



HIGHLAND COUNCIL

EDUCATION AND LEARNING SERVICE

REVIEW OF THE PROPOSAL TO DISCONTINUE PROVISION OF EDUCATION AT GERGASK PRIMARY SCHOOL, RE-ASSIGNING ITS CATCHMENT AREA TO THAT OF NEWTONMORE PRIMARY SCHOOL

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

- To discontinue education provision at Gergask Primary School, re-assigning its catchment area to that of Newtonmore Primary School.

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 person) at the public meeting held at Laggan Community Hall on 3 October 2023.
- The report from Education Scotland.

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

CONTENTS

1.0 Background

2.0 Consultation process

3.0 Review of the proposals following the consultation period

4.0 Responses received

5.0 Overview of Issues Raised During the Consultation Period

6.0 Summary of issues raised during the consultation period, and Highland Council's responses

- 7.0 Summary of issues raised by Education Scotland, and Highland Council's responses
- 8.0 Effects on the Community
- 9.0 Alleged omissions or inaccuracies
- 10.0 Further Review of Alternatives to Closure
- 11.0 Procedure for Ministerial Call-in
- 12.0 Legal issues
- 13.0 Financial implications
- 14.0 Equality Impact Assessment
- 15.0 Rural Impact Assessment/Island Community Impact Assessment
- 16.0 Effects on School Transport
- 17.0 Mitigation of Adverse Effects
- 18.0 Conclusion
- 19.0 Recommendation

Appendices:

Appendix 2	Minute of public meeting held on 3 October 2023
Appendix 3	List of written submissions
Appendix 3i-3v	Copies of individual written responses
Appendix 4	Report from Education Scotland
Appendix A	The proposal document and appendices
Appendix B	Map of Existing Gergask PS catchment
Appendix C	Proposed New Catchment for Newtonmore PS
Appendix D	School Roll Forecasts for the Kingussie ASG
Appendix Di	School Roll Forecasts - Methodology
Appendix E	Financial Analysis

1.0 Background

- 1.1 Highland Council's Education Committee, at its meeting on 7 September 2023, agreed that a statutory consultation be undertaken on the proposal to discontinue the provision of education at Gergask Primary School, re-assigning its catchment to that of Newtonmore Primary School.

- 1.2 **Appendix A** is the original consultative paper and provides full details of the above proposal. **Appendices B - E** are the appendices to the original proposal.
- 1.3 Gergask Primary School has been mothballed since September 2022, when the remaining pupils transferred to Newtonmore Primary School.
- 1.4 Having once again reviewed the status of Gergask Primary, it is the Council's view that there is an insufficient number of children of suitable age in the Gergask catchment, who wish to attend Gergask Primary School, and that consequently the school is no longer viable. Further details on this are provided in Sections 6 and 10 below.
- 1.5 Gergask Primary School is designated as a rural school under the terms of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010. In that context, the Council has had special regard to:
- any viable alternative to the closure proposal; alternatives were considered at Sections 6-10 of the Proposal Paper (**Appendix A**) and have been reconsidered again in the light of responses received to consultation – see Sections 5-10 below.
 - the likely effect on the local community in consequence of the proposal (if implemented), with reference in particular to (a) the sustainability of the community, (b) the availability of the school's premises and its other facilities for use by the community. The effect on the local community was considered at Section 13 of the Proposal Paper (**Appendix A**) and is further considered at Sections 8 and 10 below, taking into account representations received during consultation.
 - the likely effect caused by any different travelling arrangements that may be required in consequence of the proposal (if implemented) with reference in particular to;
 - the effect caused by such travelling arrangements including (in particular), (i) that on the school's pupils and staff and any other users of the school's facilities, (ii) any environmental impact. The effects on school transport were considered at Section 11 of the Proposal Paper, (**Appendix A**) and reconsidered again in the light of responses received to consultation – see Sections 6 and 10 below.

