

CONSULTATION MEETING – PROPOSAL TO DISCONTINUE THE PROVISION OF EDUCATION AT DUROR PRIMARY SCHOOL

HELD AT DUROR PRIMARY SCHOOL – 16 APRIL 2024 – 6.30pm

MINUTES OF MEETING

Panel

Cllr. John Grafton - Chairperson
Ian Jackson, Education Officer, Resources
Mhairi MacDonald, Area Education Manager

In Attendance

Malcolm McGregor, Head Teacher, Ballachulish, Duror, Glencoe and St. Bride's Primary Schools
Cllr. Sarah Fanet
4 members of staff
23 members of the public

The Chairperson – Cllr. John Grafton introduced himself as Vice-Chair of the Local Area Committee and welcomed everyone to the consultation meeting.

He continued as follows:

The purpose of the meeting is to discuss the proposal to formally close Duror Primary School, (as set out in the recommendation to the proposal Paper). The proposed change, if approved, will take place at the end of the school year following the conclusion of the statutory consultation process. This would most likely be the end of the 2024-25 school session.

Other options identified in the proposal paper are keeping the school open, or deciding to “mothball” it. We can also discuss any other options or alternatives to closure which those present would like to raise.

The Council officials present tonight are Mhairi MacDonald, Area Education Manager, and Ian Jackson, Education Officer, (Resources). Also present is Malcolm McGregor, Head Teacher of Duror Primary School as well as the schools at Ballachulish, Glencoe and St. Bride's.

Mr Jackson and Mrs MacDonald will shortly make a couple of quick presentations, and following these, I will open to the meeting for questions and observations.

The Chairperson then invited Ian Jackson to describe the consultation process.

Mr Jackson

Thank you Chair. The permanent closure of a school, which is what the Council is proposing for Duror PS, 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 3 May, 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 Duror 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 3 May, 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 school, 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 invited Mhairi MacDonald to outline the educational benefits that would arise from the Proposal.

Mrs MacDonald referred to the Proposal Paper, and advised that the goal of the Education Service was to make the educational experience for children as positive as it could be. We have developed a number of indicators around that. The evidence we have gathered for Duror suggest there is no realistic prospect of the roll increasing significantly in the foreseeable future. There are 4 pupils at present but only two are expected for the 2024-25 school session. From the educational point of view there are a number of disadvantages that arise from that. Duror is part of a quad-cluster and in the other cluster schools, children can engage in co-operative learning in groups of various sizes, engaging in listening and talking. These opportunities, and those for peer group opportunities such as sports, are greater in those schools than we have in Duror, especially come August. Working with others is one of the core elements of the school curriculum. Thinking ahead into children moving into high school, it can present challenges if you are the only one from your primary school entering S1. Pages 8-10 in the Report set out the arguments relating to educational provision, and on page 10 it is summarised by concluding that there are positive educational benefits to be derived from the closure of Duror Primary School, due to the increased opportunities that can be provided from any of the other schools in the cluster.

The Chairperson opened the meeting to the floor.

Q1 – I think the proposal is short-sighted. My daughter is one of those who will be in the school next year. This is a rural community and the numbers at the school can fluctuate. This is one of the few amenities in the village. I disagree with the Council's claim that the children are not getting a good education – they get an amazing education, and the socialisation issue is covered by the fact the school is part of a quad cluster. I feel that the education my daughter receives here is probably better than what she would receive at one of the bigger schools.

A1 (Ian Jackson) – We obviously take the points you have made there. Just to clarify one issue, the Council is not saying that children at this school do not receive a good education – we think they do – but we think that having a roll of two provides some barriers to education and makes things harder for staff. There's also the issue of socialisation which we discussed before [in pre-consultation].

Q2 – I think it's also important to remember that small schools are at the heart of their community. There's another aspect of socialisation which you have missed out, which is socialisation with other members of this community. My boys went to St. Bride's, which is at the heart of its community. Once you take that away, you take it away for ever. I would also disagree with your comment about transition. I am a teacher at the High School and in my experience, the children who come from the small schools have a much more developed sense of identity and confidence, and I'm not seeing, in my experience, any difficulty with transition to secondary school.

Q3 – My children came to this school many years ago. When my oldest daughter came there were two in her year group. When my youngest daughter came there were 8 in

her year group so that gives you an idea of how much the local population can fluctuate. I know it's now the whole school you are talking about, but when my oldest girl went to high school she was the only one left in her year group, and she had no problem with transitioning, even though she went to Lochaber High. She therefore went from being the only pupil from Duror to a much larger school and class, but had no difficulties.

