

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

HELD AT KINLOCHEWE VILLAGE HALL – 28 JANUARY 2025 – 6.30pm

## MINUTES OF MEETING

### Panel

Cllr. Liz Kraft - Chairperson  
Ian Jackson, Education Officer, Resources  
Mhairi MacDonald, Area Education Manager

### In Attendance

Andrea McMillan, Education Scotland  
Thomas O'Halloran, HT, Shieldaig and Applecross Primary Schools  
14 members of the public

**The Chairperson – Cllr. Liz Kraft** introduced herself as an elected councillor and a member of the Council's Education Committee; and welcomed everyone to the consultation meeting.

She continued as follows:

The purpose of the meeting is to discuss the proposal to formally close Kinlochewe 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.

**Ian** - The permanent closure of a school, which is what the Council is proposing for Kinlochewe 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 28 February, 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 Kinlochewe PS, but before that I will briefly describe the rest of the consultation process.

Since July 2022 Kinlochewe 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 December 2023/January 2024 and again in the summer of 2024. 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 28 February, 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.

**Mhairi** commented that Ian's presentation had demonstrated how a school closure consultation was a serious matter, taken very seriously by both Council officials and elected councillors.

The Proposal Paper sets out, at page 11, the indicators that the Council uses in reviewing its school estate. The school environment should be of a quality that sustains and improves the education of children.

The evidence we have suggests that there is no realistic prospect of a viable roll at Kinlochewe Primary, and that's why we are at this stage in our consultation process. The Council believes there are educational benefits to children being able to attend a school with a larger roll than that on offer at Kinlochewe.

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. Socialisation is a very important part of school attendance.

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

**The Chairperson** opened the meeting to the floor.

**Q1** – I've been vociferous over the years, as Ian knows, about the school closures here. We've lost Achnasheen and we've lost Torrison, which is a good solid building at the centre of the community of Fasaig, to give it its proper name. Why has common sense not prevailed? You are closing Kinlochewe, you have left Shildaig open. The kids from here could have had a half-hour journey to Torrison, the kids from Diabaig a 10-15 minute one, and the kids from Shildaig a 10-15 minute one. You've closed down the wrong place. Torrison should have been kept as a school.

**A1 (Ian)** – Torrison is obviously more central to this part of Wester Ross than either Kinlochewe or Shildaig. Realistically though, the Council is not going to re-open Torrison School.

**Q2 (Follow-up)**– Had it been looked after in the first place, and had the Council thrown out the person that was in there, the person responsible for all the parents leaving,

then the school would not have been closed. Ian knows exactly what I am talking about.

**The Chairperson** commented that we should try to avoid comments about individuals who might not be present, but who might be identified.

**A2 (Ian)** – Yes, you will appreciate I can't say too much about that.

**Q3 (Follow-up)** – I take it the school building in Torridon has now been completely handed over?

**The Chairperson** said she believed the building had gone for community transfer.

**Q4 (Follow-up)** – Well, that should be stopped, and Highland Council should look at centralising education in the area in a purpose-built school. Torridon is the central location and the children should be brought there to save on excessive travelling. There is a small child here tonight, who will have to travel 35-45 minutes just to get to school, and the same coming back. Children in Highland have always had to travel, but let's not exacerbate the problem.

**A4 – (Ian)** – The purpose of tonight's meeting is to record views and consider them, but I would be misleading you if I said there was much prospect of Torridon School re-opening. I am just trying to be honest about that, though we are obliged to consider any comments made tonight. The bigger picture is the decline in the number of children in the area. We've talked about the closures of Achnasheen and Torridon and now possibly Kinlochewe, and even Garve has a very low roll. They are down to about 8 pupils. It's no secret that we have had informal discussions with the Garve parents about the future of their school. They have said they want to retain their school and we've respected that, but we have a huge swathe of the Highlands, from Garve all the way to Torridon, with very few children.

