

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

HELD AT BADCAUL CHURCH OF SCOTLAND – 10 SEPTEMBER 2024 – 6.30pm

MINUTES OF MEETING

Panel

Cllr. Sarah Atkin - Chairperson
Ian Jackson, Education Officer, Resources
Mhairi MacDonald, Area Education Manager

In Attendance

Robert Hynd, Education Scotland
16 members of the public

The Chairperson – Cllr. Sarah Atkin introduced herself as an elected councillor and a member of the Council's Education Committee, and welcomed everyone to the consultation meeting. She had taken over the Chairperson's role tonight as the local Area chairperson was indisposed.

She continued as follows:

The purpose of the meeting is to discuss the proposal to formally close Badcaul Primary School, (as set out in the recommendation to the proposal Paper). The proposed change, if approved, will take place at the conclusion of the statutory consultation process.

Other options identified in the proposal paper are keeping the school open, or continuing 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).

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 Badcaul 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 11 October, 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 Badcaul PS, but before that I will briefly describe the rest of the consultation process.

Since January 2022 Badcaul PS has been "mothballed", which means it is not operational, but neither is it permanently closed. The Council held some informal discussions about the future of the school in the spring of 2023 and again in the spring of this year. There was though limited engagement from the community, and we felt it was appropriate to advance this formal proposal in the expectation that it might generate a wider range of views.

The formal process has a number of stages. Once the public consultation ends on 11 October, 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 Ullapool Primary 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 commented that page 10 of the Proposal Paper sets out our view on the educational benefits of closure. I had the pleasure of visiting Badcaul a couple of times when it was clustered with Scoraig and I saw the dedication of the staff and what a close knit group of young people we had, but it was shortly after that the parents chose to move their children to Ullapool PS, which they saw as better for their children.

The indicators that the Council looks at are set out at Section 9 of the Paper, but the key thing for the Council is the peer group available to young people in a school. People often ask whether the Council has a specific number of children they regard as necessary for a school, but for me it is often the make-up of children. There was a school that Ian and I visited earlier this year, that had 7 children, due to fall to five, but in only 3 families, and two of those families were related. The parents felt it was restrictive for the children to be living in the same community, socialising with each other, and also to be in the same class at school all day long. Those parents felt that moving to another school with larger numbers would benefit the children.

The evidence that we have suggests that there is no realistic prospect of Badcaul PS having a viable roll in the foreseeable future. Currently there are only 2 children of primary school age in the catchment area, and both currently attend Ullapool PS. We have not been made aware of any parental demand to re-open the school.

Should Badcaul PS be closed, the new catchment school would be Ullapool PS, where there is a healthy roll, an Early Years setting and a choice of English Medium or Gaelic Medium education.

Working with others across a wide range of curriculum areas is important for young people's development, getting opportunities to share and to develop responsibilities. There are also issues such as team sports and other recreational or cultural activities. Language learning also benefits considerably from having greater numbers. All of that is to the benefit of young people.

In summary, closing Badcaul PS would provide educational benefits through increased opportunities for young people.

The Chairperson opened the meeting to the floor.

Q1 – You have described the benefits, but have you addressed the disadvantages? One example might be transport. You have primary school children travelling with high school children, perhaps some of the primary school children could have special educational needs. Have the costs of that been identified?

A1 (Mhairi) – In terms of children with additional needs, we always consider the appropriateness of transport arrangements.

Q2 (Follow-up)– But what about the age differences? Is it appropriate to allow 5-year-olds to travel with teenagers, without adult supervision?

A2 (Mhairi) – That is common throughout Highland. It happens in my own community on Skye, with children going to Portree. It seems to work well.

Q3 (Follow-up)– So there is no provision for chaperoning very young children?

A3 (Mhairi) – There is for children with identified needs, where the needs require it. Assessing whether a transport escort is required is part of what we do, where children have additional needs.

Q4 (Follow-up) – That wasn't covered in the report, and I am disappointed that you don't seem to have considered any of the possible downsides to the proposal.

A4 – (Ian) The purpose of this meeting is to gather community views. Section 17 of the report does address possible adverse effects, although we concluded there were none since the pupils are already attending Ullapool PS.

Q5 – (Follow-up) – But there will be additional children in years to come.

A5 – (Ian) – In terms of presenting the educational benefits, that has to be the Council's justification for making this proposal. We are presenting this paper to effectively say, "We think it's a good idea to close Badcaul Primary, and these are the reasons why." We have assessed this and we think there are benefits to what we propose, but, this is a consultation and we have to listen to the views expressed tonight.