A3 (Ian Jackson) – You are right in saying that small school rolls fluctuate, but we are seeing a pattern across Highland, of declining school rolls. The simple fact is that, taken as a whole, there are less children around today than there were 20, 30, or 40 years ago, and there is a fundamental problem with low school rolls in rural areas, and many urban areas as well.

Q4 – However if you take the school away, anyone else who is thinking of moving to the area that has a family will be deterred from moving.

Q5 – We moved to Duror a year ago, to work remotely, and one reason we picked the location was the school, so if you get rid of that, there is no reason for young professional families who are looking to work remotely to move here. We have a pre-school child and we don't mind the idea of him being part of a school with a low roll.

Q6 – I was fortunate enough to have 3 daughters that were all educated here, and who transitioned successfully onto high school. My thoughts on this proposal are that education doesn't start only when a child goes to school in the morning, nor does it finish at the end of the school day. This is an area where we have such environmental beauty, with river, sea and woodland, and these are the things politicians today tell us are the most important.

The Chairperson asked Malcolm McGregor whether he wished to comment.

Malcolm McGregor - All schools have tons of potential and Duror PS has tons of potential. That doesn't change the fact that the school will be going down to two kids, with all the compromises that involves with clustering, and the hybrid approach. The potential here is good, but the educational concerns don't go away.

Q7 – Could I ask whether the Education Department works with the Housing Department at any stage? If there is no school here, there will be fewer children wanting to come. Would the Housing Department build more social housing to change the population pattern locally, so that more people can benefit from what is on offer in this area, something others have already spoken about. This is a very caring area, where we take a great interest in the school. I can recall attending lunches that the children had cooked, because they had grown their own food. The children have also been involved in removing litter from Cuil Bay. They take part in the community in the way they would not in a bigger school, and I think they benefit enormously from the community interest in the school.

A7 (Ian Jackson) – We take future housebuilding into account when calculating school roll forecasts, both planned developments and what we call “ad hoc” developments – people building a single house for themselves. One of the things we find with housebuilding nowadays is that it doesn’t necessarily follow that more houses means many more children. At the moment, for every 10 houses that are built, we expect around 2 children of primary school age. In the 1970s that figure was 7 children per 10 houses. Having more houses no longer generates big increases in the school roll, certainly not with the number of houses you could expect in a community like this. The issue of the relationship between the presence of a village school and the health of a community is an interesting one. About 10 years ago the Scottish Government set up a Commission on Rural Education. They looked into this, and concluded there was no clear relationship. Some rural communities thrived after losing a village school, others did not. There was no clear pattern. I understand the point you express though.

Q8 – It’s where the very young get to meet the very old. I feel very strongly that if you take the school out of a community like this, it will leave a huge hole for everyone, not just the children.

Q9 – My children went to this school also, and before my son went we were told the school was to be closed. It was just before regionalisation, and we were told our children would be going to Appin School. Am I right in saying that, in those days, children in a community had to go to the village school, and that doesn’t always happen now? In days gone by, you didn’t have the choice, but they gave people the choice.

A8/9 (Ian Jackson) – You’re absolutely right. There was a time, when if you lived in a particular community, you had to attend the designated school for that community. I don’t want to make this too political, but the change came in in 1980, after the Conservatives took power in 1979. They had a manifesto commitment to introduce an element of parental choice in terms of schools, and they passed legislation accordingly. The way the Council organises this is that every address in Highland is allocated to a catchment area served by a particular school, and our default position is that a child is enrolled into that designated school. However, if parents want another school, they can submit what is termed a placing request. The normal expectation is that we grant those, although there are some circumstances in which we can refuse them, for example where the class is already full. So yes, before regionalisation there wasn’t a choice, but now there is.

Q10 – You say you don’t expect the school roll to increase, but does the Council actually know how many children there are under a certain age in this area, or is it just guesswork. How do you actually know that figure?

A10 (Ian Jackson) – We get information from the NHS about the number of births in a particular area.

Q11 – So we wouldn’t be recorded on that?