**Q5** – There are some new children in this community.

**A5 – (Ian)** – Well, that's the type of thing we need to hear about, but I had been in touch with all the local parents I could identify, before we started on this formal process, about the future of the school, and there didn't seem to be many parents enthused about re-opening it. This is a consultation though, and if there are young families here who want the school re-opened, we need to hear about that.

**Q6** – [from a couple with a young child]. When we moved up here, we thought the school was still open, and we were devastated when we moved here and found it wasn't. We attended a small school ourselves, but it wasn't 20 miles from the house. Our son is going to have excessive travel time to get to school and nursery. His day is going to be too long.

**Q7 (follow-up)** – We also think that small schools can be good. I have read what you say about larger schools, but we think there are advantages to small schools.

**A7 (Mhairi)** – It's all relative though. What are termed bigger schools in Highland would be considered very small schools in most other parts of the country. Schools like Shieldaig and Gairloch are in the range of 30-60 pupils. When we talk about small schools in the Highland context, we are usually talking about schools with 2-5 children.

**Q8 (follow-up)** – There are quite a few children in the village now.

**A8 (Ian)** - There are 3 outcomes possible here. We could re-open the school, if there are enough children, we could close it for good, which is what the Council is proposing and which is what happened to Torridon, or we could continue to mothball and see if the population recovers. If there are parents in the community and they have small children that they want to send to the school, then they need to let us know. If enough parents came to us and said "I have children aged X and Y and I want them to attend Kinlochewe Primary", that would be the thing to swing the decision.

**Q9** – We have had a complete change in the local demographics. How many children attended here in the past?

**(follow-up from the floor)** – The roll at one point went down to six. At another point it went up to twenty-eight. I was involved in this school for 34 years so I know a bit about peaks and troughs. The people who have taken their children away, I feel there must have been a compelling reason to do that. There is no-one in their right mind who wouldn't want their children to attend a small village school. I worked in the school and didn't find it lonely. Small is beautiful. Highland Council has such an abysmal record on attainment, you would think that the smaller the unit, the better chance of raising attainment. I was a pupil here myself before becoming a member of staff, and I can tell you we didn't miss out in much. If there's a will, there's a way. We went to sports meetings, the Mòd, music festivals, concerts. I don't think the parents who are present felt their children were disadvantaged.

**A9 (Ian)** – Schools rolls can go up and down, but when the last parents moved their children, there were only two pupils left.

**Q10** – When you get placing requests, do you ask the parents why they are moving their children?

**A10 (Ian)** – We don't. Sometimes people tell us, but we have no power to ask why. Councils can only do what they have a legal power to do, and parents who want to move their children don't have to justify their choice to the Council.

Without discussing specific instances, I do think that a lot of parents feel that children are better off being with other children their own age. When a school gets down to 2 or 3 children, and they might be widely spread, so maybe with one in P1, one in P4

and one in P7, parents sometimes feel their children aren't getting enough social interaction.

**Q12** – It wouldn't be two or three if all the parents in Kinlochewe had kept their children in the local school

**A12 (Ian)** – That's their choice though.

**The Chairperson** commented that the number of school closures in her ward in recent years was heartbreaking. What sometimes happens is a self-fulfilling prophecy, parents think the Council is going to shut the school and so they move their children to another school. I tell parents that we are not planning to close the school, but if they remove their children, they may leave the Council with no option. Only communities themselves can turn the tide with that.

**(Ian)** – Although I would add that parents should not be pressurised into changing their choices. Parents need to do what's best for their children.

**Q13** – I would just like to say that at the time the mothballing happened, it was during the COVID time, when there were not the opportunities for the children to visit other schools for the sorts of activities mentioned earlier, and that had an impact. Children were not getting the social interaction they had prior to COVID, at that particular point in time. Over the period however, the families who took their children out of Kinlochewe did so for a host of different reasons.

