

MINUTE OF PUBLIC MEETING HELD ONLINE ON 12 JANUARY 2022

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

Panel

Andrew Baxter, Councillor (Chair)
Don Esson, Area Education Manager (West)
Ian Jackson, Education Officer, Highland Council

Elected Members of Highland Council

Cllr. Allan Henderson
Cllr. Denis Rixson
Cllr. Sarah Fanet

Emily Brown, Head Teacher, Spean Bridge and Invergarry Primary Schools
Pamela Adamson, HMIE

2 journalists (from the BBC, and the Press and Journal)

14 members of the public attended the meeting.

The Chairperson began by welcoming everyone to the meeting, by introducing himself as the Chair of the Lochaber Area Committee, and introducing the officials present. He advised that the purpose of the meeting was to discuss the proposal to formally close Roy Bridge 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 - Since Easter 2017 Roy Bridge PS has been in what we term a "mothballed" status, which means it 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 January, 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 Don Esson will shortly set out the educational basis for the Council's proposal to formally close Roy Bridge 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 January, 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 Spean Bridge Primary, 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 Don Esson to explain the educational aspects of the proposal.

Don Esson – Just by way of introduction, I am currently the Area Education Manager for the Highland Council's West area, but before that I was Quality Improvement Manager for the West, so I have worked in the area for many years and I know the local context well. I worked closely with the two previous Head Teachers of Spean Bridge Primary and continue to work with the current HT.

In terms of the educational benefits offered by the closure of Roy Bridge PS, you will see these outlined in pages 11-13 of the Proposal Paper. Highland Council is looking very much at the local context. Young people should have a sufficient number of age-appropriate peers for socialization purposes. When the total school roll falls to single

numbers, there can be huge challenges around that. We are also looking at the opportunity for youngsters to participate in activities such as music, drama and team sports, which require a sufficient number of other children. We also know that young people with Additional Support Needs require support in the most appropriate local setting, and Spean Bridge Primary can offer excellent facilities for providing that support.

We know that the mothballing of Roy Bridge took place because of a pattern of parents voluntarily placing their children in Spean Bridge to take account of the better facilities on offer there.

In terms of professional development, it is very beneficial to have a number of members of staff, to have a thriving teaching and learning community.

There is also the existence of the pre-school class at Spean Bridge, which is very successful and where there are strong transition arrangements into P1.

Spean Bridge PS has strong programmes for the development of language – reading, writing, listening and talking, and French and Gaelic Learners is on offer to support language development. Prior to COVID the school was developing lunchtime clubs and other social activities.

Currently there are more than 30 pupils in the Roy Bridge catchment, with the majority of these attending Spean Bridge Primary, with some others attending Bun-sgoil Ghàidhlig Loch Abar. All the indications are that if Roy Bridge Primary were to re-open, it would be with a very small roll, in single figures.

In summary, Highland Council feels that a range of educational benefits have derived from the operational merger of Spean Bridge and Roy Bridge schools.

The Chairperson then opened the meeting to the Q and A session. He added that, if anyone was making comments, it was equally as important for people to also submit written responses to the consultation.

Q1 – (Ali Berardelli) I was just wondering about the Proposal Paper. Is that something we can access now?

A1 (Ian Jackson) – It's available on the website, and a letter went out to parents in November, which contained the link to the website page.

Ali Berardelli – Thanks. I'll get the link from the school.

Q2 (Cllr. Allan Henderson) – This is a sad day. When I joined the Council in 2007, I got together with Davie Dignan and Marie-Claire Russell in a long hard fight to reverse the Council's decision to close Roy Bridge at that time. It was thanks to the financial genius of a chap called Sandy Longmuir of the Scottish Rural Schools Network that we succeeded in demolishing the Council's financial case. We also enlisted the help of John Finnie, who became an MSP, and Maxine Smith as well. When we won our

case it was a very happy day, and we managed to get the school up to about 28 pupils, but then when parents started to vote with their feet, which we couldn't argue against, then the numbers dwindled and we reached the position of this closure. I would though like to appeal to any parents who have an interest in stopping this closure – there is still a school there, and there are still things you can do. If so please get in touch with the Council. If a school has no pupils then it can't stay open, but perhaps some use can be made of the building. Thanks again for everyone who was part of the good fight last time.

Q3 (Valerie Steel) – I worked as a peripatetic teacher for many years in the Scottish Borders, and worked in lots of little schools. Were you suggesting Allan, that if Roy Bridge Primary stops being a school, the community should find another use for it?

