



HIGHLAND COUNCIL

EDUCATION AND LEARNING SERVICE

REVIEW OF THE PROPOSAL TO DISCONTINUE PROVISION OF EDUCATION AT TORRIDON PRIMARY SCHOOL, RE-ASSIGNING ITS CATCHMENT AREA TO THAT OF SHIELDAIG PRIMARY SCHOOL

This report has been prepared following a review of the proposal:

- To discontinue education provision at Torridon Primary School, re-assigning its catchment area to that of Shieldaig Primary School.

Having had regard (in particular) to:

- Relevant written representations received by the Council (from any person) during the consultation period.
- Oral representations made to it (by any person) at the public meeting held at Torridon Community Centre on 28 March 2023.
- The report from Education Scotland.

This document has been issued by the Highland Council under the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010.

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1.0 Background

- 1.1 Highland Council's Education Committee, at its meeting on 15 February 2023, agreed that a statutory consultation be undertaken on the proposal to discontinue the provision of education at Torridon Primary School, re-assigning its catchment to that of Shieldaig Primary School.
- 1.2 **Appendix A** is the original consultative paper and provides full details of the above proposal. **Appendices B - E** are the appendices to the original proposal.
- 1.3 Torridon Primary School has been mothballed since June 2012.
- 1.4 Having once again reviewed the status of Torridon Primary, it is the Council's view that there are insufficient children of suitable age within the Torridon catchment to provide for a viable school, and that consequently Torridon Primary School should close. Further details on this are provided in Sections 6 and 10 below.
- 1.5 Torridon Primary School is designated as a rural school under the terms of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010. In that context, the Council has had special regard to:
 - any viable alternative to the closure proposal; alternatives were considered at Sections 5-9 of the Proposal Paper (**Appendix A**) and have been reconsidered again in the light of responses received to consultation – see Sections 6-10 below.
 - the likely effect on the local community in consequence of the proposal (if implemented), with reference in particular to (a) the sustainability of the community, (b) the availability of the school's premises and its other facilities for use by the community. The effect on the local community was considered at Section 14 of the Proposal Paper (**Appendix A**) and is further considered at Sections 8 and 10 below, taking into account representations received during consultation.
 - the likely effect caused by any different travelling arrangements that may be required in consequence of the proposal (if implemented) with reference in particular to;
 - the effect caused by such travelling arrangements including (in particular), (i) that on the school's pupils and staff and any other users of the school's facilities, (ii) any environmental impact. The effects on school transport were considered at Section 12 of the Proposal Paper, (**Appendix A**) and reconsidered again in the light of responses received to consultation – see Sections 6 and 10 below.

2.0 Consultation process

- 2.1 The formal consultation period Monday 27 February 2023 to Friday 21 April 2023. Written representations on the proposal were sought from interested parties as defined within the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010, as amended.
- 2.2 In accordance with statutory requirements, the following were consulted:

- (i) Parents of pupils attending Shildaig Primary School; including parents of pre-school pupils.
- (ii) The Parent Council of Shildaig Primary School
- (iii) Members of Parliament and Members of Scottish Parliament for the area affected by the proposal.
- (iv) Staff of Shildaig Primary Schools.
- (v) Trade Union representatives.
- (vi) Torridon and Kinlochewe Community Council
- (vii) Shildaig Community Council
- (viii) Garve and District Community Council
- (ix) Education Scotland

2.3 The proposal document was also advertised on the Highland Council website.

2.4 A public meeting was held at Torridon Community Council on 28 March 2023. The meeting was advertised in advance on the Highland Council website, Twitter Account and Facebook page, and in the *Ross-shire Journal*. The minute of the meeting is at **Appendix 2**.

3.0 Review of proposals following the consultation period

3.1 Following receipt of written representations received by Highland Council and consideration of oral representations made at the public meeting, officials reviewed the proposals.

3.2 The feedback from the consultation was considered by a range of Council officials. This ensured that the Council met the requirements of the 2010 Act.

3.3 The outcome of this review process is reflected in the response, conclusion and recommendations outlined below.

4.0 Responses received

4.1 A list of those who responded in writing during the public consultation is at **Appendix 3**. There were 4 written responses (not including the pupil questionnaires). Copies of three of these can also be found at Appendices 3ii-3iv. One respondent requested that their response be treated as confidential to Highland councillors and Council officials, so has been circulated separately from the appendices to this Report.

4.2 The views of pupils at Shildaig Primary School (which included the pupils living within the Torridon catchment area) were sought by means of an age adapted questionnaire. Appendices 3i and 3ii summarises their views, which are also discussed at Section 5 below.

5.0 Overview of Issues raised during the consultation period

5.1 There were 20 responses from pupils. Six pupils thought the Council should re-open Torridon Primary School, whilst 14 thought the school should continue to

be mothballed. None of the pupils supported closing the school. The detailed comments from pupils can be viewed at Appendix 3ii.

