

Name of consultation: Torridon Primary

Your comments: As Head teacher of Torridon Primary School at the time of mothballing I would like to make the following comments.

Loss of jobs within the community.

On mothballing Torridon School in June 2012, at least six jobs within the community were lost and Education Officials within Highland Council did not follow any of the agreed closure or redeployment procedures for promoted staff such as myself.

In June 2010 an attempt was made to force the mothballing of Torridon School causing considerable distress for all. Staff were told they would be out of work within weeks and parents of families told to decide which school they would prefer to move to, Kinlochewe or Shieldaig. After parents expressed a wish for their children to continue in Torridon the forced attempt to mothball did not go ahead. Instead in August 2010 the first day of term, the experienced Head teacher was suspended without reason, warning or investigation for two years, causing considerable upset and prompting parents to eventually move their children to Shieldaig, including parents of preschool children who had already signed up for Torridon earlier that Spring. Only after the last pupil was told he must move schools in April 2012 and the school then mothballed in June, was the Head teacher's told that having been able to mothball the school, the suspension was now 'all forgotten.' An offer of redeployment was made in July 2013 which was then not kept to, resulting in the Head teacher winning a claim for Unfair Dismissal in 2014. Staff such as the Cook, Cleaner, Secretary and support staff were all paid off with minimal notice. A huge blow to such a small community.

When a meeting was held with Education Officials and local Councillors in 2012 to discuss the mothballing of Torridon Primary, it was held in private behind locked doors with no members of the community associated with the school allowed to attend. The following day the school kitchen was cleared of all equipment and school cook told she was out of a job.

Housing and Fluctuating Pupil Numbers

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 Shieldaig after new family housing was built. Numbers of pupils at Shieldaig 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 pre school children to Nursery in Shieldaig 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.

Pre school education

Since mothballing in 2012 families coming to Torridon have been told educational provision could only be in Shieldaig 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 Shieldaig , all live close and within walking distance of Torridon School, the journey to Shieldaig 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

Duncan Darrach Deeds

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.

The Building

In June 1992 , a new extension to the school was completed, creating double the classroom space, a new spacious office, walk in store cupboard and disabled toilet. Ceilings were lowered leaving ample loft space and the school kitchen updated. Considerable work was also completed in the adjoining Schoolhouse cottage with a new heating system installed and ceilings lowered. In 2010 when the first attempt to mothball the school was made, Torridon Primary topped the list of local schools with little maintenance costs and good capacity. 20 solar panels were also installed on the schoolhouse roof in April 2011. The head teacher carried out a lot of routine and regular maintenance jobs as there was never any janitor.

Sadly, all requests to make use of the school building by community groups from 2012 on

were refused. These included for playgroup, youth and community activities or exhibition space. Instead all heating was turned off throughout winter months despite the solar panels creating energy. All maintenance needs both in and outside of the building ignored.

In January 2018, all play equipment was ripped out from the adjacent popular outdoor play area without any warning or explanation. This was particularly disappointing for the Community Council (2015 - 2019) who at the time had invested in improvements, having a new gate and picnic table built with promises of funding to replace the main gates and replace a wooden seat bench.

In January 2020, with the school still mothballed with minimal discussion, the head teacher was told to vacate the Schoolhouse, Highland Council claiming to have lost the lease after 28 years. There were no plans for any alternative use so from then on the house and school building were left cold and neglected. Unheated, a ceiling roof in one of the schoolhouse rooms collapsed and the house has been left 2 years now with carpets sodden, damp spreading up walls and no attempt to clear any of the water or plaster work away. It is noted the same thing was allowed to happen in nearby Kinlochewe Schoolhouse before the Council sold the schoolhouse off as a holiday home. Torridon Schoolhouse is linked to the school with a door through the kitchens but this neglect will have a negative effect on the school building which has survived remarkably well. Contrary to information given to the Community Council, there are no leaks within the school itself which remains ready for use though in August 2022, members of local communities were invited to take any resources they wished with word that the school was officially closed. The surrounding playground is now a mess with collapsed fences and sawn down bushes left lying across it restricting access. Entrance gates to the adjoining play park and green space have been left hanging causing safety concerns for youngsters so near to the road.

Small Rural Schools

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.

The Future

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.

Asset Transfer

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.

We 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 Shieldaig 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 Shieldaig's gain.

Upload documents or letters :

I am commenting as: Teacher or school staff

Which school do you work in?: Torridon Primary School

I am commenting on behalf of:

Name:

Title	First name	Last name
Miss	Anne	Macrae

Address:

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