

## **THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL**

### **EDUCATION COMMITTEE**

**The proposal is to discontinue education provision at Gergask Primary School, re-assigning its catchment area to that of Newtonmore Primary School.**

### **EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS STATEMENT**

#### **THIS IS A PROPOSAL PAPER PREPARED IN TERMS OF THE EDUCATION AUTHORITY'S AGREED PROCEDURE TO MEET THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE SCHOOLS (CONSULTATION) (SCOTLAND) ACT 2010**

The Highland Council is proposing, subject to the outcome of the statutory consultation process:

- To discontinue education provision at Gergask Primary School, re-assigning its catchment area to that of Newtonmore Primary School. A map of the current Gergask Primary School catchment is at **Appendix B**, and a map of the proposed merged catchment is at **Appendix C**.
- For the avoidance of doubt, it should be assumed that the related Pre-School provision is included within any reference below to a Primary School. In particular, any reference to Newtonmore Primary School should be taken as a reference to both the primary and nursery classes.
- The proposed change, if approved, will take place immediately after the conclusion of the statutory process relating to school closures.

## **SUMMARY OF THE CONSULTATION PROCESS**

### **PUBLICATION INFORMATION**

#### **Proposal Paper Published**

The proposal paper will be available for inspection, free of charge, at:

Newtonmore Primary School, Main Street, Newtonmore PH 20 1DN

and published on the Highland Council website:

[www.highland.gov.uk/schoolconsultations](http://www.highland.gov.uk/schoolconsultations)

Copies of this Proposal Paper are also available on request from:

Business Support Team  
Education Support  
Highland Council  
Headquarters Building  
Inverness  
IV3 5NX  
E-mail: [Education.Consultations@highland.gov.uk](mailto:Education.Consultations@highland.gov.uk)

To request this information in an alternative format, e.g., large print, Braille, audio formats, or suitable language, please contact The Business Support Team Education Support, Highland Council, Headquarters Building, Inverness, IV3 5NX  
E-mail: [Education.Consultations@highland.gov.uk](mailto:Education.Consultations@highland.gov.uk)

Formal notice of the Proposal and relevant information will be given and be made available, free of charge, to the consultees listed as follows:

- (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.

## **Advertisement in Local Media**

A notice announcing the public meeting will be placed in the local press and on the Highland Council's Facebook page.

## **Consultation Period**

The consultation for this Proposal will run from 18 September 2023 and will end on 10 November 2023. This period allows for the statutory minimum of six weeks, including at least thirty school days.

## **Public Meeting**

A public meeting will be held at 6.30pm on 3 October 2023 at Laggan Community Hall. Anyone wishing to attend the public meeting is invited to do so. The meeting will be convened by the Council, will be chaired by a senior elected councillor, and will be addressed by officers of the Education Service.

The meeting will be an opportunity for the public to hear more about the proposal; to ask questions about the proposal; and to have the views of all stakeholders recorded so that they can be taken into account. A note will be taken at the meeting of questions asked and views expressed. This note will be published on the Council website. The meeting will also be recorded.

The note will be forwarded to Education Scotland, along with other submissions and comments received by the Council during the consultation process.

## **Meetings with Pupils and Staff**

School staff will arrange to discuss the proposal with pupils (who are considered to be of a suitable age and maturity) in the affected schools. Questions, responses and views will be taken down and the results published in the Consultation Report.

## **Responses to the Proposals**

Interested parties are invited to respond to the Proposals by making written or electronic submissions on the Proposals to:

Business Support Team  
Care and Learning  
Highland Council  
Headquarters Building  
Inverness  
IV3 5NX  
E-mail: [Education.Consultations@highland.gov.uk](mailto:Education.Consultations@highland.gov.uk)

Or via an online form, to be found at:

<https://www.highland.gov.uk/schoolconsultations>

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When responding, you are invited to state your relationship with the school – for example, “pupil”, “parent”, “carer”, “relative”, “former pupil”, “teacher in school”, “member of the community” etc. However it is not compulsory to do so.