- 5.2 Education Scotland Inspectors who visited the school reported that children from the Torridon school catchment area who met with HM Inspectors had mixed views about the proposal. They liked the idea of Torridon Primary School re-opening but did feel if that were to happen they would miss their friends who attend Shieldaig Primary School. They are settled in Shieldaig Primary School and spoke positively about their teachers.
- 5.3 The arguments advanced by the pupils in favour of re-opening the school, are set out at Issues 1-3 below, together with arguments put forward in support of closure. The responses encountered by Education Scotland are set out at paragraph 7.4 below.
- 5.4 There were 4 written responses received from other stakeholders. One of these requested that the response be treated as confidential to Highland councillors and officials, so has been circulated separately from the appendices to this Report. All four responses expressed reservations about, or varying degrees of opposition to, the closure proposal. Concerns were expressed over a range of issues including the effect of the closure on the community, pre-school provision, travel times to Shieldaig from the outlying parts of the Torridon catchment, the possibility of an increase in the number of local children, the condition of the Torridon school building and its future use, and building/design issues at Shieldaig Primary School. Two of the respondents raised concerns about historical issues around the mothballing of the school in 2012.
- 5.5 The public meeting was well-attended, given the small size of the local community. The issues raised at the meeting were similar to those expressed in the written responses.
- 5.6 The main arguments put forward are summarised below, together with the responses from the Council. Where different responses raise similar issues, these have been “grouped” for the purposes of the response.

6.0 Responses to the Issues raised in Public Consultation

- 6.1 Arguments advanced by the children in favour of continued mothballing or re-opening are set out at Issues 1-3 below, and addressed at Responses 1-3.

Issue 1

Make the school into something we could use – toys, children’s space, after school club

Response 1

If the school closes, it is unlikely that Highland Council would wish to pursue any of the above options. However, the community might be able to take over the building, and pursue some of the ideas set out above.

Issue 2

Keep it mothballed – people have started moving to Torridon – maybe it will re-open.

Response 2

The school has now been mothballed for 11 years, without there being any significant rise in the number of children in the Torridon area. It is time to come to a final decision on the future of the school.

Issue 3

Torridon is much closer to Kinlochewe. There could be 12 kids if Kinlochewe pupils went to Torridon

Response 3

It's true that Kinlochewe is closer to Torridon than to Shildaig, but Kinlochewe School was itself mothballed in 2022 when all of the parents moved their children to either Shildaig or to Gairloch Primary. Since the parents felt the school in Kinlochewe was too small, there is nothing to suggest they would be interested in their children attending a re-opened Torridon Primary School.

- 6.3 The arguments advanced in written responses are set out at Issues 6-7 below, and addressed at Responses 4-23

Issue 4

We question why Torridon School has to close. It occupies a larger space than either Kinlochewe or Shildaig schools and is in a more central location. Also there may not be many children living in our area currently, but demographics could change.

Be that as it may, TKCC is of the view that the situation needs to be resolved. The school was mothballed over 10 years ago and the building is deteriorating badly. The Highland Council itself acknowledges that maintenance has been low and there is a lot of damage.

Response 4

See Response 2 on the demographics of the area. Whilst it is possible the demographics could change; they have not done so over an extended period since 2012. The Council agrees that it is undesirable for schools to be mothballed for as long as Torridon Primary School has, and it is time to make a decision on the future of the school.

Issue 5

Whilst we understand the benefit of larger numbers of children attending a school, closing Torridon will have a negative impact on people looking to stay or move into the community. This in turn may affect the long-term sustainability of some of our villages.

Response 5

Many of our most rural schools in Highland have seen sharply declining rolls over the last decade, suggesting that the presence of a school does not necessarily have any significant effect on attracting families with young children.

The Scottish Government's Commission on the Delivery of Rural Education, which reported in 2014, considered the impact of school closures on communities. They concluded that *"...there was a lack of robust evidence on how pre-school, childcare and school proximity (and freedom from threat of closure) links to the sustainability of communities."* The Commission added that *"In some of the communities the Commission visited, it found evidence that while a school closure had been resisted and closure still took place, the impact had been less than was feared, with communities adjusting to different school provision and community focus continuing in individual villages. Rural communities and their economic base vary widely, as does their remoteness, and this will affect their resilience to school change."*

Issue 6

We would like the Highland Council to recognise there will be a particular burden on people living in places such as Inveralligin, Wester Alligin and Diabaig, for whom Shildaig school is a long way away (up to 50 minutes by car).

Response 6

Google Maps suggests that the normal travel time from Diabaig to Shildaig is around 36 minutes. However the Council does agree that the journey times from these communities to Shildaig are longer than would be desirable for primary school pupils. We understand there are currently no children of primary school age in these three locations.

Issue 7

If Torridon School is closed, TKCC considers that the buildings and playpark should be retained for community use. There are strong feelings in the community that they should not be made available for commercial development or become another holiday home.

Response 7

This response is noted. The issue will be one for determination if a decision is taken to close the school.

Any application for a Community Asset Transfer, following any future closure of the school, would need to demonstrate a level of community benefit commensurate with the value of the site.

The school playground is an amenity for local children. The land occupied by the playpark is owned by the Council and is classed as Housing Revenue Account Land. This means any transfer of the site would require the consent of the Council as well as the Scottish Government. There is, additionally, a clause of pre-emption which prevents any sale without first having offered the same to the National Trust for Scotland.

Issue 8

See pages 1-5 of Appendix 3iii set out some background to the mothballing of Torridon Primary School, as put forward in the personal view of the respondent, who was formerly a Head Teacher with Highland Council. This background is best read in its entirety at Appendix 3iii rather than in summary form in this document.

Response 8

The issue raised above is provided as relevant background to the author's substantive objections to the closure of Torridon Primary School.

