

**MINUTE OF PUBLIC MEETING HELD AT TORRIDON COMMUNITY CENTRE ON
28 MARCH 2023**

CONSULTATION ON A PROPOSAL TO DISCONTINUE THE PROVISION OF
EDUCATION AT TORRIDON PRIMARY SCHOOL

Panel

Biz Campbell, Councillor (Chair)
Mhairi MacDonald, Area Education Manager (West)
Ian Jackson, Education Officer, Highland Council

Thomas O'Halloran, Head Teacher, Shieldaig Primary School

20 members of the public attended the meeting.

The Chairperson began by welcoming everyone to the meeting and introducing the officials present. She advised that the purpose of the meeting was to discuss the proposal to formally close Torridon Primary School, (as set out in the recommendation to the Proposal Paper). The proposed change, if approved, will take place immediately after the conclusion of the statutory process relating to school closures. Copies of the Proposal Paper and appendices were distributed. The Proposal Paper identified various options, and the Chairperson explained that we could also discuss any other options or alternatives to closure which those present would like to raise. The Chairperson then asked Ian Jackson to describe the consultation process.

Ian Jackson – As everyone knows Torridon PS has been “mothballed” for some considerable time, since 2012 in fact. A “mothballed” school is not operational, but neither is it permanently closed. The permanent closure of the school, which is what the Council is now proposing, is subject to a statutory consultation process, of which this meeting is part. We are currently in the initial phase of that consultation, which is due to end on Friday 21 April, and I would urge anyone who wants to submit views in writing to do so by that date. The purpose of tonight’s meeting is to gather views, and we will try to answer any questions that are raised.

My colleague Mhairi MacDonald will shortly set out the educational basis for the Council’s proposal to formally close Torridon PS, but before that I will briefly describe the rest of the consultation process.

The formal process has a number of stages. Once the public consultation ends on 21 April, Education Scotland becomes involved. They will look at the Proposal Paper, the note of the meeting tonight, and any written representations, and will form their own view on the educational benefits of the proposal. Education Scotland will contact the Head Teacher of Shieldaig Primary School – actually I think they already have - 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.

After all that, there would still be a further opportunity for representations to be made to Scottish Ministers. All school closures in Scotland have to be ratified by Ministers, and they have 8 weeks from the date of the Council's decision to themselves decide whether to ratify the proposal or to refer it to what's called a school closure review panel. During the first 3 weeks of that 8-week period, Ministers will take account of any relevant representations made to them by any person on whether the decision should be called in, or not called in, for review by a panel. Advice about how to make those representations will be provided at the relevant time.

In summary, I would say that the consultation process provides multiple opportunities for views to be expressed to the Council before any final decision is made

The Chairperson then asked Mhairi MacDonald to explain the educational aspects of the proposal.

Mhairi MacDonald – In the Council's view, there are significant educational benefits that arise to the Torridon children from having the opportunity to mix with a larger group of children in Shildaig Primary. As set out in the paper, the larger roll at Shildaig allows more opportunities for collaborative working and team sports. One aspect of modern education is in promoting skills-based work – and a larger number of children allows for better team-building skills. I know that Thomas, the Head Teacher of Shildaig who is here tonight, is very active in inviting people who have specialist skills into the school, to augment the skills of the core staff. This is easier to do and more effective with a larger roll. Furthermore, it is sometimes not just a matter of counting the raw numbers. For example, if there were a single family with four children, then the same issues would arise in terms of socialisation. I saw this happen myself at one of the schools where I was a cluster Head Teacher. Taken as a whole the Council feels that the educational benefits arising from this closure outweigh any gains that would be derived from re-opening the school.

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

Q1 – If the school is eventually closed, is there any possibility of the community making use of the building?

A1 (Ian Jackson) – We are getting a little ahead of ourselves here, as the first decision is whether to close the school. However, if, for the sake of argument, the school does close, then it's usual for the Council Service that owns the property – in this case the Education Service – to check with other Services whether they would wish to make use of the building. If the building is identified as surplus to Council requirements, then the community may have an opportunity to request an Asset Transfer – i.e., that the building is transferred to them. This is governed by Community Empowerment legislation introduced by the Scottish Government. It's not my area of work, but I understand it gives communities a fair amount of power in what use is made of a surplus public asset. I will say that it's not just a matter of the community asking for the asset to be handed over. Communities have to draw up a business plan demonstrating that the proposed use will represent good value.

