



HIGHLAND COUNCIL

EDUCATION SERVICE

REVIEW OF THE PROPOSAL TO DISCONTINUE THE NURSERY CLASSES AT CAOL PRIMARY SCHOOL AND ST. COLUMBA'S ROMAN CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL, REPLACING THEM WITH A SINGLE PRE-SCHOOL FACILITY SERVING BOTH SCHOOLS

This report has been prepared following a review of the proposal:

to discontinue the nursery classes at Caol Primary School and St. Columba's Roman Catholic Primary School, replacing them with a single pre-school facility serving both schools.

Having had regard (in particular) to:

- Relevant written representations received by the Council (from any person) during the consultation period:
- Oral representations made to it (by any persons) at the public meeting held at the Caol Joint Campus on 6 November 2024:
- The report from Education Scotland.

this document has been issued by the Highland Council under the requirements of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010.

For the avoidance of doubt, there are no changes proposed in respect of P1-7 provision at either school.

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1.0 Background

- 1.1 Highland Council's Education Committee, at its meeting on 12 September 2024, agreed that a statutory consultation be undertaken on the proposal to discontinue the nursery classes at Caol Primary School and St. Columba's Roman Catholic Primary School, replacing them with a single pre-school facility serving both schools.
- 1.2 **Appendix A** is the original consultative paper and provides full details of the above proposal. **Appendix B** is an appendix to the original proposal.

2.0 Consultation process

- 2.1 The formal consultation period ran from Monday 30 September 2024 to Friday 29 November 2024. Written representations on the proposal were sought from interested parties as defined within the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010.
- 2.2 In accordance with statutory requirements, the following were consulted:

- (i) Parents/carers of pupils attending Caol Primary School; including parents/carers of pre-school pupils.
- (ii) Parents/carers of pupils attending St. Columba's RC Primary School; including parents/carers of pre-school pupils.
- (iii) The Parent Councils of Caol Primary School and St. Columba's RC Primary School.
- (iv) Members of Parliament and Members of Scottish Parliament for the area affected by the proposal.
- (v) Staff of Caol Primary School and St. Columba's RC Primary School.
- (vi) Caol Community Council
- (vii) The Roman Catholic Church, Parish of St. Mary's, Fort William
- (viii) Trade Union representatives.

2.3 The proposal document was advertised on the Highland Council website.

2.4 A public meeting was held at the Caol Joint Campus on 6 November 2024. The meeting was advertised in advance on the Highland Council website, Facebook page, "X" account, and in the *Lochaber Times*.

2.5 Following receipt of written representations received by Highland Council and consideration of oral representations made at the public meetings, officials reviewed the proposals.

2.6 The outcome of this review process is reflected in the response, conclusion and recommendations outlined below.

3.0 Responses received

3.1 The note of the public meeting is at **Appendix 2**. The meeting was attended by a number of the school staff but by only one parent. No participants expressed direct opposition to the proposal, though several points of detail were raised.

3.2 A list of those who responded in writing during the public consultation is at **Appendix 3**, whilst copies of the actual responses are at **Appendix 3i – 3iii**.

3.3 Three written responses were received. Two expressed support for the proposal. The other raised issues regarding the detailed operation of the joint nursery, should be proposal be implemented.

4.0 Issues raised during the consultation period

4.1 The issues raised during consultation concerned the future operation of the merged nursery. These are detailed at Issues 1-6 below, with the responses from the Council following each.

Issue 1

Who would be responsible for the management of the new setting? Who would support the staff, organise PDR meetings and staff meetings, and act as the point of contact for child protection concerns?

Response 1

We would envisage that the existing management of Caol Primary School, would take the lead role in managing the nursery. That would allow existing practice to continue, and the majority of children at the nursery will be going on to Caol Primary School. The precise delineation of the role of the Head Teacher at St. Columba's will be determined in discussion with staff, should the merger be approved.

Issue 2

Would there be a new uniform introduced?

Response 2

Nursery children are of course not required to wear school uniform, though we appreciate some parents like their children to do so. Children who are already at the nursery will not be asked to dispense with their existing uniforms.

It would be appropriate, in due course to create a new uniform for the nursery children, possibly a version without a school badge. The detail of this can be worked out if the merger is approved.

Issue 3

Would there be any changes to current staff contracts?

Response 3

No changes will be required to current staff contracts as a result of the proposed merger.

Issue 4

Would there be an expectation that staff participate in whole school events for both schools?

Response 4

The nursery is non-denominational, so there would be no expectation that the nursery children would participate in religious events at St. Columba's. Otherwise, we would expect the schools to be treated equally in terms of enrolments, open days etc. The two Head Teachers can come to an agreement following discussion, and we anticipate this could happen without intervention from the Council centrally.

Issue 5

Has there been a proposal for a new name for the setting if we merge?

Response 5

A new name would be required if the new joint nursery is created, in order to reflect the change. Usually this is decided after input from the staff and children. This was what happened for example, when Lundavra Primary School was created.

Issue 6

Are alternative proposals being considered?

Response 6

Alternatives were considered as part of the original Proposal, as follows:

- The status quo is always considered, St. Columba's RC Primary has suffered a declining roll, with particularly small numbers in the nursery. The nursery was mothballed during the 2023-24 school session, due to low numbers, and mothballing has continued into the current session, pending the outcome of the current consultation. The nursery class at Caol Primary, whilst still healthy, has also suffered a decline, and is projected to fall further.
- It would have been possible for the Council to consult on simply closing St. Columba's nursery, but it is our view that a new joint nursery would be the best option in terms of securing the future of St. Columba's Primary.
- It would not be appropriate to have continued the current mothballing arrangement indefinitely, and this would have been contrary to statutory guidance.