(Cllr. Allan Henderson) – Absolutely – there is still a building there even if it isn't a school. There would need to be a community initiative on the future of the building, and the community would need to deal with the Council, who are always easy to deal with on buildings.

Valerie Steel – So just to clarify, once this closure has been made, are the Council proposing to retain the building, or sell the building?

Chairperson (Cllr. Baxter) – The easy answer to that is that it is still to be determined.

A3 (Ian Jackson) – At the moment the school is not closed, so the building is not available because the school could re-open. For us to be talking about the future use of the building would be prejudging the outcome of this consultation exercise. If the school does eventually close, there would be, as I understand it, a 3-stage process to determine the future of the building. Firstly there would be an internal consultation within the Council to see whether any other Council Service, for example Housing, might have any use for the building. If that's not the case, there would be an opportunity for the community to prepare a business case for some future use of the building, and failing that, the Council would dispose of the property on the open market. At this stage though, we're still talking about whether the school is to close.

Q4 – (Joanne Matheson) – This all sounds like a foregone conclusion, but, as someone who has attended that school previously, and who is of child-bearing age, I wasn't informed of this consultation. I first found out last week through a newspaper article, which is disappointing. However, if this does go ahead, and children were to move to Spean Bridge, how does that fit with initiatives like promoting walking and healthy lifestyles? If you live in Roy Bridge and have a P1 pupil, you would have to navigate a 3-mile walk to the school in Spean Bridge, with no safe footpath.

Chairperson (Cllr. Baxter)- Before I ask officials to respond, I want to make it clear this is not a foregone conclusion. The members of the Council's Education Committee, the current members anyway, are very open-minded and will consider all

the consultation responses before coming to a final decision. In my experience, councillors don't like being told by officers that there is only one possible conclusion.

A4 (Ian Jackson) – I'm a little disappointed to hear that you didn't know about the consultation Joanne. All parents, including pre-school parents, were notified of the consultation by individual letter in November, and I know those letters went out because I know some of the parents who received them, and who have confirmed they had received a letter from me. [Ali Beradelli, a parent, confirmed she had received the letter]. On the matter of walking routes, clearly when you close a school, pupils have to travel further and have less opportunity to walk, and this is recognised as a downside of a school closure. The Highland Council does provide school transport from Roy Bridge to Spean Bridge Primary, so pupils would not necessarily be expected to walk. The main point I would make in response is that pupils would not have to "move" to Spean Bridge, since they are already there and have been for the last 4 years. This proposal does not entail any difference to the current arrangements in practice, although it does involve a change to the formal status of Roy Bridge Primary.

Don Esson – There are obviously challenges in Highland in terms of walking and cycling to school, given the distances that are often involved. Schools do however promote cycling proficiency and initiatives like the "Daily Mile", where children are encouraged to walk together. Overall, our feeling is that the educational benefits from this proposal outweigh the challenges that arise in terms of walking or cycling to school.

Q5 – (Annabel Strachan) - Has the capacity limit for children at Spean Bridge been looked at and included in the paper, taking into account the housing that is being built in the area?

A5 – (Ian Jackson) – Yes we have looked at that, and the school capacity is considered in the paper. The Council has 15-year roll projections on its website, and also posts its methodology – how we calculate the projections. Anticipated housebuilding is included in the calculation, and there is also a figure to allow for ad hoc housing developments. It's not a precise science and includes an element of crystal ball gazing, but we base the figures on the best information that we have. We do feel that Spean Bridge has enough capacity for the foreseeable future.

(Don Esson) – You might also be interested to know that the last Lochaber Area Committee considered a paper, which is now in the public domain, which contained the details of school buildings within the Lochaber High School and their capacities

Q6 – (Anna Danby) What effort has been made by the Council to establish how many pre-school age children there are in Roy Bridge? I have a 3-year-old and like others I didn't hear about this consultation until recently.

A6 - (Ian Jackson) I am glad that you had heard about the proposal before tonight's meeting. We notify the parents of children on the school and pre-school roll, but it's

not always possible for us to identify all the children of pre-nursery age within a community. We have had a number of informal discussions over the past few years about the future of the school as well, both in Roy Bridge and in Spean Bridge.

Q7 – (Robert Strachan) – I just wanted to add that, as a former pupil, I would say there are huge benefits to being in a multi-stage composite class. I don't agree that there are benefits to being in a bigger school.