2.0 Consultation process

- 2.1 The formal consultation period Monday 18 September 2023 to Friday 10 November 2023. Written representations on the proposal were sought from interested parties as defined within the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010, as amended.
- 2.2 In accordance with statutory requirements, the following were consulted:
- (i) Parents/carers of pupils attending Newtonmore Primary School; including parents/carers of pre-school pupils.
 - (ii) The Parent Councils of Newtonmore Primary School and Kingussie High School.

- (iii) Members of Parliament and Members of Scottish Parliament for the area affected by the proposal.
- (iv) Staff of Newtonmore Primary School.
- (v) Laggan Community Council
- (vi) Newtonmore Community Council
- (vii) Trade Union representatives.

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

2.4 A public meeting was held at Laggan Community Hall on 3 October 2023. The meeting was advertised in advance on the Highland Council website, X Account and Facebook page, and in the *Badenoch and Strathspey Herald*. The minute of the meeting is at **Appendix 2**.

3.0 Review of proposals following the consultation period

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

3.2 The feedback from the consultation was considered by a range of Council officials. This ensured that the Council met the requirements of the 2010 Act.

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

4.0 Responses

4.1 A list of those who responded in writing during the public consultation is at **Appendix 3**. There were 4 written responses (not including the pupil questionnaires). Copies of these responses can also be found at Appendices 3i-3iv.

4.2 The views of pupils of a suitable age at Newtonmore Primary School (which included the pupils living within the Gergask catchment area) were sought by means of an age adapted questionnaire. Appendix 3v summarises their views, which are also discussed at Section 5 below.

5.0 Overview of Issues raised during the consultation period

5.1 There were 11 responses from pupils. One pupil thought the Council should re-open Gergask Primary School, and one thought the school should be permanently closed. Nine of the 11 pupils who responded expressed support for continued mothballing. The detailed comments from pupils can be viewed at Appendix 3v.

5.2 Education Scotland Inspectors who visited the school reported that the majority of children and young people who met with inspectors do not think that the school should open with the current roll of two. A few would like to see it become a school again with more children attending. They think that a delay to closure

to see if more children would attend would be helpful. Children and young people see advantages of a very small class including time with the teacher. They are positive about the outdoor environment at Gergask Primary School. However, they do not think that these advantages outweigh the benefits of a larger school like Newtonmore Primary School. This includes, more resources, more staff to approach for help and opportunities to make friends. Children and young people would like to see the building used for the benefit of children and young people in the area.

- 5.3 The arguments advanced by the pupils in favour of re-opening the school, are set out at Issues 1-3 below, together with arguments put forward in support of closure.
- 5.4 There were 4 written responses received from other stakeholders. All the respondents opposed the proposed closure due to the effect on the community. The responses did however come from local residents or parents from outwith the Gergask catchment, rather than parents of primary age children from within the catchment.
- 5.5 The public meeting was reasonably well-attended, given the small size of the local community. Although sadness was expressed over the demise of the school, there was a general feeling that closure was inevitable due to the lack of the children in the area.
- 5.6 The main arguments put forward are summarised below, together with the responses from the Council. Where different responses raise similar issues, these have been “grouped” for the purposes of the response.

6.0 Responses to the Issues raised in Public Consultation

- 6.1 Arguments advanced by the children in favour of continued mothballing are set out at Issues 1-3 below, and addressed at Responses 1-3.

Issue 1

Wait and see if a new family comes, then it can re-open and everyone would be happy.

Response 1

There is an argument for doing this, which the Council has considered. However we think it is unlikely that enough new children will come to the school. Leaving a school mothballed for too long has a bad effect on the building.

Issue 2

It's closer and has lots of nice areas. It's a nice school.

Response 2

When last operational, Gergask PS was a lovely school in a beautiful location. On balance though, the Council takes the view that the number of children who want to attend the school is too small to allow it to work well.

Issue 3

The building could be used by others.

Response 3

Yes, it could be, although it might be easier to arrange that if the school were closed, rather than just mothballed.

Laggan village also has a community hall at the moment.

- 6.2 Arguments advanced by the children in favour of closing Gergask Primary School are set out at Issue 4 below, and addressed at Response 4.