A11 (Ian Jackson) – The system gives us some indication, but it's not perfect as it doesn't really give us information on families who move in and out. So if a baby is registered with a GP, we will have that information, but it doesn't really pick up families with pre-nursery age children who move in and out of the area. However, part of the process for this consultation is that we put information on the Council website, we put things in the local paper, we contact all the parents and the community council, and by these methods we hope to catch all the people such as yourselves. We aim to catch all parents. I would hope that in a community like this, if we are talking about something as big as the closure of the school, word will get around the community, and anyone who had a view would be able to submit that view. It's certainly our intention to publicise this consultation as widely as we can.

Q12 – What does the Council consider as a viable number for a school?

A12 (Ian Jackson) – We don't have a set number. We take into account a variety of factors. Partly it is the number of pupils, partly it is the location of the school and how far it is to its nearest alternative. To give an example, we have schools in the Small Isles - Rum, Eigg, Muck etc, and even if there is only one child in those schools, we would keep them open for lack of any alternative within travelling distance. In a school like this, which is 10-15 minutes' drive from other schools, we would look at the numbers in the context of the location.

Q13 – Has the Council done anything proactive to contact all the people who have children in this locality but who don't send their children here, to find out why?

A13 (Ian Jackson) – That's a decision for the parents concerned. We wouldn't challenge those decisions. They don't have to justify their choice to the Council.

Q14 – You say there are a number of factors taken into consideration. How much weight is given to the number of children in the school? If we had 10 families move in over the summer, each with school age children, would that be weighted more?

A14 (Ian Jackson) – I can't give promises about decisions to be made in the future, but the number of pupils and the associated educational issues is the biggest factor. This is a long process. It will not be completed by the summer, and we wouldn't close the school in the middle of a session, so if this process goes through to the end, it will be the summer of 2025 before the school was actually closed. If there was a significant change to the roll between now and then, or certainly between now and when the Education Committee takes its decision, then we would have to take that into account. If our argument is that a roll of two children is not educationally suitable, and if there were 10 children, that changes the scenario.

Q15 – You've said that you are happy with the education the children receive at this school, and the parents themselves are very happy with it. There seem to be three factors taken into account, one is the roll, the second is distance, and the other is cost,

which hasn't been discussed yet. Is that fair, or are there other factors? Is there anything else that hasn't been mentioned?

A15 (Ian Jackson) – We would also look at things like the capacity of the receiving schools. Is the closure of a school and the movement of pupils going to cause any capacity issues in the school that will take those pupils? We also rate all our schools for what we term Condition and Suitability - the latter relates to the design of the school. If the receiving school had lower ratings for these items than the school to be closed, that would be considered as well. There are a range of factors, but the biggest is the educational one, linked to the roll. Where there are only two children on the roll, there are some disadvantages, that Mhairi has set out.

Q16 - But the parents themselves have argued those disadvantages do not exist. You're saying they do, they say they don't. Which of the arguments are we able to influence?

A16 (Ian Jackson)– We have to take away all of the comments made tonight, and consider whether the feedback we have received should alter our proposal.

Q17 – One gentleman made a comment earlier about moving here. The cost of property in cities is rising continually, and the opportunities to work remotely in this area have been greatly enhanced recently with the installation of fibre cables, so the opportunities to gain more families in this area are growing, not decreasing. It would be good if you could take this into account as well. Previously it was rare to work for home, but a number of us in this room do so.

Q19 – Could I ask what criteria were used to classify the state of the building? It's been classed as a C, which is poor. What exactly is wrong with it?

A19 (Ian Jackson) – Those ratings are produced by our School Estates Team, who carry out the assessments according to Scottish Government criteria. I don't actually know what the details of this school's assessment are off the top of my head, but will certainly get the details.

Q20 - Sitting here, it's hard to see too many issues.

A21 (Ian Jackson) – In terms of the school design, there are some issues with, for example, the lack of a dining room, and children taking their meals in the classroom. The playground is small and not very varied. They look at things like disabled access. Parking is a minor issue but is another problem here.

Q22 – The disabled access was a big mistake in 1986 when they put the extension on, because the ramp was badly designed.

Q23 – I suspect that if you were to ask parents, pupils and staff who had been here over the last 30 years, you would find very few complaints. Many of the children would

prefer the playground facilities here to those in a larger school. Have you had any such complaints? If not, that should be taken into account. Because of the very low numbers at this school, the facilities have never been an issue.

Q24 – I feel timing is a big issue here. My children came here, but it was at the time the nursery was closed, and from then it was a ticking clock – no nursery, no feed into the school. However, if we ride out the current storm, things can improve. We could potentially re-establish the feed-in to the school. We have heard in the past that the school roll has gone down and then back up. I accept though there is a question about how long it can be kept open at a very low level.