Issue 9

The community from Diabaig to Torridon at Fasaig is a contiguous community. Shioldaig is quite distinct with a 'gap' along the south shore of Loch Torridon. As reported in documentation Torridon Primary School is a sound building. Diabaig and Alligin are too far from Shioldaig to enable viable family life of primary school age children. The lack of a school within the Torridon community has the effect of de-development and a knock-on preventing or deterring families from making their homes there. This then has a whole number of other knock-on effects marginalising the community and inhibiting economic development.

Response 9

Response 5 above also addresses this issue. It should also be noted that the Commission on the Delivery of Rural Education also concluded that *"A school alone cannot sustain a rural community. The Commission noted that other issues are likely to be as critical to maintaining a working age*

population. The Commission received a strong message on its visits to communities that while they place great value on a school in their community, the two most important factors in sustaining the community are jobs and housing. Without employment opportunities and affordable housing, families can neither move to an area nor remain there. While local schools are strongly desirable in a similar way to local healthcare and a local post office, it seems likely that rural communities do generally manage to tolerate travelling a further distance to school. This finding is consistent with other Scottish rural studies."

Issue 10

Pages 5-6 of Appendix 3iii set out the respondent's view that this proposal cannot proceed without due consideration of the Highland Council's treatment of staff in the lead-up to the school being mothballed. As with Issue 8 above, the argument is best read in its entirety at Appendix 3iii rather than in summary form in this document. The respondent draws particular attention to the paragraph in the Scots language at page 8 of Appendix 3iii.

Response 10

In considering the future of Torridon Primary School, the crucial consideration is whether the school is viable, and whether there are educational benefits to the children from their attendance at Shieldaig Primary, due to the larger numbers at that school. The Council's Proposal Paper set out the educational arguments in favour of the closure of the school, and our view is that the number of children within the Torridon Primary School catchment is insufficient for a re-opened Torridon Primary School to be viable. One of the factors the Council has taken into account is whether parents of children who already attend Shieldaig Primary School would be willing to remove those children to attend a re-opened school at Torridon.

Issue 11

The first page of Appendix 3iv sets out some background to the mothballing of Torridon Primary School, as put forward in the personal view of the respondent, who was formerly a Head Teacher with Highland Council. This background, which concerns personal issues, is best read in its entirety at Appendix 3iv rather than in summary form in this document.

The respondent also makes the point that, on mothballing Torridon School in June 2012, at least six jobs within the community were lost, a significant blow to a very small community.

Response 11

In June 2010 the very low roll at Torridon Primary School led officials to conduct informal discussions with parents about the future of the school. At that point the view of the very small number of parents was that the school

should continue to operate. The Highland Council took cognisance of this view – the identification of which was the entire purpose of the discussion - and the school remained open. The mothballing of Torridon Primary School in 2012 took place because by then the school roll had fallen still further and was too low to be viable. Most parents had already moved their children elsewhere on placing requests and it was clear that one of the two remaining children was also about to be moved.

The jobs referred to were mostly part-time, but it is nevertheless acknowledged that the loss of employment in a rural community is an adverse effect from a school closure.

Ultimately, schools need children to continue in operation.

Issue 12

A lack of affordable housing in area has hampered families wishing to stay in the area over the last 23 years. In 2000 the roll was down to a perspective 2 pupils from 19 in 1992 but quickly went up to 11 by end of the first term. The school rolls fluctuate in small rural schools and one family moving in or out can change things considerably.

In 2010 three families (9 children) who would have stayed in Torridon if they were able to, transferred to Shildaig after new family housing was built. Numbers of pupils at Shildaig School rising from 3 to 17 over that summer. There have been various assurances of new houses for Torridon over a number of years and in recent months The Community Housing Trust has again expressed interest in being in a position to help facilitate building more houses along from Torridon Primary by Darroch Park with the potential for higher numbers of children in Torridon.

There are now no primary school age children living in the outlying villages of Alligin, Wester Alligin or Diabaig 9 miles away from Torridon School and it is unlikely that families will ever move to these villages if there is no educational provision available at Torridon. Since mothballing in 2012, two families who had bought houses in Diabaig and Wester Alligin planning to live there, moved away. Travel and transport, 18 miles each way, from Diabaig to Kinlochewe proved a problem through Winter months when school was missed. Travel for preschool children to Nursery in Shildaig from villages like Wester Alligin, entailed parents providing transport at their own cost 26 miles twice a day. Time also an important factor as each journey there and back over an hour. No expenses and losing working time if having to drive. This has resulted in families not only leaving but keeping children at home rather than try to attend Nursery.

Response 12

The issue of the effect of school closures on communities is considered at Response 9 above.

The Council agrees that housing can be an issue in terms of retaining families in rural communities. It is clear however, that the number of children in the area is now so low that there is no realistic prospect of the school having sufficient children to become viable.

The Council's methodology for calculating school roll forecasts is available on our website:

[Developer Contributions](#) | [School Roll Forecast Methodology, September 2017](#)
([highland.gov.uk](#))

It can be seen from paragraphs 3.2 -3.4 of the PDF document on the above page, that the Council takes full account of the influence of new or potential housing development.

An analysis of school transport operation over the past few years has established that there were 3 dates during 2022-23 in which transport was cancelled due to adverse weather - 12th December 2022, 15th December 2022, and 20th January 2023.

Previous years had no cancellations as the area seldom has any frost. The coast of Wester Ross is known for its relatively mild oceanic climate and for the moderating effect of the Gulf Stream.