Those sending in a response, whether by letter or electronically, should know that their response will be open to public scrutiny and may have to be supplied to anyone making a reasonable request to see it. If they do not wish their response to be made publicly available, they should clearly write on the document: “I wish my response to be considered as confidential with access restricted to Councillors and Council Officers of Highland Council”. Otherwise, it will be assumed that the person making the response agrees to it being made publicly available. All written responses must be received by the last day of the consultation period, 10 November 2023 at 5.00pm.

### **Involvement of Education Scotland**

When the Proposal Document is published, a copy will be sent to Education Scotland the Council. Education Scotland will also be sent, by 20 November 2023, a copy of any written representations that are received by the Council from any person during the consultation period. Education Scotland will also receive the summary note of the public meeting that will be held and so far as is practicable a copy of any other relevant documentation. Education Scotland will then prepare a report on the educational aspects of the proposal not later than 8 December 2023. In preparing their report, Education Scotland may visit the affected schools and make such enquiries of people there as they consider appropriate.

### **Review of Consultation Exercise**

Highland Council will review the proposal having regard to the Education Scotland Report, written representations that it has received, and oral representations made at the public meeting. It will then prepare a Consultation Report. This Report will be published in electronic and printed formats and will be sent to anyone who submitted a written representation during consultation. It will be available on the Council website and at the affected school and local library, free of charge. The Report will include a summary of the written and oral representations made during consultation and a copy of the Education Scotland Report, together with the Council’s considered response to the issues raised. The Report will include details of any alleged inaccuracies and/or omissions and how these have been handled. The Consultation Report will be published at least 3 weeks prior to being submitted to the Education Committee of Highland Council, who will make a recommendation to the full Highland Council.

In publishing the report the Council will invite any person or party to make further representations to the Committee prior to its meeting. A notice to this effect will also be published on the Highland Council website.

At the present time the Council intends to publish its Report in the spring of 2024, prior to submission to the Education Committee in May/June 2024. However, this timescale may change depending on the nature of issues raised during consultation, and the need to give full consideration to those issues. In the latter event, the Report may not be submitted until a later Committee meeting.

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Any proposal approved at the Education Committee would require to be confirmed by a subsequent meeting of the full Highland Council.

As the proposal involves the closure of a school, Highland Council would be required to notify Scottish Ministers of its decision and provide them with a copy of the Proposal Paper and Consultation Report. The Scottish Ministers would have an eight-week period from the date of that final decision 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.

### **Note on Corrections**

If any inaccuracy or omission is discovered in this Proposal Paper, either by the Council or any other person, the Council will determine if relevant information has been omitted or, if the paper contains an inaccuracy. The Council will then take appropriate action, which may include the issue of a correction or the reissuing of the Proposal or the revision of the timescale for the consultation period, if appropriate. In that event, relevant consultees and Education Scotland will be advised.

## **DETAILS OF THE PROPOSAL**

### **Legislative Background**

- 1.1 The proposal is advanced within the context of all applicable legislation. Amongst other duties, education authorities are required to secure adequate and efficient provision of school education (S.1 of the Education Act 1980); and to endeavour to secure improvement in the quality of school education in schools that are managed by them (S.3 of The Standards in Scotland's Schools Act 2000).
- 1.2 Gergask Primary School is a rural school within the terms of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 (the school is classed as "very remote rural") and the Council has had regard to the provisions of that Act, in particular the special regard required for rural school closures. The Council has considered the school roll projections for Gergask Primary School, taking into account the current pattern of enrolments, has given detailed consideration to the viable alternatives to closure (Sections 6-9 below); to the effect of closure on the community (Section 15 below) and to the impact of travel arrangements on children who are not yet of school age but who live in the Gergask catchment (Section 11 below).

### **Reasons for the Proposal**

- 2.1 This proposal is being advanced for the following reasons:
  - Gergask Primary School has been mothballed since September 2022, after the total roll fell to 2 pupils.
  - Consequently, no children have attended the school since September 2022.
  - The Council has explored alternatives in arriving at this proposal, explained further below.
- 2.2 In April 2023 informal discussions were held with local parents and with Laggan Community Council about the future of the school. There was little interest from local parents in attending the meeting, and the Community Council were of the view that a statutory consultation would be appropriate, in order to come to a decision on the school's future.
- 2.3 There are a very small number of children resident with the Gergask Primary School catchment, all of whom have alternative arrangements for their education. The results of the informal discussions would suggest there is no demand for children to attend Gergask Primary School, and that the school is no longer viable.