Q6 – I appreciate there has been a certain momentum in favour of Ullapool as the destination school, linked to the availability of transport, but having read through the paper, I felt it was very dismissive of Bualnaluib PS. Is Bualnaluib on the short list for closure as well? It's 32 miles from Badcaul to Ullapool, but only 14 miles to Bualnaluib. Ullapool is a long way for small children, especially in wintertime.

I will admit I see a strong case for closing Badcaul. It's hard to see how the school could stay open, but I wonder whether Bualnaluib might be a more viable option.

A6 (Ian) – Thanks for the comment. The geography is obvious, Aultbea is much closer to Badcaul than Ullapool. The parents, when they made their choice, made their choice for Ullapool. One factor is the boundary of the Associated School Group (ASG), by which we mean a secondary school and the primary schools that feed into it. Bualnaluib PS is part of the Gairloch ASG and feeds into Gairloch High. Badcaul,

when it was last in operation, fed to Ullapool High, as does Scoraig, and of course there is the hostel in Ullapool for the secondary school age pupils from Scoraig

Q7 (follow-up) – Pupils from Scoraig previously travelled to Gairloch.

A7 (Ian) – At sometime in the past, yes, but Ullapool PS/HS are the designated schools for Badcaul and Scoraig, and Scoraig will always fit better with Ullapool because of the school hostel there. Part of the issue with considering a catchment change for the primary school, is that it would also mean a catchment change for the secondary school. However, if there is demand from parents in Badcaul to be part of the Gairloch ASG, then we could take account of that. It is possible to amend catchment areas, but again it would require a statutory consultation.

In answer to your question about whether Bualnaluib is on a list for closure, absolutely not! None of us can give promises about what might happen in the far future, but at the moment there are 20-odd children at Bualnaluib School and no plans to close it.

Q8 (follow-up) – The critical point is that in sparsely populated areas like ours, the demographics can change rapidly. Shieldaig is a good example of that. The argument you make in your paper is very strong, I can't find many flaws in it, but I think it is too dismissive of Bualnaluib, when we are talking about small children. Then there is this point about changing demographics. There is talk of a fish farm development here, and who knows what population that might bring to the area. I accept that the education that could be offered at Badcaul at present would be limited in comparison to what is offered at Ullapool, despite the professionalism and dedication of staff, but I do think there is a case for not rushing into full-scale closure too precipitately.

A8 (Ian) – I think what you are saying there is that we should continue with the mothballing for the time being. We will note and consider that.

Q9 – It used to be the case that the pupils travelling to Ullapool had to change buses at Breamore Junction. If that is still the case, I would question whether it is appropriate for very young children?

A9 (Ian) – Within the Council, the detailed arrangements for school transport are organised by our Public Transport Unit (PTU). In effect the Education Service advises the PTU that we have X amount of pupils who need to get from Point A to Point B at a certain time, and the PTU make the arrangements for that. I will follow that up with the PTU.

Q10 – There are pre-school children in the area, that could potentially change the current situation. We came here 14 years ago, and the school was thriving at that time. We are where we are, but I would question your approach to mothballing. We look out at night and there are lights flashing and an alarm going off. The Highland Council should look at cutting the costs of mothballing, and also give a bit more flexibility in case the numbers of children locally do change.

You also mentioned Scoraig, and this school did a lot of good work together with Scoraig. What's going to happen to those connections in the future? I'm very surprised at the lack of mention of Scoraig. It's hardly mentioned at all. I'm also concerned about the state of the transport. I know people are concerned about the current arrangements. Are you even going to be able to get drivers in the future?

A10 (Ian) – There's a particular issue with the Badcaul building providing a broadband link to Scoraig and Achiltibuie, which meant we had to keep the power on. We are always happy to take comments about reducing the costs of mothballing, but fundamentally the issue with the future of Badcaul School is the lack of children. Others have advocated tonight for continued mothballing on the basis that the school should be kept open to allow for a future increase in numbers. It's true that there are patches within Highland which have seen increases in the number of children – Shieldaig was one and has been mentioned. Any information about the numbers of pre-school children locally and their ages, would be useful to us. On the sustainability of transport – it's our job to provide the transport.

(Mhairi) - Regarding Scoraig, for a while we had the cluster HT covering Scoraig and Badcaul. We have just split that again, so that Scoraig has its own HT. It is difficult for the children over in Scoraig to get up to Ullapool, though I know they go up there for swimming. I acknowledge that the lack of children in Badcaul has been a loss to Scoraig as well, but the new HT at Scoraig will work closely with Ullapool PS to make sure the children get as many links as possible with the larger school.