Issue 4

Only three children isn't great for socialising.

Response 4

The Council agrees with this comment.

- 6.3 The arguments advanced in written responses are set out at Issues 5-7 below, and addressed at Responses 5-7.

Issue 5

I don't think that the school should be permanently closed as it will discourage new families from coming to the area. This is already full of holiday properties and the loss of educational opportunities will potentially further reduce the likelihood of families settling in this area to live permanently and be part of the community.

The school has only recently been mothballed. There are some children in the village. If you go ahead and close it then the nearest school will be 8 miles away. This will be a huge deterrent to any family considering a move to the area and will kill future development of the village and for this reason I would propose delaying the permanent closure of the school.

I'm concerned at the number of school closures and the impact on communities. No school means it is less likely that parents with young children will move into the community as we are seeing in Laggan.

A family from Laggan moved to the south of France quite near Carcassonne. There, in an area like Badenoch and Strathspey, they have taken a creative approach. They have avoided closing all the schools and clustering them in one location bursting at the seams. Instead community schools host 1 or 2 years. Children are bussed to and from school. There is more space and the communities are kept alive.

When we moved here in 2000, my son and grandchildren moved up a few years later and Gergask had 24 pupils. It is sad to see the decline in numbers. Surely we could look for more creative approaches here.

'The Community' is going to have to have a lot of discussions if it is to discuss what to do with (a) the church, (b) the school, and probably (c) the shop, if there are going to be so few people, such as tourists, to need coffee and sandwiches etc.

Response 5

The extent of the decline of the roll of Gergask Primary, from what it was 20 years ago, is sadly typical of many communities across Highland and indeed across Scotland.

In August 2011 the Scottish Government established a Commission on the Delivery of Rural Education, which reported in 2014. The Commission examined the question of whether the future of a community is compromised without the incentive that a rural school provides to encourage young families to move to or remain in the area. The Commission noted that there were examples of communities which had thrived despite the loss of a local school, as well as examples of communities which had continued to depopulate despite the presence of a rural school. The Commission concluded there was a lack of robust evidence on how pre-school, childcare and school proximity (and freedom from threat of closure) links to the sustainability of communities.

The Commission also concluded that a school alone cannot sustain a rural community. They noted that other issues are likely to be as critical to maintaining a working age population. The Commission received a strong message on its visits to communities that while they place great value on a school in their community, the two most important factors in sustaining the community are jobs and housing. Without employment opportunities and affordable housing, families can neither move to an area nor remain there.

The Council agrees with this view.

Issue 6

Having seen the article in The Strathspey & Badenoch Herald stating "No future so school's to be shut", there seems no point in making any further comment despite your statement that 'the consultation process remains open

until November 10th', - a contradiction in terms if I may say so! - and that a community meeting should take place to discuss future use for the building.

Response 6

The wording used by *The Strathspey and Badenoch Herald* was that of the newspaper's journalists, and was not used by Highland Council. The statement made by Highland Council, that the consultation remained open until 10 November, was correct. There was no contradiction with any other statement made by the Council, as it was the newspaper, not the Council, that announced the "school's to be shut".

Issue 7

What is needed are more jobs - good, well paid jobs, that will bring more families to the neighbourhood, with more houses for them and their grown-up offspring to afford to buy. I don't think Badenoch is the only 'dying' rural community, now life-styles have changed so drastically, but surely Scotland isn't totally devoid of intelligent, successful business men - or women - with good innovative ideas of what is needed in the C21st rural areas, and enough knowledge of modern technological means of bringing their ideas about? Surely those of you living in or around the rural parts of the Highlands must have SOME idea of what can be done up here other than sheep? Most Local Authorities in the UK seem to be - well perhaps it should be 'have been' - good at coming up with ideas to get things going in their area. We need them more than ever now if 'the Highlands' aren't going to die.