Issue 13

Since mothballing in 2012 families coming to Torridon have been told educational provision could only be in Shildaig or Kinlochewe and that Torridon was not an option.

When parents requested that Nursery provision resume in Torridon where all resources were in place prior to the Pandemic, all requests were refused.

Kinlochewe Primary & Nursery was mothballed at short notice in June 2023 so Kinlochewe is no longer an option, the nearest Primary and Nursery Units being Shieldaig 16 miles from Diabaig or Gairloch 39 miles.

Families residing in Kinlochewe must now travel 17 miles to Shieldaig or 20 miles to Gairloch, again for pre-school at their own expense regarding time and fuel. Some choosing to opt for home education instead.

It has been noted that Torridon Primary is a central location, 10 miles from Kinlochewe School and 8 from Shieldaig.

Currently the 6 children from the Torridon area now attending Shildaig, all live close and within walking distance of Torridon School, the journey to Shildaig 8 miles each way in comparison to the outlying villages such as Diabaig being an additional 9 more.

With ever increasing distances to travel, more school days off are required in Winter and youngsters are less able obtain transport to travel to after school activities

Response 13

At the time of writing, there is only one child in the Torridon catchment who would qualify for attending a school nursery class. It is undesirable, both educationally and socially, for a child to be left on their own in a nursery setting. Where an alternative exists with more children, then there are educational advantages to children travelling to that provision.

The Council is trying to recruit more local childminders to deliver Early Years childcare and education. We would welcome any interest from the Torridon community.

Issue 14

In 1910, Duncan Darrach, owner of Torridon Estate signed over land within the stone dyke boundary at Torridon for the purpose of a school and teacher house to be built. In the deeds he stipulates that the building be used for educational use. or be offered back to his successors if not being used for continued educational purposes.

He also stipulated that boundary walls and paths be kept in good condition, something Highland Council have badly neglected in recent years.

Response 14

This issue was covered at S.14 of the Proposal Paper. The Council's Title to Torridon School (including the school grounds and schoolhouse) is a Feu Charter by Duncan Darroch of Gourock and Torridon in favour of The School Board of the Parish of Applecross recorded in the Division of the General Register of Sasines applicable to the County of Ross and Cromarty on 23rd August 1875. It is believed that The National Trust for Scotland is the current owner of the surrounding Torridon Estate. From an examination of the title, it would appear that there is nothing in terms of the Council's title which would prevent the Council transferring the property to another party.

Issue 15

As with Issues 8, 10, and 11 above, pages 2-3 of Appendix 3iv describes some background to the mothballing of Torridon Primary School, as put forward in the personal view of the respondent, who was formerly a Head Teacher with Highland Council. This background includes personal as well as more general issues, is best read in its entirety at Appendix 3iv rather than in summary form in this document.

Response 15

The Highland Council does not regard Torridon Primary School as closed.

Some resources were removed from the school on the following grounds – i. that some materials were actually owned by members of the community; ii. that some resources could be repurposed by Shieldaig School for the benefit of the children there (including the children from Torridon); and iii. other out of date resources were offered to the community rather than being thrown out. At no time were any of these arrangements linked to the school being closed.

The work undertaken at the school in the 1990s illustrated the commitment of the former Highland Regional Council to the school and the area, but this commitment did not arrest the decline in the school roll. The “good capacity” referred to was a result of the roll falling so low that only a small fraction of the school’s capacity was being utilised, something which represented an inefficient use of taxpayer resources.

As advised elsewhere, the Council’s view is that a decision on the closure of Torridon Primary is required to allow the building to move on to a new phase in its history.

The matter of the schoolhouse tenancy was settled at Sheriff court.

Issue 16

Claims have been made that children attending a very small rural school suffer socially and academically and that small numbers do not fit the Curriculum for Excellence ideas. Having taught three decades in various sized schools, Lochcarron, Ullapool and Torridon, with a mix of large class numbers, composite classes and then small numbers I found the one to one attention that staff were able to give a small number of pupils very beneficial. Each school has to be considered in its own right but for Torridon the numbers and spread of ages worked well for both individual and collaborative learning and fitted well into the new Curriculum strands. From 2000 on, families moved into the area especially, attracted by the low pupil/ staff ratio. The school was inclusive, giving additional support when needed. Achievements were celebrated with pupils going on to achieve National recognition in activities ranging from winning Gold medals at the National Mod to joining the Scottish National Sheepdog Trial Junior Team. Pupils enjoyed their own time but also mixed well with other local small schools, combining for sport team activities when needed. Academically pupils at Torridon Primary had 100% attainment from 2015 - 2012. Pupils from Torridon also went on to be Dux of Gairloch High School. Above all when going well, small schools enable a family feel and lifelong friendships to be created. They are a hub for the community, enabling a number of additional activities to take place. Within the last decade this has been remarked upon by a number of local villagers, saying they miss the sound of children's

laughter as time and again houses are sold for ever rising prices, often as holiday businesses with some owners now owning multiple properties.

Unfortunately, yes, small schools are expensive per pupil to run, one of the main background factors I believe when in 2010 attempts were made to close a number of West Highland and Island small schools including Torridon and on North Skye.

Response 16

Torridon School, was mothballed after the school roll fell to just one pupil, and largely as a result of parents opting to send their children elsewhere.

The Proposal Paper set out the detailed reasons why the Highland Council believes that there are educational benefits to the closure of Torridon Primary School, and why we feel the school is no longer viable.