Q8 – (Catherine MacKinnon) I've read the consultation paper. My children unfortunately had to make the journey into Fort William to access Gaelic Medium education, all 5 of them, and we had considerable problems with school transport, and the children were considerably disadvantaged in terms of after-school activities. When they were pre-school age we had the Partner Centre Gaelic Medium nursery so that was fine – it was so much better than travelling to Fort William. However we just never quite got the numbers to turn it into a primary school class. Had that happened the quality of their experience would have been so much higher, particularly in the early years, and they would have been educated within their local community. The consultation paper doesn't mention the number of children who are travelling from this area to GME in Fort William, and it doesn't consider the carbon footprint of that. It seems to class those who have opted for GME as non-members of the community. It should be acknowledged in the paper that there are children who travel from this catchment but who have to travel to Fort William. They should be counted as part of the Roy Bridge catchment. The consultation paper also looks at possibilities to change the catchment to add other areas to the Roy Bridge catchment. Whilst there are no opportunities to do that in English Medium, there could be in Gaelic Medium. I don't know where the nearest Gaelic Medium provision is in the Badenoch direction, but in Lochaber it's in Fort William. I don't know whether any of this would change the situation we are currently in, but I think for completeness it should be looked at. We need to know how many children are travelling from this area to GME, and what the demand is. My own children are all through school and I'm not yet at the stage of having grandchildren, but that could be different in 10 years' time.

A8 – (Ian Jackson) – You raise some interesting points Catherine. Andrew mentioned at the beginning of the meeting that, although we are proposing closure, we have identified alternative options, and that we could also consider other options put forward during consultation. In effect, I think you are suggesting we look at GME in Roy Bridge as an alternative to closure.

In terms of the numbers, our view was that if someone lives in Roy Bridge but has children attending Bun-sgoil Ghàidhlig Loch Abar, they would continue to attend that school irrespective of whether Roy Bridge was re-opened as an English Medium school, which is what it was before it was mothballed. In respect of the opportunity for GME to be provided at Roy Bridge, there is an opportunity for parents to request local provision of Gaelic Medium education, and the criteria for that are laid down in the Statutory Guidance for Gaelic Education. Essentially, if there are 5 children in a year

group whose parents request an assessment for GMPE, we are required to carry out that assessment. I would say, and possibly Don will comment on this as well, that Bun-sgoil Ghàidhlig Loch Abar not only offers larger numbers – better for language learning – but also offers an immersive Gaelic language experience that would not be offered at a school that provided both Gaelic and English medium education. We would therefore see some merit in GME in the area being provided at Bun-sgoil Ghàidhlig Loch Abar, and of course the Council has invested heavily in providing that facility. Nevertheless, you have made an interesting suggestion and I think the Council will have to consider it as a possible alternative to closure.

Don Esson – It's very good that you have highlighted the potential for GME, and we are aware of the problems with travelling. Ian has highlighted that there is a statutory process for moving forward with GME, if the demand can be shown. I would add that neither Ian nor I are particularly flying a flag for large schools – both of us live in small Highland communities – but there are huge disadvantages when the numbers fall as low as they did in Roy Bridge.

Q9 (Valerie Steel) – I feel I have been misled because I thought this consultation was about the closure of Roy Bridge Primary, and I am now hearing that it's not a foregone conclusion, and that Roy Bridge could open up again as a result of this consultation. Also I think there are multiple issues around transport. We live in Inverroy, a mile from Roy Bridge and 2 miles from Spean Bridge, but there is no safe walking route to Spean Bridge. My grandson is attending Spean Bridge PS, and he loves cycling. He would be delighted to cycle to school, or walk. He loves shinty as well, and he has just joined the Beavers, so I am using a lot of fuel to drive him up and down to his activities. When the operational merger of the two schools took place, what consideration was given to the fact that children wouldn't be able to walk or cycle to school?

The Chairperson (Cllr. Andrew Baxter) – I am sorry that you feel misled, but the Proposal is to close the school. The statutory consultation process does oblige us to consider other options if they are presented.

A9 (Ian Jackson) – The school was mothballed in 2017 because the roll eventually fell to two, because all the other parents had moved their children to Spean Bridge of their own free will. If every child in Roy Bridge had continued to attend Roy Bridge School it would have remained a viable school, but although as Don says we aren't here to do down small schools, when the total roll falls to two, there are some serious disadvantages in terms of socialization. In terms of walking, I would have thought the journey would have been as difficult from Inverroy to Roy Bridge as it is to Spean Bridge.

(Valerie Steel) – No we have a path, although it's not the best.

(Ian Jackson) – I stand corrected on that then! However as previously mentioned we do provide school transport from the Roy Bridge catchment to Spean Bridge PS.

Don Esson - Parents took a conscious and informed decision to move their children to either Spean Bridge Primary or Bun-sgoil Ghàidhlig Loch Abar.