A24 (Ian Jackson) - Just to clarify, the nursery you refer to was a private sector one at the village hall.

Q25 – Can we just go back to the criteria you referred to? Is this assessed in the same way for all schools, regardless of the location? Would you judge this school in the same way as the high school in Fort William?

A25 (Ian Jackson) – We would judge it against other primaries. Essentially though there are set criteria from the Scottish Government, and we try to be consistent.

Q26 – But in being consistent you could be comparing this small rural school against a large inner-city school in Glasgow or Edinburgh?

A26 (Ian Jackson) – We would compare with other schools in Highland, because it's Highland Council staff that carry out the assessments within our area, but I accept that you might be compared with schools in Inverness. Many of the criteria are the same. Are there dining facilities, is there disabled access, are the classrooms big enough, is there enough car parking, and so on?

Q27 – I don't think car parking should be a factor, since most of the children here would walk or cycle.

Q28 – I don't see how you could make an issue with the playground, when you consider the hundreds of children who have gone through this school over the years. The playground has been totally satisfactory. It's incorrect to bring that up now. Also as I said earlier, what about the wider environment here?

The Chairperson asked whether the wider environment was considered as part of the Suitability assessment.

A28 (Ian Jackson) – The Condition and Suitability ratings relate to the school site.

Q29 – Can I pick up a point made earlier, which is that many of the children in this area walk or cycle to school, whereas that would not be feasible if you were sending them to Ballachulish.

A29 (Ian Jackson) – They would obviously get school transport but yes, walking and cycling to school is something Highland Council would normally encourage, and it would no longer be practical.

Q30 – Just to be really clear on car parking, I can see the car park from my house and there is almost never a problem, only on an Open Day.

A30 (Ian Jackson) – The last time I saw the weightings given to these assessments, these exterior factors were about 10% of the total, so a fairly minor part.

Q31 – In all the arguments that the Council have made, and that we have answered, it's not been mentioned that this is probably a financial decision. If the Council want to close the school to save money, then why don't you just say that?

A31 (Ian Jackson) – We have come today to set out a proposal, and to explain why the Council has chosen to go down this path, and we are here to listen to local opinions on that proposal. We feel that having two children is not ideal, and have explained why we think that.

Q32 – You're just avoiding the real issue.

A32 (Ian Jackson) – I can tell you, in all honesty, that I have been to meet parents at schools where there are more than two pupils, and where the parents have said to me, "we don't think there are enough children to allow this school to continue." Opinions do vary on this matter. This is clearly a community that feels very strongly about keeping their school, and we have to consider all the points that are made.

Q33 – I disagree strongly with this idea that small schools don't provide enough for the children. When we moved here, one of my sons had been in a class of 30 children, and coming to this tiny community school transformed his educational experience. I work at the high school, and we try to work with children in smaller groups. I would always send children to a small school if I had the choice.

Q34 - Are these perceived negative impacts of small schools backed by studies or science? Are there studies that would prove or disprove whether larger or smaller schools are positive or negative?

A34 – (Ian Jackson) – That is a very good question actually! There has been quite a lot of research on the attainment of what are termed small schools, as opposed to larger schools. The problem is that in much of the research, they define a small school as one with less than 70 pupils, so the research doesn't address schools of the size of this one. They are more likely to compare schools of 60 with schools of 400. One of the issues with doing that kind of research in a school like this is breaching confidentiality, because if you are looking at attainment data in a school with 2 children, it would be easy to identify them. In answer to your question, there is a lack of research applicable to schools this size.

Q35 – So, if the Council's argument is that a school of two children is insufficient for the children to thrive and flourish, there is no actual evidence to back that up, one way or the other. Being selfish, as I have a child in the school, I want to know that any move for my child is not going to have a negative impact. In a wider sense, I would also repeat a point made earlier, that the age range of the people here tonight shows the incredible bond there is between this school and its community.