Sadly, the phenomenon of a lack of children is something commented upon in many rural villages across Highland, whether the community has a school, or not. In the last two years five schools in Highland, all with formerly healthy rolls, have been mothballed due to a simple lack of children.

Issue 17

Torridon School is a bright, spacious building with a spectacular setting at the foot of a mountain and at the head of a loch with large sandy bay with surrounding croft land. After the extension built at considerable cost in 1992, the classroom has large windows and three doors leading into it. Ideal for plenty ventilation to combat Covid.

The school is in the centre of the village, not far from the Community Centre, Fire & Mountain Rescue Stations, Medical Centre and local Cafe & Store. It has ample parking nearby with parking space along the road at the front of the school and up the drive at the side.

This year has seen a positive change from Highland Council who now allow a number of mothballed school buildings to be used by the community on Skye in particular so helping keep them in better order until further decisions are made.

Torridon School and Schoolhouse require immediate attention and maintenance to save further deterioration and costs. The sad thing is that the building could have been used productively from 2012 till now and in a number of educational ways as Duncan Darrach wished. There are still options not explored for maintaining alongside Shieldaig and Kinlochewe even as a resource and outdoor learning centre.

Collaboration could be made with Highlife Highland, The National Trust or Wester Ross Biosphere as the building lies within their UNESCO accredited educational Buffer Zone to provide a range of educational resources and

activities whilst still maintaining the chance of a school if children numbers were to grow through additional housing.

Wester Ross also missed out on having a Newton Room to boost Science in the area.

Couldoran House near Kishorn was recently sold and is to become an exciting Rainforest Learning Centre.

Intergenerational Educational classes could also be held in collaboration with the Loch Torridon Community Centre to allow additional space for resident artists, life skill classes etc where equipment would not need to be tidied away each day. Torridon is also lacking a local Heritage Centre with the building having ample wall space for display too.

Response 17

The response above outlines a number of exciting ideas for the future life of the school building, that could be taken forward by the local community. None however, could move forward until a decision is taken on the future of Torridon Primary School as a primary school, operated by the local authority. It is high time that decision was taken.

The issue of “options not explored” is considered further at Section 10 below.

Issue 18

It was recently stated by a Highland Ward Councillor that if the Community asked for a Community Asset Transfer they would then have the option of retuning to a school if needed in future years. I do not believe this could happen if officially closed so think the statement misleading.

With such a scarcity of local housing it is terrible to see the Schoolhouse now lying empty and un-lived in. It could form additional living or office space combined with use of the school as an educational centre of some kind, so meeting Mr Darroch's wishes or be signed over to the Community in an Asset Transfer for local community housing. A separate gate would need to be opened up for the house, the old entrance having been blocked up by the Council many years ago.

Ideally the design and layout of the building and surrounding curtilage lends itself to a combined use.

As a school and home it worked well, much envied by many others visiting it. It would be very sad to see the building just sold off as yet another luxury holiday home.

With first Diabaig then Alligin Schools closing and the manner in which staff and parents were treated prior to and following the mothballing of Torridon there is a feeling of Community Clearances. Especially with Kinlochewe also now mothballed and Achnasheen School demolished leaving ever increasing distances and costs for families to have to travel, if they have actually been able to find a house they can afford to live in. This then also has an impact on High School numbers.

There is a need to think creatively, working together with better communication to explore all options to closure to help reverse the depopulation currently occurring.

A number of young families have now been able to return to Shildaig in recent years where the village is happily thriving. In danger of closure itself in 2010 with only 3 pupils, numbers are now heading to 30 demonstrating how quickly things can and do change. Torridon's loss being Shildaig's gain.

Response 18

The Highland Council is delighted at the growth in the roll of Shildaig Primary School in recent years. However Torridon Primary School has been mothballed for over a decade now, with no indication of any significant rise in the number of local children. As has been mentioned, Kinlochewe Primary School has also recently been mothballed due to a sharply falling roll, the speed of which came as a surprise to the Highland Council.

In its overall programme, the Highland Council has identified the place-based strategy approach to be one of its key strategic priorities, and a place-based Investment Fund has been created to address local priorities and combat rural depopulation.

It should be noted though, that Scotland's birth rate has declined since 2008, with inevitable consequences for school enrolments.

The efficient use of Council resources must be part of the Council's strategy for addressing the needs of communities.

Issue 19

The loss of the primary school will damage our community irrevocably and could have been avoided. However, we would like to focus on the realistic and viable steps the Highland Council can take to lessen the impact of the proposed closure.

Our experience is that the families with children that currently attend Shildaig school but who live outside the village of Shildaig (Torridon, Alligin, Annat, Kinlochewe and Applecross coast road) are socially disadvantaged due to the lack of transport provision outside normal school hours. There are currently after school sports, ballet and music classes and

play dates but these require parents to travel long distances to drop off, wait for and collect children. This social isolation could be significantly reduced by (i) making a minibus or some other form of group transport available for use by the school/ community/ parents or (ii) extending the current school transport contract to cover after school activities. The recent community consultation exercise in Torridon has raised the issue of community transport and it would be possible for the HC to partner with local charities or businesses to enhance transport provision.

Response 19

The Transport Co-Ordination Unit from within the Highland Council have begun discussions with the local community transport provider and other community representatives about the potential for transport that would allow for youngsters to have greater connectivity to extracurricular activities, which will minimise social disadvantage and isolation.