If neither of the first two options are taken up, then the Council would dispose of the building on the open market, to realise a receipt for the Council taxpayer.

Q2 – What sort of timescale would we be looking at? You mentioned several different periods of time in your introduction, but could you clarify that again please?

A2 – (Ian Jackson) In terms of the school closure proposal, the current consultation ends on 21 April. That's followed by a consultation with Education Scotland – the school inspectors. This has to follow the public consultation, as Education Scotland receive the note of this meeting plus copies of any written responses received. That consultation is scheduled for 9-29 May, which leaves us just a month before the school holidays. What happens next depends on the number and the complexity of responses received, as the Council has to review those and address any points raised before going back to the Education Committee for a decision. At least three weeks before the Committee, we must publish the report and invite "further representations" from anyone who responded in writing to the public consultation.

There is an Education Committee scheduled for November 2023, and I would envisage the report for decision being submitted to that meeting. If the decision is to close the school, then it has to be ratified by the full Council, which meets in December. After that it has to go to Scottish Ministers, who will have 8 weeks to make their decision. So I would say that February 2024 is probably the earliest date by which the closure process could be concluded.

Q3 - Is any account taken of the impact on the community of the school being closed? I'm thinking in particular of the attractiveness of the village to new families. People are more likely to want to come here if there is a village school.

A3 – (Ian Jackson) The short answer is yes, we are expected to take account of that. It's mentioned in the Proposal Paper and we would welcome any comments from local people on that aspect of the proposal.

Q4 – How many children are there in the Torridon catchment at the present time, and how many are in the Kinlochewe catchment, since that school has also been mothballed?

A4 - (Ian Jackson) According to the information we have, there are currently 5 children aged P1-7 in the Torridon catchment. All these children currently attend Shildaig Primary, and given that they have got used to that school and made friends there, I'm not clear whether any would wish to transfer back to a re-opened Torridon School.

In the case of Kinlochewe, there are children in the catchment, but their parents have all chosen to move them to other schools.

Q5 – Does the Highland Council have a minimum number of pupils, which it uses to decide whether a school is viable?

A5 – There isn't a minimum figure, due to the geography of Highland. We have a number of schools that are located either on remote islands or in parts of the mainland that are not served by the national road network. We keep those schools operating even where there are just one or two pupils, as there isn't really an alternative to doing so. However, where reasonable alternative provision exists and where the roll of a school has fallen to a very low level, we believe that children can benefit from learning in an environment with more of their peers.

Q6 – My question would be, why now? What is the urgency around closing the school at this time? Would it not be better to keep the school mothballed to see whether the number of children might increase? The preservation of rural schools is extremely important for the future of Scotland.

A6 – (Ian Jackson) – I would say that we've left this one a bit too long. It's good to allow a period during which the school could re-open if the number of children increases, but empty buildings do deteriorate and after a while re-opening becomes difficult. It's also important that the community can have their say as the result of a process like this one. Although we've had informal meetings since 2019, this is the first chance the community have had to put over their view in this formal context. It's important that "mothballing" doesn't become a means of depriving the community of their say. The Scottish Government recommends that mothballing should not normally last more than 3 years unless the school is in a very rural location. Clearly, Torridon IS a very rural location, but still, the length of time the school has been mothballed is longer than is desirable. It's time for a decision one way or another.

Q7 – In previous discussions with parents and residents, the Council gave assurances that the building would be maintained. That hasn't happened, the exterior fabric of the building and the grounds is very poor. The gate is broken and the exterior grounds are unkempt.

A7 – (Ian Jackson) We do have an obligation to keep our buildings wind and watertight. Beyond that I would have to say the resources of our maintenance department are stretched, and empty buildings are not really a priority.

Q8 – (follow-up) – How much money has the Council spent on maintaining the building since it was mothballed?

A8 – (Ian Jackson) – I don't have that figure to hand. I'll ask within the Council and get back to you

Q9 – I am frankly shocked that you don't know the answer to that question. As Council taxpayers we pay your salaries, and I can't believe that you have come to this meeting so ill-equipped with the facts. I'm not even talking about the interior of the building which is even worse than the exterior – the ceiling of the schoolhouse has collapsed. It's shameful the way the building has been allowed to deteriorate.

A9 (Ian Jackson) – Although I don't know the figure, I would imagine it's not very large.