A35 (Mhairi MacDonald) – Someone asked about the numbers, and in some of our other schools, we might have say, 7 children, but those children come from only 2 or 3 families. Parents have come to us to say that they feel the school is not working well, because the children see each other at home, and then have the same experience at school. Other people have other experiences, so it doesn't just come down to the numbers, it's the make-up of the families in the school as well. Sometimes we find that as children move up the year groups, parents want their children to move to a bigger school as preparation for transition. When we talk about bigger schools, it's all relative. We are talking about Ballachulish and Glencoe as bigger schools, but many people would see them as very small rural schools. I was HT of two schools in Skye. One had 30 pupils and one had 7. The school with 30 pupils was considered a big school. I had previously taught in Dundee and when I moved from there, the children couldn't believe I was moving to a school with only 30 pupils. In my school in Dundee there were 30 in a class. Recently, parents in a small school in Highland approached us to say there were not enough children in the school, and their children were not getting enough socialisation. Ultimately that led to the school being mothballed. That didn't come from the Council, but from the parents. It very much depends on the particular children in a school, rather than just numbers or whether a playground is suitable. It's a complex assessment. The parents' views are important.

Q36 - Just following up on that, if you are genuinely interested in our views, I hope you are picking up the message from everybody here that a small school is fantastic for this community. That's why everyone is here. I really hope that is noted.

Q37 – I wanted to add that, although there may only be 2 children, they are involved in the cluster schools, so they do get to meet other children, and participate in sport, and so on. That has to be taken into account as well.

Q38 - Reference was made earlier to children from the same families at a small school. When my girls were here, there were 8 children, from a total of about 19, who came from four families, and it didn't cause any problems.

Q39 – Are you able to give us any information about the financial factors that are being considered?

A39 (Ian Jackson) - There is information attached as an appendix to the Proposal Paper.

Q40 – Mention was made about schools that had closed following parent requests. I assume no such request has come from Duror.

A40 (Ian Jackson) – No. I came to meet with the parents in November, and they made it clear they did not want to see the school closed.

(Mhairi MacDonald) – Ian and I held an online meeting last year in connection with a mothballed school, where no parents came along, but the wider community did not want the school to close, and so we agreed to continue mothballing for another year to allow the community to attract more families. Even though no parents had expressed an opinion about the school, we did still listen to the community. We reviewed the mothballing again just recently.

Q41 – But you are not talking about mothballing Duror, you are talking about closing it for good.

A42 (Ian Jackson) – Yes, although the paper does say that other options can be considered, and one of those is mothballing.

Q43 – But just to reiterate that the parents and the community are perfectly satisfied with this school, and the service they are receiving from the Education Department.

Q44 – There is a plan to get a toddler group going in the area, to start getting a group to feed into the school in future.

Malcolm McGregor also made reference to a local Place Plan currently being developed, to try to grow the community. He wished to make the Chair aware.

The Chairperson asked whether the Place Plan would be something that the Council would wait for before coming to a decision on the future of the school.

A44 (Ian Jackson) – All I can say is that all suggestions made tonight will be part of the mix.

Q45 – When I read the Proposal, I felt the main reason for it was money, and tonight you have mentioned other reasons. Are you saying that, if those other reasons were sorted, money wouldn't have anything to do with it? Also, how can you grade the school on facilities and make that part of your argument, when you are the organisation with the purse strings to change the facilities? The Council could invest in this building to improve its ratings.

A45 (Ian Jackson) – The Scottish Government sets out the factors we must consider in making a school closure proposal, and one of these is the financial analysis attached to the paper. If we didn't do that, when the proposal went to Scottish Ministers, they would kick it back on the basis that we hadn't done the financial analysis, but we are advancing this primarily on the basis of educational benefit.

On the other point about the Suitability and Condition assessments, we can obviously argue about the detail, but I think it is sensible for the Council to have an assessment of the condition and suitability of its school buildings. They are all rated from A to D. The Council has nearly 200 schools in total, so these surveys allow us to prioritize investment. If schools have A or B ratings, they are not as high a priority than those with C ratings. I'm not personally involved in decisions on capital investment for the Council - ultimately those decisions are taken by elected councillors - but the Council does not have enough capital funds to tackle all its building problems, and the suitability and condition ratings are part of the process of assessing that.

Q46 – Is there any route for us to question the grading of what are going to be key elements of the decision-making process?

A46 (Ian Jackson) – People are free to put in comments as they see fit. I need to send out the details of the ratings for you to submit comments on. I will repeat though, that the suitability and condition ratings are one of the factors, but not one of the more significant.

Q47 - What is the most significant?

A47 (Ian Jackson) – The educational issues related to the roll.

Q48 – The view from the room is to reject the issues you have raised, and it isn't backed up with any scientific evidence, so what is the ceiling you would consider as the number of children that would be appropriate?

