

Note of an Exploratory Meeting with Parents in Torridon held via Microsoft Teams at 7pm on 11 November 2020, to discuss the Future of Torridon Primary School

Ian Jackson (Education Officer – Resources)

Don Esson, Area Education and Learning Manager (West)

Claire Thorburn

Joanne Mitchell

Sally Cook

Louise Gray

Felix von Racknitz (joined towards the end of the meeting)

Ian Jackson began by referring to the meeting in June 2019. Norma Young had retired in July 2020 and Don Esson had just taken up post (on Monday 9 November) as her replacement. Don had asked Ian to chair the meeting, given his knowledge of previous discussions.

Don explained his appointment was an interim one until the end of the 2020/21 school session, as the Council was presently restructuring.

Ian commented that Torridon School had now been mothballed for 8 years. This was an unusually long time for mothballing. A school should not be kept in a “mothballed” condition indefinitely. Eventually we should come to a decision, either to re-open or to close.

Ian continued by referring to last year’s discussion. He and Norma had advised that the Council considered there were insufficient children in the Torridon catchment to justify re-opening the school. The parents who had been present had asked for another 12 months to work on their own ideas for making Torridon a viable school again. Ian asked whether any proposals had emerged from that.

Joanne Mitchell commented that at last year’s meeting it was Felix and Sarah who had put forward the idea of a community led proposal to retain the school in some form. She hadn’t heard anything since.

Louise Gray introduced herself as someone who was looking to move to Torridon. She had a daughter who was coming up to two years old, and she was very keen on the idea of re-opening the school.

Ian and Don advised that the Council considers there are some disadvantages in having very small schools. Put simply, the Education Service thinks that children benefit from being with other children their own age. The skills learned by children through social interaction are very important throughout life. Aside from the social side, cooperative learning and working between pupils is an important part of classroom work today, and very small numbers have obvious disadvantages for team sports, choirs etc.

Claire Thorburn agreed that the social side of things was very important. Her oldest daughter was in P7 at Kinlochewe PS. She had been enrolled there when the numbers at Kinlochewe had been higher, but since then a number of families had left and her daughter was now the only girl in the school. She was desperate to get to High School.

Sally Cook commented that last year she had been in the position Louise is in, but now she was a permanent resident of the area with a daughter in Shildaig Nursery. She made the point that Shildaig was a school bursting at the seams.

Don Esson advised that the Council is currently planning an extensive refurbishment of Shildaig Primary School, which includes converting the existing schoolhouse to create a new Nursery with ancillary accommodation, allowing the existing Nursery classroom in the main school building to become additional Primary education space to meet future capacity needs. Once completed, the Primary school will have the potential to accommodate up to 45 pupils. Work is expected to be completed for the new school year in August 2021. There should therefore be no concerns about the long-term capacity of Shildaig PS. Don also noted that Shildaig Nursery was scheduled to go to 1140 hours provision from August 2021.

Sally continued by commenting that as a parent, she was continually forced to transport her daughter to Shildaig for after-school events. There were never any reciprocal visits to Torridon, despite the fantastic environment that Torridon has. It's also the case the Shildaig School has a lack of outdoor space. Could there be opportunities to use the Torridon School building as a base for outdoor education?

Don commented that a new Head Teacher, Thomas O'Halloran, had just been appointed to take over the Shildaig and Kinlochewe cluster, and that he was very keen on outdoor education and links with the community. The parents were unanimous in welcoming Thomas' appointment and the prospect of more outdoor based education, but were still concerned that there was a one-way flow of traffic, with children from Torridon attending Shildaig but never any sign of Shildaig children visiting Torridon.

Sally asked about our school roll projections, and whether these took account of the impact of the COVID pandemic. There was much talk in the media about home working, and people moving from the cities out to the countryside. How might that affect our projections?

Ian said he had seen those discussions, and whilst the ideas sounded plausible there was no hard evidence about whether the changes would actually happen. The Council does calculate future school rolls for schools, and the methodology for the calculation is on the Council website. He would forward the relevant links. However, there was no current projection for Torridon, as the school had not been operational for 8 years.