### **Current Details – Gergask Primary School**

- 3.1 Gergask School serves a sparsely populated rural area, with the small local population mainly concentrated in the village of Laggan, where the school is located. The school is a traditional granite building consisting of an entrance hall and three classrooms. An office and a general purpose room which was

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also used as a dinner canteen is located in Spey Lodge, a spacious demountable building which was installed in the playground in 2007.

- 3.2 The school has been mothballed since September 2022 when the remaining pupils transferred to Newtonmore Primary School.
- 3.3 There were no nursery children at Gergask Primary School prior to mothballing, but the school did operate a nursery class when there were children to attend it. As mentioned above, this closure proposal encompasses both the primary school and nursery class stages.
- 3.4 The school has a registered permanent capacity of 44.
- 3.5 The Highland Council assesses all of its schools for Suitability and Condition, in line with the Scottish Government's School Estate Management guidelines. Schools are assessed on a scale with the ratings "A" (good) "B" (satisfactory), "C" (poor) and "D" (bad). Prior to mothballing, Gergask Primary School was rated as "C" for the educational suitability of the building and "B" for building condition.
- 3.6. In the five sessions from 2019-20 to 2023-24, there were 5 placing requests to leave Gergask Primary School, and 1 placing request to join.
- 3.7 No current HMle Report is available.
- 3.8 Between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2022 the CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent emissions from the Gergask Primary School building are estimated at 13.3 tonnes.

### **Current Details – Newtonmore Primary School**

- 4.1 Newtonmore Primary School is located in the large village of same name, which has a population of around 1100-1200. Only schools located in communities with a population of 3,000 or more are not classed as rural schools, so Newtonmore Primary falls within the category of a "very remote" rural school. It provides education in both English (EM) and Gàidhlig (GM). Its English Medium catchment formerly drew pupils mainly from Newtonmore and its immediate surrounds, but since 2016 the catchment has also included that of the former Dalwhinnie Primary, which closed at that time. The school's Gàidhlig Medium catchment covers a still wider area, including the EM catchments of all of the other primary schools in the Kingussie Associated School Group (ASG), Alvie Primary, Aviemore Primary, Kingussie Primary and Gergask Primary.
- 4.2 Newtonmore Primary School, situated in the middle of Newtonmore, was completely modernised in 1991. The building offers spacious accommodation of a very high standard with a tarred and paved play area and an enclosed grass playing area to the rear. There is a seated area for outdoor classroom activities. The school hall offers a multi-purpose area for the school and community.

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- 4.3 At the time of writing, the anticipated roll for 2023-24 is 111 pupils within P1-7, with 66 in English Medium (EM) education and 45 in Gaelic Medium (GM). There are further 23 children in the two nursery classes, 9 in English Medium and 14 in Gaelic Medium.
- 4.4 The school (excluding the nursery) has a registered capacity of 122. The 2023-24 roll of 111 therefore represents 91% use of capacity.
- 4.5 The Council publishes roll projections for each of its currently operational schools. The latest forecast for Newtonmore Primary School is attached at **Appendix D**, alongside the forecasts for the other schools in the Kingussie High School group, whilst a copy of the Council's methodology for calculating the forecasts can be found at **Appendix Di**.
- 4.6 It can be seen from Appendix D that the roll at Newtonmore Primary School is forecast to see a modest decline over the course the rest of the current decade.
- 4.7 The accommodation at Newtonmore Primary School is rated as "C" for educational suitability and "B" for Condition.
- 4.8 In the 5 sessions from 2019-20 to 2023-24, there were 4 placing requests to leave Newtonmore Primary School, and 15 requests to join.
- 4.9 There is no current HMle Report for the school.
- 4.10 Annual CO<sub>2</sub>e emissions from Newtonmore Primary School building from April 2021 to March 2022 are estimated at 7.3 tonnes. This figure would not be affected by the formal closure of Gergask Primary School.