Q10 – Personally I would agree with the comments about the state of the building, and I would say that this consultation has been a very long time coming. However we have to move on from here. Once this decision is taken, we can all move on as a village.

A10 – (Ian Jackson) – This meeting is part of a process of establishing what the community wants.

Q11 – I have some concerns about road safety issues at Shildaig Primary. I realise that the children get school transport, but there are some days where parents have to pick up their children, if there has been an excursion or other activity. Parents park their cars everywhere and children have to walk along roads with no pavements. I think there are some serious hazards.

A11 – (Mhairi MacDonald) – I can pick that issue up with Thomas (HT) separately from this meeting. We will look at ways of managing those situations.

(Ian Jackson) – The Council also has a Road Safety Unit. Part of their remit is to encourage walking and cycling by children, and the safety of walking/cycling routes is a factor in that. I will contact them to see whether they can assist.

Q12 – There are no catering facilities at Shildaig, and the children have to eat their lunch in the classroom. They do this in shifts, which cuts down on their free play at lunchtimes. Is this common?

A12 – (Mhairi MacDonald) – It's more common than you might think, due to the design of our older rural schools.

Q13 – What about the playpark next to the school? Is the Council going to maintain the play equipment?

A13 – (Ian Jackson) The Council's own lawyers have advised me that the land on which the playpark sits is classed as Housing Revenue Account land, and that this means any transfer of the site would require the consent of the Council's Housing Department as well as the Scottish Government. There is also a clause of pre-emption which prevents any sale before the same has been offered to the National Trust for Scotland.

Q14 – I think the last question was more to do with whether the Council would maintain the current playpark.

The Chairperson (Cllr. Biz Campbell) referred to the Council's current financial position and suggested that it would be better if the community took over responsibility for managing the playpark.

Q15 – More of a comment than a question, but the mothballing of the school, and the closure if confirmed, has a big negative impact on nursery education. The Council doesn't provide transport to nursery education, so parents are forced to travel a considerable distance 4 times every day, if they want their children to attend nursery.

A15 – (Mhairi MacDonald) – 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.

Q16 - I would like to reiterate that point about nursery education, particularly for children who might live in Wester Alligan or Inveralligin. Parents there would have to make two return trips a day, of 20 miles or more each time.

Housing for families is a great problem in this area. I'm the ex-Head Teacher of the school and at one time there were 19 children at the school, then the roll fell away but then rose again. These numbers do fluctuate, but I think family housing is the key for the future.

A16 – (Ian Jackson) – We are seeing a worrying fall in the rolls of many of our rural schools. Across Highland the picture is uneven. Inverness is growing, as seems to be the case with some other locations in the east of our area, such as Aviemore and Grantown. The school rolls in our larger towns, like Fort William, Thurso, and Wick, seem to be quite stable, but we are seeing rolls fall across much of the rural west. It's affecting not just primary schools but also the rolls at Ullapool High and Gairloch High.

Q17 – What's the roll at Gairloch High now?

A17 – (Ian Jackson) – It's down to around 100 now. I first started dealing with Ross-shire in 2008 and at that time the roll at Gairloch High was around 180. Our published school forecasts suggest the roll at Gairloch High will fall further to around 80, a decade from now.

Fortunately, Shieldaig Primary is one school that is maintaining a healthy roll.

Q18 – As others have said, the school building has been subject to shameful neglect. The ceiling of the schoolhouse has collapsed and there is grass growing through the carpet. The school room itself can still be saved, and needs to be saved.

The Proposal Paper refers to the school having one classroom but there was more than that. We had an office and a disabled toilet. We had a lovely school at one time.

Can I ask about the terms of the 1875 Feu Charter by Duncan Darroch of Gourrock and Torridon, that first allowed the school to be built? Do the terms of that not require that the site is handed back if it is no longer used for education?

A18 – (Ian Jackson) – The advice I have received suggests that there is nothing in that Title that would prevent the Council from transferring the property to another party.

Q19 – If the school is closed, I think it should be developed in a way that would allow it to be used as a school again.

A19 – The Chairperson commented that the Community Centre (where the meeting was being held) was a very impressive building and a credit to the community.

Discussion followed about the pressures on volunteers to create initiatives, maintain buildings etc. Torridon is a small community with a limited pool of people to draw on.

There being no other comments, the **Chairperson** thanked everyone for coming and for the thoughtful and measured comments made. She reminded those present of the closing date for responses – 21 April 2023 – 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 Education 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