These discussions are still in early stages, with a number of issues to resolve; as a result, the outcome is as yet unclear as to what shape this transport provision will take. However, in the long-term, the intention is to ensure that there are viable community transport options for youngsters who would otherwise be at a disadvantage due to remoteness and lack of existing transport links.

Issue 20

There is a concern about safety at Shildaig school drop off and pick up. The closure of Kinlochewe and Torridon schools means that increased numbers of parents have to pick up their children by car, especially those that have children attending nursery (who are ineligible for school transport) or those that wish their children to join in with after school activities or social events. There is not even adequate parking available for the number of staff working at the school. This concern could be reduced by the provision of additional transport and/or by allowing nursery children to use school transport. This would have additional environmental benefits. Alternatively, given the large budget the HC was able to allocate to the conversion of the Shildaig school house, perhaps budget could be found to fund an extension of school parking facilities to make them adequate for a school/nursery of the current size. We believe that the current parking facilities at Shildaig school are not compliant with the most basic planning requirements for a residential building, let alone a public facility.

Response 20

Children at Shildaig Primary School are supervised at all times outside at the school by either support staff or teaching staff. The school have a good staffing ratio to allow for this.

There is a right of way through the school which does bring a lot of tourists walking through, particularly in the summer. Children are never outside alone.

The council has installed large gates at the entrance to discourage cars driving through. These are kept closed during the day and because of the school really only gets residents passing through in vehicles.

The HMI Report at Appendix 4 noted that the school grounds are secure (Paragraph 3.1)

The parking issue is covered at Response 23 below.

Issue 21

The kitchen facilities at Shieltaig school are not large enough to support the provision of meals to the increased number of pupils arising from the closure/mothballing of Torridon and Kinlochewe schools. In particular, the school is no longer able to offer a choice of meals which is the norm in most other schools. There is also no dedicated area where the children can eat, so staff/pupils have to move furniture in the classrooms and children have to eat in shifts, which means that some rush to eat their food and some miss out on playtime. The closure of Torridon school will permanently increase the number of pupils on the Shieltaig school roll and the catering facilities should be improved to meet this additional demand. If there are cost savings associated with the closure of Kinlochewe and Torridon schools, funds could be redirected to improve the catering/ dining facilities at Shieltaig. This might also assist with recruitment and retention of catering and cleaning staff who currently work in challenging conditions.

Response 21

The kitchen area did receive a significant upgrade at the time the former schoolhouse was converted into a classroom, with new equipment and surfaces, and new walls designed for easier cleaning.

Unfortunately there do not appear to be any suitable options for the Council in terms of creating a separate area for pupils to dine in within the existing school building. We agree that the current arrangement of the use of one of the two primary classrooms is far from ideal but there really isn't any other space available in the school and/or nursery that could be utilised.

In regard to the menu options, Highland Council is working on moving to a two-choice menu to replace the current single choice menu at the school. This may involve the recruitment of a Catering Assistant to support the Cook in Charge who currently is providing approx. 30 meals a day on her own. Generally, the Council only provides a single choice menu option in the schools with very small pupil numbers however other factors do impact on this including staffing levels, kitchen size, cooking equipment and storage space. Since the recent improvement works the kitchen at Shieltaig would be suitable for the provision of a two-choice menu. The challenges of moving to a two-choice menu would be more to do with staffing and the ability to recruit to a post.

Issue 22

Whilst we understand that in the current circumstances Torridon school is likely to close, we do not see why the community should also lose a well-loved and well-used playpark. The loss of the playpark will compound the social isolation felt by local families. We believe that in the event of closure of the school, any subsequent sale or transfer of the land should not take place without the prior provision of space for a playpark somewhere in Torridon.

Torridon school building sits at the heart of the community and has been long neglected. Recent community consultation has identified multiple possible opportunities for the building if it could be transferred to the community. We understand that the land currently used as a playing field and playpark is owned separately but, in the event of closure, we would urge the council to facilitate a concurrent process to allow the transfer of both the building and the adjacent land to the community at the same time in order to give the community the best opportunity to create the most viable project at the site. Whilst recognising the budget pressures faced by the Highland Council, we believe that any community asset transfer should include recompense to the community for the acknowledged failure to maintain and repair the school building since it was mothballed.

Response 22

Paragraph 14.4 of the Proposal Paper advised that the land occupied by the playpark is owned by the Council and is classed as Housing Revenue Account Land. This means any transfer of the site would require the consent of the Council as well as the Scottish Government. There is, additionally, a clause of pre-emption which prevents any sale without first having offered the same to the National Trust for Scotland.

The Council is particularly keen to support communities to take on former school buildings and any associated land and facilities.

Proposals from communities to do this can be taken forward on submission of a single community asset transfer application. This application can include multiple assets such as in this instance the school building and play park. The application process can be found here- www.highland.gov.uk/cat

Support with an application can be accessed from [Community Asset Transfer | DTAS Community Ownership Support Service](#)

It is not unusual for Council land and buildings to have a variety of conditions such as title burdens that dictate future use or a right of pre-emption (the original landowner having first refusal of any sale) or other legal elements that require to be worked through.

The Council is committed to helping prospective community asset transfer applicants work through these.

Unfortunately the Council is not in a position to fund work on former school buildings to enable a transfer.

A meeting with Council staff to advise on the asset transfer process could be arranged, if considered helpful.

