outcome of consultation, members will then create a catchment, either as set out in this proposal, or in an amended form.

The Chairperson then asked Norma Young to explain the educational aspects of the proposal.

Norma Young commented that, before she addressed the proposal set out in the paper, she was aware that there were a number of other issues, particularly in relation to staffing, that parents wanted to bring to the Council. She was aware parents had written to the Chief Executive and others, and would be very happy to take question on these matters at the end.

Norma continued by commenting that some people might wonder why we were creating a catchment area when these other matters were outstanding. As Ian had alluded to earlier, it was a requirement of statutory guidance issued by BnaG. Council staff had been going round the Highlands on a rolling programme of creating GM catchments.

The Proposal Paper sets out how Highland Council is seeking to make GME as accessible for as many parents as possible in the Thurso area. One of the key features is providing clarity on entitlement to transport to GME. The educational benefits around the Proposal are set out in paragraphs 7.1 and 7.2, and we consider that the Proposal will help consolidate the existing GME provision. The clarification around transport will assist the Head Teacher in advising parents who are considering enrolling in GME.

The Chairperson then opened the meeting to the Q and A session.

Q1 – In the past, we have had someone who was enrolled in GME at Mount Pleasant and who moved to Strathy. When they moved they were promised that they could continue to get transport to GME but after the move took place that

promise was not kept. If we have another case of a pupil who is enrolled in GME but who moves 20/30 miles away, would they be given transport?

A1 (Ian Jackson) – One of the advantages of this Proposal is that it will provide clarity with respect to transport. The Highland Council works on the basis of providing school transport to the catchment school for a particular address. In most cases that is the local English Medium school, but it follows that if a pupil is within a designated Gaelic Medium catchment, they will get transport. The Paper before you proposes that the GM catchment for Mount Pleasant will be the whole of the Thurso ASG, so children living within that area will get transport. The Paper does mention that if a pupil is coming from a considerable distance, we will try to make use of existing transport to Thurso High, and that is to prevent the Council incurring unreasonable expense in relation to GM transport. These cases would be judged on a case by case basis, as it may not be appropriate to place a single P1 pupil on a High School bus, whereas as the child moved up through primary they may become ready to travel on the High School bus. The intention is though, that once we define this catchment, that if you are within the new catchment and you want to access GME at Mount Pleasant, then you will get transport.

The Chairperson commented that the response did not answer the question. The question posed was in relation to someone from outside the Thurso HS area (e.g. in Strathy). Could consideration be given to providing transport in a case where someone was accessing GME from within the Thurso ASG, but then moved just outside of that area. In the case mentioned GME had been invested in the children, but then they moved outside the catchment and even though a promise was given it was not adhered to.

A1 (Ian Jackson) – Excuse my ignorance of the local geography. I knew Strathy was somewhere to the west of Thurso but I hadn't realised it was outside the Thurso HS catchment. In Highland school transport is based on the principle of the school catchment. Normally, if someone chooses to move out of catchment, then they don't get school transport to their old school. They would get transport to the new school, assuming they met the distance criterion. It's a little different with GME, I will admit, because in the scenario you describe, the family moved to an area that doesn't offer GME. We would have to consider each case on its merits, but I couldn't guarantee that a family who moved out of catchment would continue to receive transport, because the system is based around the idea of catchments, and in the scenario you outline the Council would have to take the potential costs into account.

(Norma Young) – I appreciate the argument that in this scenario considerable resource had been invested on providing GME for the child. I think the way to address this would be to write into the Paper that any such case would be considered by the Transport Appeals Committee. It should not be for a single officer to decide on such a matter. You mention that a promise was made to the family. I didn't know who that person was, but it sounds to me that whoever they were, they

didn't actually have the delegated authority to take that decision, and therefore it wasn't followed through. If it was written in that such cases would be referred to the Transport Appeals Committee, that would be the course of action that would cover another similar such case.