**Q14** – It's a sad day, when we see the number of schools that have closed, and a bit of foresight should have been applied. I return to my argument that Torridon should have been kept open. That school was closed because the Council failed to deal with the problems there. Torridon should be opened up again as a school, and Kinlochewe and Shieldaig should be closed instead. If there is only going to be one school in the area it should be located in Torridon.

**Comment from the floor** – You wouldn't get agreement from the parents in Shieldaig for that.

**A14 (Ian)** – Shieldaig also has a healthy roll.

**The Chairperson** commented that, realistically, she could not see Torridon re-opening as a school. It was important to look to the future. What potential does the community see in terms of young families coming forward?

**Q15** – All of the houses in this area are being sold off to coffin-dodgers! (Laughter)

**A15 (Ian)** – The crucial question for tonight is the future of Kinlochewe Primary.

**Q16** – To be fair, I'm not sure the Council has much option, if children aren't coming here.

**Comment from the floor** – There are other small children in the village, and other people are pregnant. There could be houses being built as well.

**Comment from the floor** – There are a lot of Estate workers locally about to retire, and younger blood due to come in.

**Comment from the floor** – Not having a school will be a hindrance to new families coming here. People will see there is no local school and that their children will need to travel 30 minutes to school and 30 minutes back.

**A16 (Ian)** – Although there do seem have been some families that have moved here even though the school is not operational.

**Q17** – We can say that two families with young children have moved in since the school was mothballed, but one of those families thought there was a school.

**Comment from the floor** – There are some houses for sale.

**Comment from the floor** – There are always houses for sale and there is always the potential for families to move in. However, I feel it is unlikely that any of the parents of children who go to other schools, would bring them back to Kinlochewe. That means we are looking at the next generation wave. Schools do not generally operate nursery classes without a primary school, we are told, which means the children would have to attend pre-school nursery elsewhere, whether Gairloch or Shildaig or anywhere else. They would then have been already attending that facility, and they would need to agree to come back to Kinlochewe, and you would need enough of them at the same time to re-open a new P1, unless other parents chose to bring their children back. That, for me, is the challenge. Somebody has to decide “I don’t mind my child being 1 of 2 children in the school” for enough years as it takes for the school to build the roll again.

**A17 (Mhairi)** – Ian and I met with parents at another remote school last autumn, where we were considering re-opening a school for 2 pupils, because of the location. It’s not just a numbers game. However, at that location the parents eventually came to the view that it was going to be better for their child to make a long journey and be with other children. The make-up of the school roll is another factor. You might have 3 pupils but all from a single family, so socialisation at school would be no different from that at home. As Ian said, parents must decide what is best for their child, and sometimes that can be in a larger school with other children. We are finding this more and more, that parents themselves are making that decision, and moving their children to slightly bigger schools. We are not talking about schools with 200 pupils here, more like schools with 40-60 pupils.

**Q18** – Can I ask about pre-school?

**A18 (Ian)** – It's enough of a journey to go from here to either Gairloch or Shieldaig if you are a primary school pupil. It's even more an issue for pre-school. Although P1-7 children are entitled to free school transport beyond a certain distance, that doesn't extend to pre-school children. There are a couple of possibilities. One would be if there was somebody in the area interested in being a childminder, they could deliver the early years' service on behalf of the Council, under contract. There usually has to be enough children in the area for that to happen though, and to make a viable childminding business. Another option might be for us to make a payment to parents to deliver that service at home, but that doesn't get round the socialisation problem. We might also look at some form of parental recompense to parents for transporting pre-school children, given the geography in this case.

**Q19** – Would you not create a nursery at the school, even without the P1-7 classes?

**A19 (Ian)** – We don't normally operate school nurseries without a school being attached. It raises a lot of issues around ensuring there are enough staff, and having a Head Teacher responsible for the nursery.

**(Mhairi)** – As a council we are keen to recruit childminders, but part of the issue is that I believe you are not allowed to count your own children towards the total for funding.