Response 7

The Council agrees that issues around access to housing, transport, quality employment and the availability of skilled workers are all interconnected, and have a critical impact on the provision of schools within our area. Taken as a whole, the Highland Council area faces significant issues in terms of a declining and aging population. Younger age groups are decreasing in numbers, whilst the older age groups are growing. Between 2001 and 2021, the 0 to 15 age group in Highland saw a decrease of 6.7%. The 75+ age group saw an increase of 60.6%. This changing population structure clearly has a critical impact on the future pattern of our school provision. This is not an issue that is unique to Highland and the Scottish Government itself recognises that rural areas across Scotland are facing a depopulation crisis.

The Council is working with partners such as local Chambers of Commerce, the Regional Economic Partnership and other partnerships to address the issues identified above and to ensure that actions are attached to them. Further details are set out in a Report submitted to a meeting of the Highland Council on 14 December.

Nevertheless, given the low number of children living within the Gergask PS, and local parental preferences around education, the Council sees no realistic prospect that Gergask Primary School will develop a viable school roll in the foreseeable future.

Summary of the issues raised by Education Scotland

- 7.1 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**.
- 7.2 In their report, Education Scotland agree that the council has clearly outlined a range of educational benefits in the proposal. The current school roll has fallen to two pupils and the building has been mothballed since September 2022. Future school roll projections for the area do not show a significant increase. Parents are already choosing home-schooling or placing requests to other primary schools such as Newtonmore Primary School. With a small roll, there are less opportunities for peer group learning, socialisation, work with partners and group activities such as team sports. Newtonmore Primary School has the capacity and the resources to meet the learning needs of the children from the Gergask Primary school catchment area. This includes provision for additional support needs and Gaelic Medium Education. Newtonmore Primary School also offers a range of out of school opportunities, including sport and music. Transport for children in the Laggan area to Newtonmore Primary School will continue to be provided by the council and is within the 30-minute guideline.
- 7.3 Education Scotland further noted that stakeholders, including children and young people, would like to see the building used for the benefit of the community if the school is closed. If this proposal is approved, the council should continue to engage with the community to discuss future options for the use of the building.

8.0 Effects on the Community

- 8.1 Paragraphs 13.1 - 13.4 of the Proposal Paper set out the Council's assessment of the effects of closure on the local community, and advised that Highland Council would be keen to work with the local community to see whether the current school building and site could be turned over to community use.
- 8.2 The future of the site and building was one of the main issues that arose in the consultation exercise. As previously discussed, the Council cannot prejudge the outcome of the current consultation by agreeing any future use of the building at this stage. In the event the closure is approved, the Council would welcome a community bid for the future use of the building and site.
- 8.3 As highlighted above, the consultation exercise identified concerns about the effect of the school closure on the future health of the community. The issues raised are addressed at Responses 5-7 above.

9.0 Alleged omissions or inaccuracies

9.1 There were no alleged omissions or inaccuracies.

10.0 Further Review of Alternatives to Closure

10.1 Throughout the consultation the Council has had special regard to the provision for rural schools within Section 12 of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010. In particular, the Council has had special regard to the following:

- any viable alternative to the closure proposal;

Sections 5-8 of the Proposal Paper identified and discussed the following alternatives to closure:

- i. To continue with the current “mothballing” arrangement.
- ii. To re-open Gergask Primary School with its current catchment area.
- iii. To re-open Gergask Primary School with an expanded catchment area.

10.2 Sections 6 and 7 of the Proposal Paper set out the Council’s consideration as to why Options i and ii above would not be viable options for Gergask Primary School. No additional suggestions were made during consultation.

10.3 Similarly, in respect of option (iii) in paragraph 10.1 above, Section 8 of the original Proposal Paper set out the reasons why an expanded catchment area would not be a viable option for Gergask Primary School. Again, no suggestion to this effect was made during consultation.

10.5 Having reconsidered each of the alternatives identified at Sections 5-8 of the Proposal Paper, the Highland Council has concluded that the alternatives to closure would not deliver the educational benefits of the proposal.