Sally asked whether the Torridon school building could be used as an outdoor centre for schools across Highland. Ian and Don commented that decisions on school trips and excursions were taken by individual Head Teachers, and the Council did not direct HTs into using particular locations for excursions. In normal times schools use outdoor facilities frequently, but there are plenty of existing centres in Highland, such as “Outward Bound” centres; the Abernethy Trust; Lagganlia; and Loch Insh Watersports. There’s also a privately-run outdoor centre in Dalguise in Perthshire, which seems to be used a lot by schools. There would no problem with setting Torridon up as an outdoor centre aimed at school excursions, but it’s a crowded market.

Louise Gray commented that Felix and Sarah were world class musicians and that music could be another option to be delivered from the Torridon School building.

Joanne commented that, whilst she agreed with the aim of having more activity in Torridon, the community already had a very good facility in the Village Hall. She questioned why there would also be a need to keep the school building.

Ian added that if Torridon PS was re-opened as a school, we would expect it to follow the Curriculum for Excellence, and for children to be taught in the same way as in any other school. He didn’t have the impression that this was what was being suggested. The discussion seemed similar to that held in June 2019, and he was concerned that things had not moved on since then. Sally Cook and Felix von Racknitz both commented that the COVID outbreak had clearly disrupted the community’s ability to work together.

Sally asked about maintenance to the Torridon building, which had been raised at the 2019 meeting. What had been done since then, and what work was planned? Ian undertook to seek advice from colleagues in the Council’s Estates Team.

There was extensive discussion about the possibility of Torridon School becoming a community facility in the event it was closed as a school. Ian advised that when a Council service such as Education declares it has a building that is surplus to requirements, the first step is to check whether any other Service wishes to make use of the building or the site. If not, it might be possible for the community to arrange a Community Asset Transfer (CAT). He wasn’t familiar with the process in detail, although he understood the community would need to prepare a business plan. He would forward contact details for the Council’s Community Engagement Team, who could provide advice.

Louise observed that, given its small size, the local community would need support in preparing a bid for a CAT. Was there any deadline? Ian responded by explaining that a CAT could only happen after the school were closed. However, if the community were working on ideas it would be best to keep the Council informed. If we didn't hear anything we might assume no work was being undertaken. Ian added, that, if a CAT bid was not made or was unsuccessful, the building would be sold on the open market.

Ian asked Sally about meeting the local Community Council. There had been a rather fraught meeting in 2019, at which the CC members had been unhappy that he and Norma had met separately with parents. Ian added that the Council made no apology for making sure the voices of parents were heard, but that we were also more than happy to discuss matters with the wider community.

Sally responded by advising that the CC membership had changed somewhat since 2019. She asked if the new CC could have the notes of the 2019 meeting. Ian undertook to send his own notes of that discussion, but added that these were not the formal minutes of the CC itself. The new CC should be able to obtain copies of past minutes from the Ward Manager.

Ian added that the members of the CC could be reassured about the formal process of closing Torridon PS for good. That process would involve a statutory consultation in which all parents and staff from any affected school would be notified, and in which the local Community Council would also be a statutory consultee. We would also need to gather the views of the children. We would be required to hold a public meeting and to consult Education Scotland – the School Inspectors – who would assess the “educational merits” of the closure proposal and who would also want to talk to parents. After the completion of the consultation exercise the Council would respond to all points raised and there would be a 3-week window for people to make further representations. Lastly, if there were any concerns about the consultation exercise itself, there would be an opportunity to raise them with Scottish Ministers.

Louise asked that parents be given notice of the start of any formal consultation.

Sally suggested that Ian should contact the Chair and Secretary of the Community Council, once she had provided them with feedback from this meeting. The CC felt that the Torridon community and environment had a lot to offer, and were keen to play a constructive part in discussions.

Ian summarised the discussion by saying that some parents had expressed a wish to retain a form of educational facility in Torridon. This might not be a re-opened school but a commitment to use the building as a sort of annex to Shildaig PS. Alternatively, if Torridon School were closed, there should be a CAT to allow the community to take over the facility.

Ian and Don thanked everyone for attending and for their input.

The meeting closed at approximately 8.20pm.