

Note of an Exploratory Meeting with Torridon and Kinlochewe Community Council held via Microsoft Teams at 7pm on 8 December 2020, to discuss the Future of Torridon Primary School

Don Esson, Area Education and Learning Manager (West)

Ian Jackson (Education Officer – Resources)

Caroline Hamilton, Chair of TKCC

Chris Davies, Secretary of TKCC

Sally Cook, Member of TKCC

Matt Webster, Member of TKCC

Cllr. Ian Cockburn, Ex-officio member of TKCC

Cllr. Alex MacInnes, Ex-officio member of TKCC

Don Esson set out the background to the meeting, highlighting that Torridon Primary had now been mothballed for 8 years. It was highly unusual for a school to be mothballed for as long as a period as this, and in most cases the Council would have taken a decision on the future of the school after 4-5 years, either to re-open or to close. He referred to the meetings of June 2019, when Norma Young and Ian Jackson had met with parents and with the Community Council, at which it had been agreed to continue with mothballing for another year whilst the community developed further proposals for the use of the school building. Last month we had met with the parents again, and tonight's meeting was another in which the Council was seeking an understanding of local opinion.

Sally Cook advised that the Torridon community wished to retain the school as an educational facility, possibly in a partnership capacity with the NTS. Ideas that had been suggested were around its use as a forest school, for music, and for arts and crafts. Since the meeting in November, the Torridon parents had formed an unofficial association, and had started reaching out to other organisations about a potential future for the school. Would we consider using the school building as part of Shildaig School, for the provision of education for one or two days per week?

Don thought that a number of issues could arise, particularly around transport and staffing. It might be difficult to obtain staff for a school on this basis. Shildaig PS does not have a minibus, so there could well be logistical issues with transporting pupils to Torridon. At the very least it would be expensive to do so. He doubted that the footfall and usage of the school building would be sufficient to justify keeping it as an annex to Shildaig PS.

Don added that Pablo Mascarenhas, the Council's Community Engagement Manager, would be a good contact for the parents/community, in terms of other possible uses.

Matt Webster commented that, in his view, the community really wanted to see something done with the building. At the moment the building and grounds were being neglected and that was the key concern of local residents,

Questions were raised about whether the play park adjacent to the school was part of the Title to the school, and also about the "reversionary rights" question which had been raised in 2019, and to which the community had not received an answer. Ian Jackson commented that he had made enquiries internally last year but hadn't been entirely clear about the response. He undertook to follow this up. The community representatives also expressed concern about the level of maintenance in the building. Don explained that the Council was required to keep the property wind and watertight, and he was aware of several recent visits by staff of the Council's Property Service.

Sally also asked whether there was any possibility of the schoolhouse being used as key worker housing, pending any longer-term solution. Don and Ian both commented that the schoolhouse would need considerable investment to bring it to the level required for re-letting. Cllr. Cockburn agreed and suggested that was no prospect of the Council agreeing to such investment for a property that would only be let for the short-term.

Don asked Ian to run through the process of statutory consultation. Ian advised it would involve a statutory consultation over a period of 6 weeks, which must include 30 school days. All parents and staff from any affected school would be notified, and the Community Council would also be a statutory consultee. We would also need to gather the views of the children. This would probably be done through the class teachers as the children would be more comfortable working with them. We would be careful to ensure that questions were put to the children in a neutral way. We would also 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.

Caroline Hamilton asked why we would consult only about closure. Why not a consultation on re-opening the school? Ian replied that, as Torridon PS was mothballed, there would not need to be a formal consultation on re-opening it. If the Council had concluded that the school were viable, it would simply be a case of re-opening it on an agreed date. A statutory consultation was required in any case where the Council were proposing to create a brand-new school, and we carried out such a consultation in relation to a new school in Inverness in 2018.

The statutory consultation, if approved, would set out a proposal from the Council, in this case a school closure. However, anyone could submit views that suggested another course of action, and these would be given full consideration.

The CC representatives saw potential in the idea of a Community Asset Transfer (CAT) after the closure of the school, but they felt it would be vital to establish the details of the Title and in particular whether the local Estate possessed “reversionary rights”. There would be no point in the community putting in huge amounts of work for a building they might not get access to. This was a crucial point.

Matt Webster asked for an outline of the possible timetable for a statutory consultation. Ian advised that the Scottish Government were currently advising that the public meeting required had to be face to face. For this reason, the Council were thinking of waiting until the Education Committee meeting in May before seeking permission for a statutory consultation. That might allow for a public meeting in August. If the vaccine programme was underway by then it might allow a better chance of a safe public meeting.

Statutory consultations normally took around 12 months to complete.

Cllrs Cockburn and MacInnes both described examples of successful CATs that have taken place elsewhere in Highland. One was at the former Achiltibuie Schoolhouse, which was adjacent to the still-operating school but where the building had been turned into 2 self-contained flats. Another was the former Diabaig School which had been turned into a restaurant. Members could put the CC in touch with other development associations, who could provide information.

Cllr. Cockburn felt it was time to come to a decision on the school. Cllr. MacInnes agreed, commenting that it would be useful to retain the building for use by the community. There was general agreement to this suggestion, and that the building could no longer afford to be left idle. The main aim would be to maximise the local benefit.

There being no other questions, Don thanked everyone for attending and for their input.

The meeting closed at approximately 8.20pm.