Issue 23

We would welcome some reassurance from the Highland Council regarding the safeguarding and supervision measures that are in place to protect children when they are playing/working outside at Shildaig school. Torridon school, like most modern primary schools, was in a completely enclosed playground with no public access. Shildaig school has a right of way running between the school building and the outside play areas. The outside areas are not secure and anyone can drive or walk straight through the middle of the school grounds without passing disclosure checks or any of the other usual requirements for being in close proximity to school children. They can also drop litter or harmful waste (eg needles, broken glass) in areas frequented by children. If funding was made available to address the parking situation, the outside areas might also be redesigned to make the school grounds more secure. If funding were an issue, perhaps the parent council could assist in raising funds.

Response 23

As mentioned at Response 20 above, children at Shildaig Primary School are supervised at all times outside at the school by either support staff or teaching staff. The school have a good staffing ratio to allow for this.

Highland Council is currently working with the Head Teacher on a survey of pupils / staff and parents / guardians regarding travel choices and any road safety issues they want to raise. At the time of writing there has been a poor response and the school is going to issue the survey again. Once this is done a summary will be collated for taking forward road safety and travel issues.

7.0 Summary of the issues raised by Education Scotland

- 7.1 In line with legislative requirements, Education Scotland was invited to submit comments on the Council's proposals. A copy of the report from Education Scotland is appended – **Appendix 4**. A Gàidhlig language version is at Appendix 5.
- 7.2 In their report, Education Scotland agree that the council has made a clear and reasonable case for the permanent closure of Torridon Primary School and Nursery. Children from the area are settled in Shildaig Primary School and Nursery. They enjoy learning alongside peers from the wider area. Stakeholders now largely accept the closure of the school.

- 7.3 Education Scotland noted that stakeholders are concerned about the lack of early learning and childcare in the Torridon and Kinlochewe areas. Stakeholders want to engage further with the council to look at children's access to educational opportunities and the provision of early learning and childcare across the wider Shieldaig, Torridon and Kinlochewe areas.
- 7.4 The following issues were identified for further consideration, and are set out below.

Issue 24

It will be important that the council work with community members, including children and young people, in regard to the future use of the site. The council should do this in a timely manner to avoid the condition of the building deteriorating further from not being used.

Response 24

The Council notes and agrees with this recommendation. A decision on the permanent closure of the school would be the quickest way of progressing, since in-depth discussion on the future of the site cannot take place until a decision is taken on the future of the school. The Council is keen to obtain a final decision on the school, to avoid another winter during which the building may deteriorate further.

8.0 Effects on the Community

- 8.1 Section 14 of the Proposal Paper set out the Council's assessment of the effects of closure on the local community,
- 8.2 The future of the site and building was one of the main issues that arose in the consultation exercise, along with the future of the adjacent playpark. As previously discussed, the Council cannot prejudge the outcome of the current consultation by agreeing any future use of the building at this stage. In the event the closure is approved, the Council would welcome a community bid for the future use of the building and site.
- 8.3 The other issue raised in consultation was over the fear that the closure of the school would be a disincentive for families to move to the community. This is addressed at Responses 5 and 9 above.

9.0 Alleged omissions or inaccuracies

- 9.1 There were no alleged omissions or inaccuracies.

10.0 Further Review of Alternatives to Closure

- 10.1 Throughout the consultation the Council has had special regard to the provision for rural schools within Section 12 of the Schools (Consultation)

(Scotland) Act 2010. In particular, the Council has had special regard to the following:

- any viable alternative to the closure proposal;

Sections 5-9 of the Proposal Paper identified and discussed the following alternatives to closure:

- i. To continue with the current “mothballing” arrangement.
- ii. To re-open Torridon Primary School with its current catchment area.
- iii. To re-open Torridon Primary School with an expanded catchment area.
- iv. To re-open Torridon Primary School as a specialist facility

- 10.2 Sections 6 and 7 of the Proposal Paper set out the Council’s consideration as to why Options i and ii above would not be viable options for Torridon Primary School.
- 10.3 Similarly, in respect of option (iii) in paragraph 10.1 above, Section 8 of the original Proposal Paper set out the reasons why an expanded catchment area would not be a viable option for Torridon Primary School.
- 10.4 Section 9 of the Proposal Paper set out why it is not be viable to re-open Torridon Primary School as a specialist facility.
- 10.5 Having reconsidered each of the alternatives identified at Sections 5-9 of the Proposal Paper, the Highland Council has concluded that the alternatives to closure would not deliver the educational benefits of the proposal.
- 10.6 Issue 17 above sets out an alternative approach suggested during the consultation exercise, which is that the Torridon School Building could be used for educational provision alongside the schools at Kinlochewe and Shieldaig. This might be simply as a resource or outdoor learning centre.
- 10.7 It should be noted that this suggestion would still require the completion of the legal process for the closure of Torridon Primary School. In strict terms it does not therefore represent an alternative to closure, but is more a suggestion of what should happen to the building following closure.
- 10.8 The Council has carefully considered the above suggestion, but has concluded that the distances between Shieldaig and Torridon would be a disincentive towards Shieldaig Primary School using the building for some additional purpose. Too much educational time would be utilised in travelling, and the cost of travel would be a significant drain on the budgets for such a small school. The level of use of the Torridon Primary School building would likely be small and would not justify its retention by the Council for educational use.
- 10.9 The Council has also reconsidered the likely effect on the local community in consequence of the proposal (if implemented), with reference in particular to; (a) the sustainability of the community, (b) the availability of the school’s premises and its other facilities for use by the community. The potential

community impact of the proposal was considered at Section 14 of the Proposal Paper and is further considered at Section 8 above.