**The Chairperson** commented that this was a depopulation issue. She referred to a community initiative in NW Sutherland that was working with the Scottish Government and the Council to address some of the issues around rural depopulation. It would be worth this community finding out more about that.

**Q20** – Why are you proposing to permanently close the school, rather than continuing to mothball it?

**A20 (Ian)** – There is national Guidance around this, and it suggests that schools should not normally be mothballed for 3 years unless the area is very remote. This area would meet the "very remote" definition, but nevertheless I don't think it's good practice to keep schools mothballed for years on end. Doing so might be seen as a sort of "back door closure". One of the advantages of a statutory consultation is that it allows everyone in the community to have their say. Mothballing arrangements are subject to review, but the people contacted tend to be parents and the CC, rather than the community as a whole.

**Q21** – Could there be some technological solutions, using modern technology? In Australia, children in remote areas used to be given school lessons over the radio.

**Thomas O'Halloran** commented that lessons were delivered over the Internet in the spring and early summer of 2020, during the first phase of the COVID pandemic. As a Head Teacher, he didn't feel teaching via the web was as effective as in-person teaching in a classroom.

**(Ian)** – The drawback with remote teaching for primary school children is that you need parents to fully commit to the process. Parents need to ensure their child shows up for scheduled lessons and that children do the work assigned to them. Without that, it just doesn't work. So things are all very well if parents are committed to education, but not all parents are. It's often children of less committed parents who have the poorest attainment, and remote education therefore tends to exacerbate the attainment gap.

**Q22** – I would like to raise the issue of the catchment area, if the school closes. Most of the children from here are currently attending Gairloch Primary, but that's only happened because the transport is laid on to that school. Can there be an option of choice between the two?

**A22 (Ian)** – The Council operates to a principle under which every address in Highland is allocated to a catchment area. I don't think we would want to allow Kinlochewe children the choice of two schools. That would potentially mean doubling up on transport costs as well.

**Comments from the floor followed**, highlighting that attending Gairloch Primary had an advantage as the school was co-located with Gairloch High, to which the children would transfer in due course. In addition, Gairloch Primary offers GME. Shieldaig does not.

**Q23** – I think you need to take account of the situation with early years. Effectively you are asking parents to drive 80 miles a day to allow their children to attend a pre-pre-school nursery. Parents who don't work simply can't afford that. Parents who do work probably can't afford the time. Is there any appetite within the Council for nursery children to be provided with proper transport to and from their nearest school nursery?

**Comment from the floor** – Torridon has the same issue.

**Response from the floor** – Nursery transport is an issue for every community where there is no local nursery in place.

**Comment from the floor** – The distances are even worse for children in Kinlochewe and Achnasheen though.

**A23 (Ian)** – There would be a number of issues with transport for pre-school children. For example children of that age would almost certainly need an escort in the vehicle. Also if nursery transport were provided here, then it would have to be provided in other areas, with associated costs.

**Q24** – I can't imagine there are many places located so far from their nearest pre-school provision.

**Q25** – One effect of the lack of nursery provision will be that parents will be deterred from taking up a deferment year for pre-school children. They will enrol them in P1 as soon as possible, because they can then access school transport.

**A25 (Ian)** – We will have to consider the points raised tonight.

**Q26** – Can I ask what has happened to the Kinlochewe Primary School Fund? Also what will happen to it if the school closes?

**A26 (Ian)** – At the moment it's probably just frozen, awaiting a possible re-opening of the school. If the school closes, I imagine the funds will be redistributed to Shieldaig and Gairloch, on the basis that these are the schools now attended by children from the Kinlochewe catchment.

There being no further questions, the Chairperson thanked everyone for coming, reminded everyone that representations should be sent to Ian Jackson, email [Education.Consultations@highland.gov.uk](mailto:Education.Consultations@highland.gov.uk) (address circulated in the letter), or via the online form, to arrive **no later than Friday 28 February 2025**. 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.