Q10 – Joanne Matheson – You mentioned sports, music, lunch clubs and such like. Would these things not be available at Roy Bridge if it re-opened?

A10 (Don Esson) – They could be, depending on the school roll, but many activities might not be viable, again depending on the size of the roll.

Q11 – (John Fotheringham) – I invited a number of people in the community to this meeting, because of an advert in the *Lochaber Times* last week. The advert made no mention of closing the school and only spoke about transferring the catchment area of Roy Bridge to Spean Bridge. There seems to have been some duplicity here, and I am concerned that the closure of this school by stealth. People in the general community of Roy Bridge almost certainly know nothing about this report. Now, when I was active in the Spean Bridge, Roy Bridge and Achnacarry Community Council, it always seemed to me that the primary reason for the fall in numbers at Roy Bridge came about because the lack of a nursery. Once children went to the nursery at Spean Bridge, they preferred to go into P1 at the same school. I think the community did lose out because of the lack of a school nursery in Roy Bridge. The community has lost a lot over the years. It's lost its shop and its post office although it is still a vibrant community. The people of Roy Bridge should have been better dealt with by Highland Council.

The Chairperson (Cllr. Andrew Baxter) – It probably doesn't help that the area no longer has a community council, as they would have been a statutory consultee.

A11 (Ian Jackson) – There is a set format with standard wording for these notices, so I would have to check whether there was an error [Following the meeting – there was no error – the Notice did refer to the closure of the school]. Every parent and nursery parent was notified of this consultation by individual letter, as was every member of staff. There was the notice in the *Lochaber Times*, the public meeting was advertised on the Council's Facebook page and the Council's Twitter account, and it has been on the Council's website continuously since November. There has been no attempt by the Council to put this through by stealth, we have done everything we reasonably could to publicise the consultation, and the turnout tonight suggests there are people who are aware of it. There is still time for people to submit written responses by 21 January. Going onto the point about the nursery, it's obviously correct to say that Roy Bridge did not have a nursery when it was in operation. It was certainly not the only school in that situation. In South Lochaber, Glencoe PS does not have a nursery – children go to Ballachulish nursery due to its geographical proximity. Similarly, in the Mallaig area, Lady Lovat PS in Morar does not have a nursery – children go to Mallaig to access nursery provision. Where schools are in close proximity, it's quite common for only one of them to offer nursery. I would add that, were Roy Bridge PS to re-open, it would be on the same basis as when it was last operational i.e., without a nursery.

Q12 – (John Fotheringham) I still feel you could have connected with the general population of Roy Bridge in some other way – you could have used the public notice system to have done that. I understand the point about not every school having a nursery, but I think it was the reason for the decline in the roll at Roy Bridge, but if children in Roy Bridge had the opportunity to attend a school nursery in the village, Roy Bridge school could be made viable.

Q13 (Stuart Matheson) – I was in Roy Bridge School up to 12 years ago, and we had sporting activities. We did join with Spean to play shinty, but otherwise I don't see what the issue is with that side of things. Again, I only heard late on about this meeting – I was notified though my parents, so that was a bit disappointing.

Q14 (Annabel Strachan) – An argument for continuing with mothballing might be around the use of the building, parents not as a separate school but as a continuation of the facilities of Spean Bridge School. In some schools, nursery and P1/2 is in one building and the older stages in another building. That could provide extra capacity for Spean Bridge. There's also a great outdoor play area at Roy Bridge School, which at the moment isn't used apart from a few local kids using it for rollerblading and skateboarding. It could be another area that Spean Bridge could use.

A14 – (Ian Jackson) – The only point I would wish to make at this stage is that using the Roy Bridge facilities as an adjunct of Spean Bridge school would still constitute a formal closure of Roy Bridge School.

Q15 - (Cllr. Denis Rixson) – As an ex-school teacher I don't like to see schools close, and as the Chair has already indicated, there is no particular agenda here on the part of Highland councillors. It's up to the parents on this one. If parents are sufficiently keen to see the school retained, submit written responses to the consultation. It's really in your own hands. This is not the only location in Highland where we have a bigger school drawing children from a smaller one. We have exactly the same situation in Mallaig and Morar, where parents in Morar send their children to the school in Mallaig because of the perceived better facilities in Mallaig. I am sure that councillors would be very supportive if parents came forward with suggestions for alternatives to closure for Roy Bridge school.

There being no other comments, the **Chairperson** thanked everyone for coming and for the thoughtful and measured comments made. He reminded those present of the closing date for responses – 21 January 2022 – 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