5.0 Summary of the issues raised by Education Scotland

- 5.1 In line with legislative requirements, Education Scotland was invited to submit comments on the Council's proposals. A copy of the report from Education Scotland is appended – **Appendix 4**.
- 5.2 In their report, HM Inspectors agree with the educational benefits detailed in the proposal. HM Inspectors consulted senior leaders, staff, parents and children in both schools who showed strong support for the proposed single nursery provision for both schools. Should the proposal go ahead, current arrangements where children attend the same nursery would be maintained. This would provide clarity and longer-term certainty for parents with the end of the mothballing arrangement for St Columba's RC Nursery.
- 5.3 HM Inspectors noted that the larger number of children in the one nursery would provide increased opportunities for social interaction and the forming of age-

appropriate relationships. The proposal would provide a shared facility within an already shared campus. A shared nursery could support equal promotion of each primary school rather than children progressing automatically from Caol Nursery to Caol Primary School. This has the potential to increase the roll of St Columba's RC Primary School. Should the proposal proceed, The Highland Council should work with all stakeholders to address uncertainties about important issues raised by stakeholders as a matter of priority. These include who has management responsibility of the new nursery, children's uniform, the name of the nursery and potential uses for spaces previously used for St Columba's nursery class.

- 5.4 The issues raised by Education Scotland are, for the most part, the same issues that were raised during public consultation, and addressed at Section 4 above. The use of the nursery area at St. Columba's is something for the school's Head Teacher to address

6.0 Effects on School Transport

- 6.1 Highland Council does not provide transport for pre-school children, but in any case, there are no effects on transport, as the two nurseries are located on a shared site.

7.0 Effects on Staff and School Management Arrangements

- 7.1 An assessment of the effects on school transport can be found at S.7 of the Proposal Paper, and the assessment has not changed since.

8.0 Effects on the Community

- 8.1 The Proposal Paper described how the joint campus contains extensive community facilities. The merger of the two nursery classes will not have any impact on the wider community or on users of the community facilities.

9.0 Alleged omissions or inaccuracies

- 9.1 Two alleged inaccuracies were raised. One respondent commented that 39 children were enrolled for Caol Nursery for the 2024-25 session, not 32 as stated, and that the nursery has 5 EYP's on a 23-hour contract rather than the 6 stated in the proposal.
- 9.2 The number of children in a nursery setting constantly fluctuates, not least because there are at least 3 different entry dates during a school session, as well as children on split placements. At the time the Proposal Paper was drafted, 32 children had been reported, by the school, as being enrolled at the nursery.
- 9.3 The Authority listed 6 members of staff on 23-hour weekly contracts. However, it appears that one of the six actually has a contract for 25 hours per week.

9.4 Highland Council has carefully considered the above issues, but concludes that neither issue materially affects the educational benefits that will arise from the Proposal. Therefore, the Council proposes to take no further action in response.

10.0 Overall Review of Consultation Exercise

10.1 The consultation exercise has not identified any significant opposition to the Proposal. Aside from the pupil responses, only three written representations were received, two of which supported the Proposal.

11.0 Procedure for Call-in by the Scottish Ministers

11.1 As set out in The Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010, Highland Council is required to notify the Scottish Ministers of its decision and provide them with a copy of the Proposal Paper and Consultation Report. The Scottish Ministers have an eight-week period from the date of that final decision on 26 June 2025 to decide if they will call-in the proposal. Within the first three weeks of that eight-week period, the Scottish Ministers will take account of any relevant representations made to them by any person. Therefore, anyone who wishes to make representations to the Scottish Ministers can do so up until midnight on **16 July 2025**. The Scottish Ministers will have until midnight on 20 August 2025 to take a decision on the call-in of the Closure Proposal.

11.2 Anyone wishing to make a representation to the Scottish Ministers requesting them to call-in the decision to merge the nursery classes at Caol Primary School and St. Columba's Roman Catholic Primary School is asked to email schoolclosure@gov.scot or to write to **School Infrastructure Unit, Learning Directorate, The Scottish Government, Area 2A South, Victoria Quay, Edinburgh EH6 6QQ by midnight on 16 July 2025**.

11.3 Until the outcome of the eight-week call-in process has been notified to Highland Council, it will not proceed to implement the Proposal. If the Scottish Ministers call-in the proposal, it will be referred to a School Closure Review Panel.

12.0 Legal issues

12.1 Throughout this statutory consultation Highland Council has complied in full with the requirements of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010.

12.2 As provided for in section 1 of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980, it is the duty of the Council to ensure adequate and efficient provision of school education within Highland. The above, and all other legislative requirements, have been taken into account in the preparation of this Report.

13.0 Conclusion

13.1 The consultation process has complied fully with legislative requirements and has provided an opportunity for all parties to identify key issues of concern. These issues have been fully considered and the Council's response detailed in sections 4 and 6 above.

- 13.2 Education Scotland staff visited Caol Primary School and St. Columba's RC Primary School to speak to parents, pupils and staff. They also had the opportunity to review in detail the proposal document, the written responses, and the note of the public meeting.
- 13.3 The Assistant Chief Executive (People) on reviewing all of the submissions, the notes of the meeting, and the Education Scotland report; concludes that the Proposal to discontinue the nursery classes at Caol Primary School and St. Columba's Roman Catholic Primary School, replacing them with a single pre-school facility serving both schools, will result in educational benefits and should be implemented.

14.0 Recommendation

- 14.1 It is therefore recommended that Highland Council proceeds with the course of action set out at Paragraph 13.3 above.

Kate Lackie
Assistant Chief Executive (People)
6 May 2025