Q11 – Both my children went to Badcaul Primary, and I taught Bikeability at Scoraig, along with marine surveys and learning about plants. It was very valuable for our children to interact with Scoraig, and Badcaul offered an alternative for the Scoraig children, in a way that was much easier for them than travelling to Ullapool. The reason we should continue to mothball this school is that, over the past year, I and others in the community have gone to considerable length to look into affordable housing in this community. We set up a meeting recently, to which a lot of people came. The primary school is at the forefront of this issue. Without a school and a shop, you don't have a community. Our community is dying. We hear Highland Council talk about boosting the Highland population, and taking schools away doesn't help that aim. There are young people who grew up here and who would like to live here, but they can't afford a house. Without a school and without youth facilities, we are only going to get one demographic type moving here. The new fish farm has just bought accommodation next door for conversion into a bunkhouse and house, so there are developments on the horizon. It doesn't cost the Highland Council much to keep the school mothballed.

A11 (Ian) – The one thing I will say about mothballing is that buildings do deteriorate when they are left empty. Mothballing for year after year can be an issue.

Q12 – It would be cheaper to maintain the school as an empty building for now than to deal in the future with an aging population, empty houses, no income apart from tourism.

Q13 – We should look from the top-down rather than the bottom-up. Looking from the bottom-up, nobody denies there are not enough kids to have a school at the moment. But what are the consequences of closing the school permanently? If we look from the top-down, let's take the government's strategic document about reversing population decline, which focused on various areas, education and housing being two of them. If we don't support the feeder schools, we will just end up with everything being in Ullapool, and the Highland economy being centralised in Inverness. I'm sure we can accept the points about socialising for children, but we have to be more creative with those schools, and with networking to build up opportunities. As others have said it won't cost the Council much to continue mothballing, but once the school is gone it will never come back. We are looking to build affordable homes here – affordable homes are for young people, but if there's no school, what's the point of building affordable homes? In the government's paper, it states that the presumption is against the closure of rural schools, so that's government policy. I can appreciate you are looking at it from the educational point of view, there are no pupils at the moment, how long do we keep this empty building, but there are a lot of bigger issues. Scottish Ministers could decide that on the basis of the bigger issues, closure is not the correct route at the moment. We need to think about what we want this area of Scotland to look like in 15-20 years' time. This constant chipping away at what we've got here – such as with the Care Home in Ullapool – which was saved by the community - takes a lot of energy from local communities. The school is another domino in the narrative of services being reduced. You've said the population of children is in decline, but we don't need to accept that.

The Chairperson suggested that the comments being made should also be submitted in writing.

Q14 – Would there be any possibility of a community rental of the school to use the building, to keep it from deteriorating, and then, if in future there are enough children to consider re-opening the school, it could then revert to being a school again?

A14 (Ian)– In principle that could be done. For example we had a school on Skye, in Uig, that school was mothballed for about 12 years. It did eventually close but for a long time there was a mission church that rented and used the building.

Briefly on the point earlier about Ministers and the presumption against rural school closures, that is correct and is written into the 2010 Act, under which we are advancing this proposal. I can assure you that if this proposal goes to Ministers, that is not a rubber-stamping exercise, and there is an opportunity for people to make representations direct to Ministers.

(Mhairi) – We have another school in Skye that is currently mothballed, but which was used for a while by the John Muir Trust. It's good to see an empty building being put to use for the benefit of the area.

In my experience, parents prefer schools with larger rolls. I was formerly cluster Head Teacher of two neighbouring schools in Skye, one very small and the other a bit larger. When parents moved into the area, they preferred to enrol children in the larger school, even if they were within the catchment of the smaller one. That's not to say the same would definitely happen here, but it's been my experience.

Q15 – I can see that, but I have been thinking about other schools that have closed, for example Inverasdale School, but the difference between them and here is that Badcaul is geographically central. It covers a large area and it provides options for people. It would be a mistake to close it because of the distances involved.

Q16 – What would the Highland Council do with the building if it closed?

A16 (Ian) – We have to be careful about assuming the school is going to close, when we are still consulting on that very proposal. However, this question does come up quite often in these situations. Broadly speaking, where the Education Service has a surplus building, other Council services would be asked if they have a potential use for the building. That would include, for example, the Housing Service, who might want to redevelop the building, or redevelop the site. If no-one within the Council wants to use the site, there could be an opportunity for a community buyout. It's not simply a case of asking for the building. The community would have to prepare a business case, and evidence that it was not going to undercut other local businesses. If there no interest in a community transfer, the Council would put the building up for sale on the open market.

