

CONSULTATION MEETING – PROPOSAL TO MERGE THE NURSERY CLASSES AT CAOL PRIMARY SCHOOL AND ST. COLUMBA’S RC PRIMARY SCHOOL

HELD AT ST. COLUMBA’S RC PRIMARY SCHOOL – 6 NOVEMBER 2024 – 6.30pm

MINUTES OF MEETING

Panel

Cllr. Kate Willis - Chairperson
Ian Jackson, Education Officer, Resources
Mhairi MacDonald, Area Education Manager

In Attendance

Colette MacLean – Acting Head Teacher, St. Columba’s RC PS
Leah Burns, Head Teacher, St. Columba’s RC PS (on maternity leave at the time of the meeting)
Anne-Marie Dillon, Clerical Assistant, St. Columba’s RC PS
Sharon MacDonald, Head Teacher, Caol Primary School
Kerry Lamont, Depute Head Teacher. Caol Primary School

Barbara Daly, Education Scotland
1 member of the public

Apologies: Hayley Brown, Senior Manager, Early Years
Tracy McIlvar, ELC Commissioner, West Area

The Chairperson – Cllr. Kate Willis introduced herself as an elected councillor and Chair of the Lochaber Area Committee, and welcomed everyone to the consultation meeting.

She continued as follows:

The purpose of the meeting - is to discuss the proposal to discontinue the nursery classes at Caol Primary School and St. Columba’s Roman Catholic Primary School, and to replace them with a single pre-school facility serving both schools. We can consider other options or alternatives which those present would like to raise.

Beside me are Mhairi MacDonald, Area Education Manager for the Council “West” area 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. To begin with, Mr Jackson will now describe the consultation process.

(Ian Jackson) As the Chair has outlined, the Council is proposing to merge the two nursery classes at Caol and St. Columba's. This type of proposal 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 29 November, 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, 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 29 November, 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. That part of the process will take place between 13 and 31 January 2025. 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 or nursery class 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 Chair then asked Mhairi MacDonald to discuss the educational benefits.

(Mhairi MacDonald) – The main educational benefits relate to the larger number of children that would attend the joint nursery. The effect on Caol Primary would be minimal, but there would be a significant benefit to the children at St. Columba's Nursery.

The new nursery would be a single setting feeding into the 2 schools, and will operate to a principle of equality between them. Although St. Columba's is a denominational school, the early years facility is non-denominational. Co-operation between the management of the two schools will be vital to the success of the new nursery. I have every confidence in the current management and in their ability to work together to deliver the best outcomes for children. I would hope that this new model will increase the number of children entering into P1 at St. Columba's.

There will need to be discussions on the name of the new EY facility, and we will involve stakeholders in that in due course.

Lastly, I will just make it clear that there will no effect on the current staffing arrangements of the Early Years class.

The Chairperson opened the meeting to the floor.

Q1 – Have there been any written responses so far?

A1 (Ian) – Not yet, though there is a pattern with these consultations, where responses tend to arrive in the last few days.

Q2 – I'm a bit concerned that the use of the term "closure" is a red herring. It's more of a merger than a closure. I wondered whether we can avoid using the term "closure" as people find it alarming.

A2 (Ian) – The point is well-made. We will have to continue using the word "closure" to a certain extent, just because of the way the legislation is written. I think though we will look to minimise its use.

Q3 – What will you do about school jumpers? At the moment the nursery children wear Caol Primary jumpers. Also, what would the merged nursery be called?

A3 (Ian) – We will need to discuss those issues. It sounds like we will need to get together with the HTs and the Senior EY Manager in the Council, to thrash out detailed issues like those.

(Mhairi) - We would also need to speak to parents and the wider community.

Q4 – I can see the benefits of the merger. My two girls are past the nursery stage, but attend St. Columba's. Obviously the numbers at St. Columba's are small, and my children tell me how much they enjoy being out in the joint playground where they can join with the Caol Primary children, so I accept what you say about the benefits of children mixing together. When would the merger take effect?

A4 – (Ian) – The current consultation ends on 29 November, and Education Scotland's consultation will take place from 13-31 January. We delayed it until after the Christmas/New Year period, because that's a time when parents have other things on their minds! Once completed, we have to go back to our Education Committee. There is a meeting in February 2025 but we won't be in time for that as the papers have to be published in advance of the meeting. There's another meeting on 4 June, so that's probably when the decision will be taken. After that it has to go to Scottish Ministers for 8 weeks, so we would aim to have the new nursery in place for the start of the 2025-26 school session in August 2025.

Q5 – How would that work with enrolment?

A5 – (Ian) – We would continue to mothball St. Columba's until the outcome of the current consultation.

Leah Burns commented that she would keen to advertise St. Columba's to prospective nursery parents, with a view to eventual enrolment in P1. It was agreed that would be added to the list for future discussion on detailed arrangements. **Mhairi** suggested there might be a case for a joint meeting with prospective parents.

Q6 – What would happen if the merger was refused, either by the elected councillors or by Ministers?

A6 (Ian) – We could not then close St. Columba's nursery class on a permanent basis. Technically we could probably continue to mothball it, but if the permanent closure was rejected, there would be moral pressure on us to re-open the separate nursery at St. Columba's. Not doing so would go against the spirit of the decision to reject the closure.

Q7 – If there is to be a joint nursery, you will need to decide who the manager will be.

A7 – This would be another for the list of detailed issues, for further discussion.

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 29 November 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.