Q2 – Could that not have been advised to the family at the time?

A2 (Norma Young) – I don't know about this particular case, when did it happen?

Q3 (follow-up) – Three years ago.

A2 (Norma Young) – So that's why I think we need to future-proof our policy.

The Chairperson commented that he knew of the case, and suggested that the family appealed at the time, but the Transport Appeals Committee did not uphold their appeal. He suggested that, because this is a consultation, officers will have to consider the point being raised. We now have the ability to look back on our experience with the GM arrangements at Mount Pleasant and say, "that didn't work, we need to change it". The money that was invested in that family, and the outcomes that investment would have had, should have been taken on board, and those factors need to be set out that out in this consultation exercise.

(Norma Young) – One of the things we may need to write in is the nature of the advice we provide to the Transport Appeals Committee, to ensure they are aware that appeals around GME are not on the same basis as other appeals, and that the Committee needs to consider the effect on children's education, in respect of GME.

The Chairperson commented that that there would be advantages in considering this as a result of a formal consultation exercise. That would allow us to write something into the rules of the Appeals Committee, which had been endorsed by the Care, Learning and Housing (CLH) Committee.

Q4 – Cllr. W. MacKay (from the floor) – I've been a member of the Transport Appeals Committee for 10 years, and I've yet to see a case from this area. I don't think this did go the Appeals Committee.

The Chairperson asked Cllr. MacKay whether the Transport Appeals Committee operated to guidelines that were regularly updated, in the manner that was suggested earlier.

Cllr. MacKay commented that everyone was given a fair hearing at an Appeals Committee

The Chairperson added that anyone could feed into the consultation process, so the very family that was mentioned could contribute a response to the consultation.

Ian Jackson commented that the family would not have been directly notified, as letters had been issued to the parents at Mount Pleasant Primary. However, the

consultation papers were available on the schools consultation page on the HC website. Anyone could go to that page and see this and other school consultations. An email address was provided for responses to be sent to, and there was also an online form for the submission of comments.

Q5 – I'm not sure using the High School bus will work for taking pupils to the primary school, because there is a time difference.

A5 (Ian Jackson) – What is the time difference?

Q6 (follow-up) – 8.30am at the Thurso High and 9.00am at the primary school. There's also the half-day issue on the Friday.

A6 (Ian Jackson) – OK, so quite a big difference then. The half day at the High School on Fridays is one we had previously thought about. The logistics of school transport is something that is dealt with by another department within the Council – by Community Services who cover roads and transport issues. The Care and Learning Service specifies that we need x number of children to be delivered to and collected from certain locations at certain times. There might be some allowances around that. For example they might deliver to the High School at 8.25am and then to Mount Pleasant for 8.40am. I'm not saying that's how it would work but these are the things our colleagues would look at. Where there's a substantial time difference, such as on a Friday afternoon, we would probably have to look at a different arrangement. The Transport Unit would look at the most cost-effective way of delivering transport that is also reasonable. It's difficult to say in any individual case how transport would be organised, but those are the sorts of factors that would be considered.

The Chairperson suggested that the solution of the primary school children sharing transport with high school children might not therefore be applied in every case.

Ian Jackson commented that each case would be judged on its own merits, but that the Council would try to keep down costs.

The Chairperson commented that Care and Learning staff would need to speak to Community Services to ensure that the points being raised tonight as part of consultation were covered in the response.

Norma Young commented that the key words were "cost-effectiveness" but also "reasonable".

There being no other comments on the Proposal Paper, the **Chairperson** reminded those present of the closing date for responses – 30 August 2019 – and of where responses should be sent, either via letter or via email, or by using the online form. A record of this meeting would be made available at least 3 weeks before the

meeting of the Care, Learning and Housing Committee that considered the results of consultation. The members of the Committee would have a chance to see the note and all other representations before the meeting. Following the decision of the Committee, the minutes would be submitted to the full Council for ratification.

MEETING CLOSED.