

**MINUTE OF PUBLIC MEETING HELD AT STRUAN PRIMARY SCHOOL ON 20
MARCH 2023**

**CONSULTATION ON A PROPOSAL TO DISCONTINUE THE PROVISION OF
EDUCATION AT STRUAN SCHOOL**

Panel

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

Joan Esson, HMIE

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16 members of the public attended the meeting.

The Chairperson began by welcoming everyone to the meeting and introducing the officials present. He advised that the purpose of the meeting was to discuss the proposal to formally close Struan 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 April 2022 Struan 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 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 Struan 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 Dunvegan and Carbost Primary Schools, 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 – Pages 12 and 13 of the Proposal Paper you have in front of you illustrate the educational benefits that arise from the Proposal, and the reasons why we are meeting here tonight. The evidence we have suggests there is no realistic prospect of a viable roll coming back to Struan PS. We have thought about this long and hard, and there are clear advantages from the closure in terms of social interaction and collaborative learning. This may not be just a matter of numbers, but also of the mix of families at the school. For example, if there were a single family with four children, then the same issues would arise in terms of socialisation. For those of you that know me, I was Head Teacher of Carbost and Struan at one time, and I saw the roll at Struan school gradually falling over the years.

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

Q1 – What numbers of children are there aged between 0-4 in the Struan catchment area?

A1 (Ian Jackson) – We know that the numbers are very small and I understand any children of that age group have already opted for GM nursery provision in either

Dunvegan or Portree. Our feeling is that there would be no children of that age group whose parents would be interested in attending Struan Primary.

Q2 – Is there any thought about the potential benefit of reallocating the catchment to Portree rather than Dunvegan, since the majority of children in the area are already attending school in Portree? Also, they use the school bus which is already going to Portree, so you wouldn't need any extra taxis to Dunvegan. If the catchment were allocated to Portree, parents could have the choice of the English and Gaelic schools there.

A2 – Chairperson (Cllr. John Finlayson) – I think that would be unlikely, as we have to look at the sustainability of the schools that currently exist. We currently have clearly defined catchment areas for both EM and GM education.

(Ian Jackson) – We do, and currently Struan is included within the Dunvegan GM catchment. That, I think, provides an argument for saying the EM catchment should be included within Dunvegan as well. There is another argument, as mentioned by the Chair, in that Dunvegan is also a rural school with a small roll, and the children from Struan could be a help to that, albeit there are only very small numbers. However, the purpose of tonight's meeting is to listen to the points raised, and it would be useful to hear whether there are any other views on this one.

Q3 – (follow-up) – Currently there is one child going to GME at Dunvegan and one going to EME at that school, but there are several more going to Portree, who are able to take advantage of transport that is already in place, with the High School bus. Children going to Portree are able to socialise with far more children, and there is much more on offer for sports and after-school activities. There is just more going on in Portree for children.

(Ian Jackson) – Which way does the bus go? Is it via Sligachan?

(follow-up) – Yes. They meet another bus at the junction, and then they all travel together to Portree.

(Chairperson) – It's important to remember there are plans for a new school in Dunvegan. That will change the whole profile of what families in the area want. When a new school is built and the learning environment changes, that makes a huge difference to how parents perceive a school, and very clearly, when the new school is built, there will be new sporting facilities in Dunvegan. All the points you raise are up for discussion and consideration, but personally I wouldn't want to see us build a new school in Dunvegan and all the population of this area go to Portree.

(follow-up) – The attraction of Bun-sgoil Ghàidhlig Phort-Rìgh is not so much the new school as the prospect of total immersion in Gaelic.

(Chairperson) – I would say both are contributory factors.

Q4 – I would just like to say that if the school closes it will be the end of an era. I was at school here, and my children were all schooled here. It's just such a pity there are so few children in the community of school age.

A4 (Chairperson) – That's very true of course, although if we do come to that decision, it's good that we are having the discussion now. Sometimes when we mothball schools, we don't go through the consultation process until some time afterward. When the school building is left vacant for too long, there is no prospect of it becoming an asset to the community. If we do get to a position where we agree to close the school, we then want to get to a position where this building, with all its history, can move onto another phase.

Q5 – I think the closure is inevitable. The facts are there. Quite simply there aren't the children in the area anymore. We all know the school has been there for many generations, but things change. The community are ambitious to do something with the building if the school closes, and to me it's inevitable that it does.

A5 – (Chairperson) – Mhairi referred earlier to pages 12 and 13 and the educational benefits. It's important that people read these. We need to make sure we are offering our young people the right type of education in the right environment. It's well summarised in the Proposal Paper.

Q6 – If we close the school, how long would it take for the community to take it over?

A6 – (Ian Jackson) – For the school closure process, the current consultation lasts until 21 April, then Education Scotland will prepare their assessment during May. We are almost into the school holidays then. The Education Committee that Cllr. Finlayson chairs meets 4 times a year, and there is a meeting in November. I am anticipating taking a report to that meeting for a final decision. That decision must be confirmed by the full Highland Council in December, after which it goes to Scottish Ministers for 8 weeks, so early 2024 would be the earliest timescale for a decision on the school closure part of the process. Once a school is closed, there is a separate process for how a community would go about obtaining the asset, if that's what the community wanted to do. It's not really my area of work, but there is what's known as community empowerment legislation, which does give certain rights to communities in terms of obtaining assets which are surplus to Council requirements.

(Chairperson) – The community and the Council are discussing a lease of the building anyway. Ian referred to community empowerment legislation and community asset transfer requests, and Elected Members from Skye would be supportive of this becoming a community facility. It's important that a building that has been here for so long, and has been used by the community, should continue to be of value to the community.

Q7 – Can you explain what an asset transfer is?

A7 – (Chairperson) – It's where an asset, which in this case is the school building, is transferred to community ownership and use. There can be a financial transaction involved, but often the financial transaction is nominal. We have had cases in Highland where we have mothballed schools, and we have left them mothballed for too long, so that when the building does become available, it has fallen into disrepair. The legislation around community asset transfers basically puts the power into the hands of the community who want to make use of that asset.

Q8 - Who maintains the asset after that?

A9 (Chairperson) – If it's a community asset transfer, it's no longer anything to do with the Council, as we will have transferred ownership to the community.

Q10 – Does that include all the grounds surrounding the building as well?

A10 (Chairperson) – In most cases it's the whole footprint.

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 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