A48 (Ian Jackson) – A gentleman asked that question earlier, and I said we didn't have a set figure, but we do think that 2 children is a bit low for a school in this situation.

Q49 – Is there a number of miles that is considered suitable for young children to travel? You are saying that Ballachulish, 10 miles away, is a suitable distance. If it were 20 miles away would that make a difference?

A49 (Ian Jackson) – We probably go more on travel time than miles, because in the Highlands the distance in miles could be anything from driving on the A9 to travelling on single track roads. As a rule of thumb, we normally say 30 minutes' drive time for primary school children. We do though have a school in Skye, in Elgol, that we mothballed in 2002 because there were only two children and they were siblings. It's no particular secret because we have been meeting with the parents, as they have a number of pre-schoolers there just now and they are keen to see the school re-opened. We have said we will consider that for August 2025 when there may be more children of school age. Elgol is located about 30 minutes' drive from the nearest alternative school, and some pupils live in addresses another 5 minutes further on again. Something else we might look at is the nature of the route. If it's somewhere in the Aviemore area for example, they are much more affected by winter weather than we are here.

Q50 – If the school does shut, will we be given the choice of school within the quad cluster, and not just be told which school my daughter would have to go to?

A50 (Ian Jackson) – The proposal is that the children go to Ballachulish. That's set out in the paper. We have proposed that on the basis of the geography of the catchment. We are maybe getting ahead of ourselves, in that people here don't want the school to close at all, but again we will consider views on the question of catchment. If it was to be Ballachulish, there is still the placing request system, that was discussed earlier, but the normal practice with the Council is that if someone is on a placing request, they are not eligible for school transport.

Q51 – Why Ballachulish and not St. Bride's? They are equidistant, and both are 2-teacher schools.

A51 (Ian Jackson). Yes, they are equidistant. However Duror PS only has a boundary with Ballachulish. If the Duror catchment were re-allocated to St. Bride's, it would be a slightly odd arrangement, in that it would leave the St. Bride's catchment with an exclave.

Q52 – Is that not just a historical thing though, in that, before the bridge was built, St. Bride's pupils transferred to Fort William for secondary because they were in Inverness-shire, whereas Ballachulish was part of Argyll. I think that boundary is imaginary now, and the schools have the same Head Teacher.

A52 (Ian Jackson) – You're absolutely right about the history of course. However every school has to have a catchment, and the St. Bride's catchment reflects the historic boundary. There's nothing in law to say that we couldn't have the St. Bride's catchment with an exclave, it would just be unusual. It would be the only such case I know of in Highland. The other possibility would be to move Glenachulish into the new joint catchment, but that would require a statutory consultation.

Q53 – If the school is to shut, we should have a choice of catchment.

A53 (Ian Jackson) – The current Duror catchment has a boundary with Ballachulish, but not with St. Bride's. If the school closed, and we linked the current Duror catchment with St. Bride's, that would be unusual for the reasons mentioned.

Q54 – If you have a group of people in this room who are really supportive of keeping this school open, and if you have the two children in this school, and their parents saying the children are having a great educational experience, and the community wants to keep things in place as they are, why does the school have to close, if it's not financial?

A54 (Ian Jackson) – There is a consultation period that ends on 3 May, After that Education Scotland will come, who are not part of Highland Council. They will want to talk to the parents and children, and they will produce a report saying whether they

think we are making a reasonable argument here. We will then review the consultation exercise, both the public part and the Education Scotland report, and everything said tonight will be part of that.

Q55 - If the number of children were to rise before the next meeting, would there be a change then?

A55 (Ian Jackson) – This came up earlier. It depends on how many, but any changes in circumstances would be part of our review of the consultation.

Q56 – You’ve mentioned the playground, and the dining room, and other parts of the building, but the children are happy with that. My daughter is thriving in this school. Getting out into nature, being part of this community, has really brought her out. I don’t know what else I can say, but I just want everyone to know I don’t want the school to close.

Q57 – When you say that Education Scotland will come after this consultation, you said they would talk to pupils and parents, so will they not involve the community?

A57 (Ian Jackson) – I think they will contact the community council as well. It’s up to them, they aren’t connected to the Council, but normally they would do that.

Malcolm McGregor – That will come through me, so there will be an invite to stakeholders. The Inspector will want to chat with the kids, have a chat with staff, the Parent Council. I was waiting for this meeting to be over before I presented the next meeting! I will be putting invites out, including to the CC, to make sure all stakeholders have the chance to speak to Education Scotland, in a similar way as they have had the opportunity to speak to Highland Council.

