

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

HELD AT LAGGAN COMMUNITY HALL – 3 OCTOBER 2023 – 6.30pm

MINUTES OF MEETING

Panel

Cllr. Russell Jones - Chairperson
Ian Jackson, Education Officer, Resources
Fiona Shearer, Area Education Manager
Sarah Fraser, Head Teacher, Newtonmore Primary School

In Attendance

Sheila Brown, Education Scotland
8 members of the public

The Chairperson – Cllr. Russell Jones introduced himself as Chair of the Local Area Committee and welcomed everyone to the consultation meeting.

He continued as follows:

The purpose of the meeting is to discuss the proposal to formally close Gergask Primary School, (as set out in the recommendation to the proposal Paper). The proposed change, if approved, will take place immediately after the conclusion of the statutory process relating to school closures.

Other options identified in the proposal paper are re-opening the school, 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 Fiona Shearer, Area Education Manager, and Ian Jackson, Education Officer, (Resources). Also present is Sarah Fraser, Head Teacher of Newtonmore Primary School.

Mr Jackson and Mrs Shearer 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 and the detailed reasons for issuing the Proposal.

Mr Jackson

Since last September, Gergask PS has been in what we term a “mothballed” status, which means it is not operational, but neither is it permanently closed. The permanent closure of the school, which is what the Council is now proposing, 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 10 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 Fiona Shearer will shortly set out the educational basis for the Council’s proposal to formally close Gergask PS, 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 10 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 Newtonmore Primary, 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 Fiona Shearer to outline the educational benefits that would arise from the Proposal.

Mrs Shearer referred to the Proposal Paper, and advised that the Council believes the school environment should be a place that sustains and improves school education, pupil performance and outcomes for children. Our priority is to offer the widest possible opportunities for children, and that is very difficult when there is a total school roll of two or three. The information we have gathered to date suggest there is no prospect of the roll at Gergask increasing in the future. The children who are attending Newtonmore have better opportunities to engage in active learning and cooperative learning. We are implementing and encouraging the adoption of play pedagogy in our schools, taking that play experience into P1 and beyond. In a school with only 2/3 pupils there isn't the opportunity to engage in paired learning or group learning day-to-day. The larger school provides those wider opportunities, things like sporting events, taking part in the arts, and music events. Even things like school assembly – how can that be achieved with only 2 pupils? Transition experience is also quite key. Having that wider social interaction is important, especially in the transition to a secondary school with several hundred pupils. School trips and experiences, and social interaction are all limited in a school with too few pupils. The children who have attended Newtonmore have had a very positive experience.

Mrs Fraser (Head Teacher) added that the children from Gergask who are attending Newtonmore are thriving, due to the increased social opportunities there for them. A different learning experience is on offer at Newtonmore, and they have many more opportunities to interact with other children. It's worked very well for them so far.

The Chairperson opened the meeting to the floor.

Q1 – How many children would we need to keep the school open?

A1 (Ian Jackson) – We don't have a set number, but we feel that, as Fiona indicated, the kind of numbers we had here prior to mothballing, when the school roll effectively fell to just two pupils, does create some educational disadvantages. If there were a lot of parents in the village who came to us and said they wanted to re-enrol their children in Gergask School, we would have to consider that, but we would need hard evidence that people were willing to take their children out of wherever they are enrolled at present, and enrol them at Gergask.

Q2 (follow-up) - There aren't a lot of children in the village at present, and some that are here are home-schooled.

A1 (Ian Jackson) – That's the parents' decision of course.

Q3 - I had wondered whether those children were home schooled because Gergask was closed, but the parents aren't here, so I suppose not.

A3 (Sarah Fraser) – At the last meeting we had here, where we invited the parents, only one parent came, which highlighted there wasn't that desire amongst local parents to re-open the school.

Q4 – It's understandable that you closed the school when there were only two or three children. We haven't lived here for that many years, but we have supported the school. When we first arrived there were a lot more children in the village – I think there were about a dozen children in the school then, even though it was only about 6 years ago. There are no new young families coming into this area.

Response from the Floor – It's a common issue in small communities. You have these peaks and troughs, and sometimes the trough gets too low. It's not fair to the children to enclose them in a school with only one or two others. They get no wider perspective.

A4 (Fiona Shearer) – It's a beautiful setting for a school, and some people might think that it's great the pupils get so much attention, but for me as a teacher, and as a parent, you know that they are missing out on wider social interaction, the opportunity to make more friends, and be confident when they move into to High School - all the things they can't do when there are just two children. When the numbers are that small it's detrimental to the children. That's my opinion at least, it's not necessarily the Council's. It's never an easy conversation, and that's why there is such a lengthy process around it. It's a big decision and not something we would do lightly.

Q5 – What are the plans for the building if it does close?