- 10.10 The Council has further reconsidered the likely effect caused by any different travelling arrangements that may be required in consequence of the proposal (if implemented) with reference in particular to (a) the effect caused by such travelling arrangements including (in particular), (i) that on the school's pupils and staff and any other users of the school's facilities, (ii) any environmental impact, (b) the travelling arrangements are those to and from the school of (and for) the school's pupils and staff and any other users of the school's facilities.

The impact of the proposal on travel time was considered at Section 12 of the original proposal paper. Since Torridon Primary School has been mothballed since June 2012, implementation of the proposal would not require the introduction of any different travelling arrangements for pupils or staff.

11.0 Procedure for Call-in by the Scottish Ministers

- 11.1 As set out in The Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010, Highland Council is required to notify the Scottish Ministers of its decision and provide them with a copy of the Proposal Paper and Consultation Report. The Scottish Ministers have an eight-week period from the date of that final decision on 14 September 2023 to decide if they will call-in the proposal. Within the first three weeks of that eight-week period, the Scottish Ministers will take account of any relevant representations made to them by any person. Therefore, anyone who wishes to make representations to the Scottish Ministers can do so up until midnight on 4 October 2023. The Scottish Ministers will have until midnight on 8 November 2023 to take a decision on the call-in of the Closure Proposal.
- 11.2 Anyone wishing to make a representation to the Scottish Ministers requesting them to call-in the decision to close Torridon Primary School is asked to email schoolclosure@gov.scot or to write to **School Infrastructure Unit, Learning Directorate, The Scottish Government, Area 2A South, Victoria Quay, Edinburgh EH6 6QQ by midnight on 8 November 2023.**
- 11.3 Until the outcome of the eight-week call-in process has been notified to Highland Council, it will not proceed to implement the Proposal. If the Scottish Ministers call-in the proposal, it will be referred to a School Closure Review Panel.

12.0 Legal issues

- 12.1 Throughout this statutory consultation Highland Council has complied in full with the requirements of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010, as amended.
- 12.2 As provided for in section 1 of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980, it is the duty of the Council to ensure adequate and efficient provision of school education within Highland, such education to be directed towards the development of the personality, talents and mental and physical abilities of children or young persons to their fullest potential (Standards in Scotland's Schools Etc. Act

2000). As with all Council duties, the Council also has a duty to make arrangements to secure best value, and in securing best value the Council is required to maintain an appropriate balance between, inter alia, the quality of its performance of its functions and the cost to the authority of that performance (Local Government in Scotland Act 2002, section 1). Each of the above, and all other legislative requirements, have been taken into account in the preparation of this Report.

13.0 Financial Implications

- 13.1 Advice on the financial implications of the proposal was issued as Appendix E to the Proposal Paper.

14.0 Equality Impact Assessment

- 14.1 An Equality Impact Assessment was issued with the proposal paper and can be found at Section 16 of the Proposal Paper. The consultation exercise did not identify any additional equality issues.

15.0 Rural Impact Assessment

- 15.1 A Rural Impact Assessment was issued with the proposal paper and can be found at Section 17 of the Proposal Paper. No additional rurality issues were identified.

16.0 Effects on School Transport

- 16.1 The effects on school transport were considered at Section 12 of the Proposal Paper. As there are no pupils currently attending Torridon Primary School, there are no differing school transport arrangements to take into account.

17.0 Mitigation of Adverse Effects

- 17.1 Adverse effects were considered at S.18 of the proposal Paper, and none were identified. Again, this assessment takes into account the fact that there are currently no pupils attending Torridon Primary School.

18.0 Conclusion

- 18.1 The consultation process has complied fully with legislative requirements and has provided an opportunity for all parties to identify key issues of concern. These issues have been fully considered and the Council's response detailed in sections 5, 6, 7, 8 and 10 above. For the reasons set out in detail in sections 5-10 above, Highland Council considers that implementation of the closure proposal is the most appropriate response to the reasons for the proposal.
- 18.2 The most significant reason for closure is that all the available evidence suggests that the number of children who would attend a re-opened Torridon Primary School would be too low to make the school viable, and that there would consequently be educational disadvantages arising from such a decision. Lastly, Shieldaig Primary School is itself a rural school.

- 18.3 Education Scotland staff visited Shildaig Primary School, to speak to parents, pupils and staff. They also had the opportunity to review in detail the proposal document and all written responses. They agree that The Highland Council's proposal will result in educational benefits for the children of Torridon Primary School catchment area.
- 18.4 The Executive Chief Officer (Education), on reviewing all of the submissions, the note of the meeting, and the Education Scotland report; and having had special regard to alternatives to closure, to the community impact and to the impact of travelling arrangements; concludes that the proposal offers educational benefits and that implementation of the Proposal in full is the most appropriate response to the reason for formulating the Proposal. The reasons for this conclusion are set out at Sections 5-10 above.

19.0 Recommendation

- 19.1 It is therefore recommended that Highland Council approves the proposal to discontinue education provision at Torridon Primary School, re-assigning its catchment area to that of Shildaig Primary School.

Nicky Grant
Executive Chief Officer (Education)
4 August 2023