Q58 – Not to harp on about the evidence basis, as previously discussed, but will Education Scotland assess where the kids are at, education-wise, compared with other schools in the cluster?

A58 (Mhairi MacDonald) – It’s not that type of assessment.

Malcolm McGregor – It’s a consultation. They will listen to the views of the children, and be asking questions. They won’t be comparing schools, more like they will ask “What kind of learning do you do here, do you enjoy learning? What do you like best about the school, what don’t you like about it?” Gathering that sort of evidence.

Q59 – If the Council’s argument is that having two children is a negative in educational terms, will they assess whether those negative aspects impact on the children? How do you do an assessment on how the kids are getting on?

A59 (Mhairi MacDonald) – If Education Scotland were coming to inspect the school next week, one of the big things they would consider is the unique context, and how

does the school use its context to improve the learning and teaching. You've all spoken very well about the environment for the pupils, and in the Inspection process that context and environment is very much taken into account. I would imagine that when the Inspector meets with the community, things that have been said here tonight will be shared with them, and they will take into account what impact it would have if the children were to lose this environment.

Malcolm McGregor – I'm quite confident the four kids will tell the Inspector all about it! (Laughter).

Ian Jackson – When Education Scotland come, they will consider whether Highland Council have made a reasonable case, and whether it is reasonable to say that the education of the children would be better catered for in another school.

Mhairi MacDonald - They will have their view, and we will have to await that view, just as you will.

Ian Jackson – If this eventually goes to Scottish Ministers, the Education Scotland report will carry a lot of weight. Whether it is supportive of what the Council is proposing, or whether it is critical of it, it will be a significant document.

Q60 – There has been a lot of discussion about what will happen to the kids, but what will happen to the staff if this school closed?

A60 (Ian Jackson) – We have a redeployment policy for anyone who has a permanent contract, so the teachers would be put into another vacant post. That applies also to any other staff.

Q61 – That might not be suitable, depending on geography.

A61 (Ian Jackson) – Our policy is to offer “reasonable redeployment”. Sometimes the devil can be in the detail, but sending somebody from here to Inverness probably would not be reasonable, sending someone from here to Fort William probably would be reasonable. I'm not saying staff would go to Fort William, but those are the kind of discussions we would have.

Q62 - So therefore, the financial savings element of this proposal doesn't really exist, at least in staffing, since those staff will remain on the payroll, and will be placed elsewhere. The savings are therefore more around the building, the upkeep, structure, heating, and things like that.

A62 (Ian Jackson) – You're right in a sense, but it could also be argued that the Council has made an overall reduction in the number of posts. If the staff currently at Duror were moved to fill a vacancy elsewhere, that means less people to recruit.

Q63 – Effectively though you have a policy to redeploy staff within the Council, so the salary costs associated with that person are not going to be negated. That reduces the weight of the financial argument. As we have already argued, the social and educational elements are more than satisfactory. The parents, pupils and staff are more than happy with the environment of the school, inside and outside, and the financial element is now reduced.

A63 (Ian Jackson) – The only thing I would say to that is that we have not made this case on the basis of financial impact.

Q64 – From our side, looking at this, none of the criteria you have put forward are stacking up for closure. I can understand the financial argument. If there is a ballpark figure of £100K being spent on 2 kids, I can see why you would want to redirect those resources, but that level of saving is not really going to be achieved. It's only going to be £10-15K maximum. For that saving you will be ripping the heart out of the community and restricting the attractiveness of the community for other families moving in, at a time when remote working and remote living are becoming more popular, feasible and practical. We don't just have people here from Scotland, but from all over the world. It's a very cosmopolitan area, and potentially you are taking a huge part of that attractiveness away, as well as upsetting so many people in the area. There is a big emotional factor to be considered here. I know there are practical arguments, but I think we have covered them. The Council needs to give consideration to the emotional element.

There being no further questions, the Chairperson thanked everyone for coming, and reminded everyone that representations should be sent to Ian Jackson, email Education.Consultations@highland.gov.uk (address circulated in the letter), or via the online form, to arrive **no later than Friday 3 May 2024**. He also advised that the record of the meeting will be made available at least 3 weeks before the meeting of the Education Committee where it is intended that the report of the meeting, plus any submissions/representations and the view of Education Scotland on the proposal, will be considered.