A5 (Ian Jackson) – For the moment we can't anticipate that the school will close, as we need to consider all the views expressed in this consultation. Broadly speaking, and Cllr. Jones might correct me if I make any mistakes here – there is a 3-stage process when the Council has a surplus building. Initially the availability of the building and site is circulated internally within the Council – that would include our housing department for example. If there's no use identified from within the Council, there can be an opportunity for the community to request what's called a Community Asset Transfer. It's not a simple case for just asking for the building and getting it – communities would have to produce a business plan for the new use, and would have to show that the proposed new use does not undercut existing facilities in the community. You have a community hall here already. There would be things to think about. Failing that, the building would be disposed of on the open market. We have a duty to make efficient use of Council taxpayers' money, so we could not justify holding on to a building that was lying empty.

The Chairperson reiterated that tonight was about gathering views on the proposed school closure. If the closure took place, there would be discussions with the community about the building.

Views were expressed that there would need to be a community meeting in that event. One parent commented that there was a pressing need for more housing in the area.

Q6 – Not much can be done about the school. There are simply not enough children. In some ways we would be better getting a decision rather than leaving it mothballed, because empty buildings deteriorate so quickly.

Response from the Floor – There are no children because there are no houses.

Response from the Floor – The problem is we would need a lot of houses to get enough children to restart the school. What is it, 0.3 children per house?

A6 (Fiona Shearer) – Yes, 0.3 children of primary school age per house, is the figure we work to in calculating school roll forecasts.

Q7 - Also we can't control things like home educating, which is becoming more common.

A7 (Fiona Shearer) – The general expectation is that children attend their catchment school, but there is an element of parental choice, and it's the same all over. I saw something on Facebook today about the schools where I live. A family were moving from England and were asking about the local schools, and people were giving their opinions. I didn't agree with the comments, but the outcome could be that the family might put their child outside of catchment.

Q8 – Over the last 40 years, there have been families who lived in Laggan but who sent their children to Kingussie or Newtonmore, so that has pulled the rug from under our feet. You can't tell parents what to do. Perhaps as a community we should be thinking what we can do to support families in the village, to create that sense of community. If we are worried about the loss of a sense of community, arising from children going to school elsewhere, we as a community ought to look at what we can do to counteract that.

Q9 – If the school closed, could we move the community hall into the current school building, knock down this building and build houses here? We are desperate for new housing in Laggan.

A8/9 (Ian Jackson) – These are all ideas you would need to discuss as a community, if the school does close.

Q10 – How will you get people to move to Laggan if there is no school here?

Response from the Floor - There are a lot of places that have lost their school but haven't lost their community, and where people haven't been put off from coming.

Response from the Floor – This is a different community though. You put on events in this community, you don't get many locals attending.

The Chairperson asked Ian Jackson to run through the process from here, commenting that this was the second meeting held.

Ian Jackson – The previous meeting was part of what we term informal consultation, and this meeting is part of the formal consultation process. Just to go back over the process, this stage ends on 10 November – we’ll take written views up to that time. The Education Scotland will carry out an assessment – that will be another opportunity for parents to submit views. After that we will review the consultation and put it back to the Education Committee, though there is the additional 3-week period for further representations. I would expect that the review report will be submitted to the Education Committee in May 2024. The Committee meets 4 times a year. The first after the end of consultation will be in February 2024, but we won’t go to that one as it will be too soon.

Q11 – May 2024 seems a long way away!

A11 (Ian Jackson) – It does take a while. This consultation doesn’t end until 10 November, then the consultation with Education Scotland takes us up close to Christmas, then we have to review the consultation. We then have to publish the report at least 3 weeks before the Committee, but personally I prefer to publish more like 5 weeks in advance, otherwise I feel we may not have time to properly consider the responses.

Even after May, there’s then the stage with Scottish Ministers, they have another 8 weeks to make their decision. The final decision, if made, won’t therefore be until the late summer of 2024.

(Fiona Shearer) – That’s one of the reasons we felt we should move ahead with this process, rather than leaving the building empty year after year.

Q12 The time you mentioned, in 2024, would that be it then?

A12 (Ian Jackson) – If it all goes through, then yes, once Ministers make their decision, that would be the school closed for good.

Q13 – What is happening with the building at the moment. Is it still getting heated?

A13 (Sarah Fraser) – The janitors are down once a month to check the building. The water has been drained.

Q14 – If the community wanted to take the building over, would you give us a report on the state of the building?

A14 (Ian Jackson) – I imagine that could be arranged. It wouldn’t be us, but we could ask a Maintenance Officer to produce a report.

Q15 – It's understandable that the school has been closed, given the number of children. It just seems a shame the building is lying empty, into its second year now. The sooner a decision is made the better. How old is the building?

The Chairperson thought it dated originally from about 1876.

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 10 November 2023**. He 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.