10.6 No further alternative approaches were suggested during the consultation exercise:

10.7 The Council has also reconsidered the likely effect on the local community in consequence of the proposal (if implemented), with reference in particular to; (a) the sustainability of the community, (b) the availability of the school’s premises and its other facilities for use by the community;

The potential community impact of the proposal was considered at Section 13 of the Proposal Paper and is further considered at Section 8 above.

10.8 The Council has further reconsidered the likely effect caused by any different travelling arrangements that may be required in consequence of the proposal (if implemented) with reference in particular to (a) the effect caused by such travelling arrangements including (in particular), (i) that on the school’s pupils and staff and any other users of the school’s facilities, (ii) any environmental

impact, (b) the travelling arrangements are those to and from the school of (and for) the school's pupils and staff and any other users of the school's facilities.

The impact of the proposal on travel time was considered at Section 11 of the original proposal paper. Since Gergask Primary School has been mothballed since September 2022, implementation of the proposal would not require the introduction of any different travelling arrangements for pupils or staff. Whilst it is accepted that the travel times would be shorter were Gergask Primary School to re-open, the travel times to Newtonmore are not excessive and are within the normal range of school journeys in Highland.

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 **14 March 2024** 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 3 April 2024. The Scottish Ministers will have until midnight on 8 May 2024** 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 close Gergask 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 3 April 2024.**
- 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, as amended.
- 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, such education to be directed towards the development of the personality, talents and mental and physical abilities of children or young persons to their fullest potential (Standards in Scotland's Schools Etc. Act 2000). As with all Council duties, the Council also has a duty to make arrangements to secure best value, and in securing best value the Council is required to maintain an appropriate balance between, inter alia, the quality of its performance of its functions and the cost to the authority of that performance (Local Government in Scotland Act 2002, section 1). Each of the above, and

all other legislative requirements, have been taken into account in the preparation of this Report.

13.0 Financial Implications

13.1 Advice on the financial implications of the proposal was issued as Appendix E to the Proposal Paper.

14.0 Equality Impact Assessment

14.1 An Equality Impact Assessment can be found at Section 15 of the Proposal Paper. The consultation exercise did not identify any additional equality issues.

15.0 Rural Impact Assessment/Island Community Impact Assessment

15.1 A Rural Impact Assessment can be found at Section 16 of the Proposal Paper. The public consultation exercise did not identify any additional rural issues.

16.0 Effects on School Transport

16.1 The effects on school transport were considered at Section 11 of the Proposal Paper. As there are no pupils currently attending Gergask Primary School, there are no differing school transport arrangements to take into account.

17.0 Mitigation of Adverse Effects

17.1 Adverse effects were considered at S.17 of the proposal Paper, and none were identified. Again, this assessment takes into account the fact that there are currently no pupils attending Gergask Primary School.

18.0 Conclusion

18.1 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 5, 6, 7, 8 and 10 above. For the reasons set out in detail in sections 5-8 above, Highland Council considers that implementation of the closure proposal is the most appropriate response to the reasons for the proposal.

18.2 The most significant reason for closure is that all the available evidence suggests that the number of children who would attend a re-opened Gergask Primary School would be too low to make the school viable, and that there would consequently be educational disadvantages arising from such a decision. Lastly, Newtonmore Primary School is itself a rural school.

18.3 Education Scotland staff visited Newtonmore Primary School, to speak to parents, pupils and staff. They also had the opportunity to review in detail the proposal document and all written responses. They agree that The Highland Council's proposal will result in educational benefits for the children of the Gergask Primary School catchment area.

18.4 The Executive Chief Officer (Education), on reviewing all of the submissions, the note of the meeting, and the Education Scotland report; and having had special regard to alternatives to closure, to the community impact and to the impact of travelling arrangements; concludes that the proposal offers educational benefits and that implementation of the Proposal in full is the most appropriate response to the reason for formulating the Proposal. The reasons for this conclusion are set out at Sections 5-10 above.

19.0 Recommendation

19.1 It is therefore recommended that Highland Council approves the proposal to discontinue education provision at Gergask Primary School, re-assigning its catchment area to that of Newtonmore Primary School.

Nicky Grant
Executive Chief Officer (Education)
XX January 2024