Q17 – You suggested earlier that continued mothballing could lead to the building deteriorating. The school is your asset, it is in your interest to maintain it. I think there is a mood in this meeting tonight that, whilst we accept there are currently not enough children to operate the school, things could change. There are developments within this area that could lead to that change, and I think it would be a little precipitate to close this school now. I have read the report which is well-drafted, but I think we need to look to the future. I agree with the suggestion that when families move to an area, the first thing they consider is "Where are the schools?" If your area doesn't have a school, you've got a problem. So I favour the idea of an extended mothballing. Let's just wait and see what happens in this community. In my experience, demographics can change. In a school this size, one family can tip the balance. We should not be closing the school on the basis of this meeting tonight.

A17 (Ian) – Tonight's meeting is just part of the overall consultation process, which ends on 11 October. Any evidence that you wish to present can be submitted by that date.

Q18 – If mothballing continues, the building could be used?

A18 (Ian) - In principle yes. I wouldn't want to talk about the detailed arrangements here, but it's been done in the past. I would say though that, if mothballing continues, there is an expectation that the position would be annually reviewed. Not through a formal setting like this, but a more informal discussion, and people here tonight have been part of the last two of those in relation to Badcaul.

The Chairperson commented that the community would need to lead with any proposed use.

Q19 – The general consensus of this meeting .is that we don't want the school to be permanently closed. [There was general agreement from the floor about this]

Q20 – It's only been mothballed for two years. That's not a long time. Couldn't we just wait and see?

Q21 – You said earlier that Uig was mothballed for 12 years.

A21 (Ian) – That's longer than we would see as desirable, to be honest. There is National Guidance about this that says that schools shouldn't normally be mothballed for more than 3 years unless they are in a very rural location. Clearly this school is in a very rural location, but the 3-year timescale gives an idea of the normal expectation. When a school becomes mothballed for a very long time there is a danger it becomes a fait accompli. People get used to the idea of the school not being there. Families might move in but there's no school so their children get settled in the alternative school and make friends there.

Q22 – But this community is trying to do things. We are trying to get affordable housing. The fish farm could have 8 or 9 employees, or more.

A22 (Ian) – The Council could, at the end of this process, decide to continue with mothballing, or it could decide on closure. However, if we do continue with mothballing, then we might all be back here one day having the same discussion.

Q23 – The feedback from tonight, and the written responses, are they put to the Education Committee? Are we privy to that?

A23 (Ian) – That's published a minimum of 3 weeks before we go back to Committee, and we basically put all the points into a report along with our responses. Anyone who submitted a representation in writing to this exercise is contacted with a copy of the report and is invited to make "further representations". Those further representations are then put to the Members of the Committee. The Committee meets four times a year, usually in February, May, September and November. Officials will make a recommendation to the Committee members.

Q24 – You do need to look at the transport arrangements. The report says 41 minutes travel time, but it could be a lot more in the winter, and there could be small children.

A24 (Ian) – I agree the journey is an unusually long one for primary school children.

Q25 – The provision of nursery would be an issue as well. You can't put a 3-year-old on the bus to Ullapool.

A25 (Ian) – We would have to look at other potential alternatives there, for example if there was a local childminder in the community, or even paying the parents themselves.

Q26 – Cumulatively, these various issues could start racking up costs.

Q27 – I would like to add that the school is the beating heart of the community. They used to do wonderful things, like at Halloween. The children would visit everyone along the road and the parents and others in the village would love that. Badcaul PS "Sale of Work" was legendary. A lot of older folk used to appreciate the school for those events. There's a bigger picture here.

[Various comments followed from the floor, from people saying they would not have moved here had there not been a primary school].

Q28 – Could the Council make money temporarily renting out the schoolhouse, to pay for the maintenance of the school part of the building?

The Chairperson commented that she was a member of the Council's Housing and Property Committee. There would be complications around acceptable standards for renting.

A28 (Ian) – I can take that up with our Estates Team, but you get into complications with tenants' rights as well. Fundamentally, this issue is about the lack of children for the school. Sadly, the type of comments you were making earlier are common across Highland. There are so many communities now where people are saying things like, "It was wonderful back when the children came out at Halloween" and about how strong the links were between school and community. The problem is there are so many communities where the children just aren't there anymore.

Q29 – I don't think you are basing this purely on education. There has to be a financial consideration.

A29 (Mhairi) – We've got to this point tonight because there are no children who want to attend Badcaul Primary.

(Ian) - There is a financial analysis attached to the back of the paper, but we would not be advancing this proposal were it not for the severe lack of children in this

community. On a personal as well as a professional basis, I do think that children need to be with other children their own age.

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 11 October 2024**. She 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.