## 5 Examination of Alternatives

- 5.1 In bringing forward this proposal for closure, the Council must give due consideration of alternative courses of action that could be considered. The following reasonable alternatives to closure have been considered:
- 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.
- 5.2 As part of the consideration of alternatives, the Council has investigated the long-term roll projections.
- 5.3 The detail of the Council's consideration of the reasonable alternatives is set out throughout this proposal paper and its appendices.

### Option 1 – Continued Mothballing

- 6.1 Although it would be possible to continue with the current "mothballing" arrangement, Highland Council does not consider that would represent the best option for the taxpayer or the community. The very low number of

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children in the Gergask Primary School catchment indicates strongly that the school is no longer viable. “Mothballing” would mean the continuation of the current lack of clarity regarding the future status of the school and would prevent the community from developing options for the future use of the accommodation. Informal discussions suggest that the local community does not favour a lengthy “mothballing” arrangement.

- 6.2 In the past, Highland Council has left schools mothballed for a number of years before they have been finally closed. One disadvantage has been that the empty building has deteriorated, limiting limitations for the community, in terms of making use of the building following closure. Continued mothballing would also leave the Council burdened with the costs of maintaining the empty building.
- 6.3 Scottish Government guidance relating to the mothballing of schools makes it clear that mothballing is a temporary measure and should not be used to undermine the requirements to undertake a statutory school closure consultation. The status of mothballed schools should be regularly reviewed. Having undertaken such a review, Highland Council does not see continued mothballing as a realistic alternative to closure.
- 6.4 Current school transport arrangements would not be affected by a continuation of mothballing.

### **Option 2 - Re-Opening of Gergask Primary School with its Current Catchment Area**

- 7.1 The results of informal consultation suggest there is insufficient parental interest in re-opening Gergask Primary School. The number of children within the catchment is now insufficient to enable the school to continue.

### **Option 3 - Re-Opening of Gergask Primary School with an Expanded Catchment Area**

- 8.1 The Gergask Primary School catchment is linked by road to the Newtonmore and Spean Bridge catchments, the latter being part of the Lochaber ASG. Spean Bridge Primary School is located 31 miles from Laggan, which is the main population centre for the Gergask catchment. It would not be a realistic option to change the catchment boundary in favour of Gergask Primary School. Any such proposal would of course require a statutory consultation.
- 8.2 At present the Gergask/Newtonmore catchment boundary is at a point roughly equidistant from the two schools. Within the Newtonmore catchment, there is no substantial population until the village of Newtonmore itself, so a catchment change would not be practical suggestion of improving the roll at Gergask. Any such proposal would of course require a statutory consultation.
- 8.2 It should also be borne in mind that Newtonmore Primary is also a very remote rural school. Spean Bridge Primary School is also on the Rural Schools list.

- 8.3 Taking all the above into account, it would not be appropriate to alter either catchment boundary in order to expand the Gergask Primary School catchment.

### **Educational Benefits**

- 9.1 Highland Council is of the view that the school environment should be of a quality that sustains and improves education provision, pupil performance and outcomes for the young people of Highland.
- 9.2 Highland Council has adopted the following indicators in reviewing its' school estate:
- Pupils should be educated in facilities which are rated at least category B for each of Condition and Suitability.
  - Pupils should be members of an age-appropriate peer group.
  - Pupils should have the opportunity to engage in the widest possible range of activities beyond the core curriculum, including music, sports, drama and art.
  - Pupils with Additional Support Needs should be educated in the most appropriate local setting.
  - Pupils should not ordinarily be required to travel for longer than 30 minutes from the nearest classified road pick-up point to school (primary) although it is recognised that this may not always be possible in a rural council area such as Highland.
  - School facilities should be of a size appropriate to the delineated area that they serve, paying due regard to demographic trends.
  - School delineated areas should reflect geography, travel routes and population distribution.
  - Safe school transport should be provided and safe traffic management in and around school sites should be implemented.
  - Teachers should be members of a professional learning community comprising at least 3 members located in the same facility.
  - The implications of school location to local communities should be considered.
  - Schools, wherever possible, should be located where there is a recognised village or other built-up community.
- 9.3 As mentioned above, evidence gathered by Highland Council to date suggests that there is no realistic prospect of a viable roll at Gergask Primary School.
- 9.4 Children at Newtonmore Primary School regularly work in co-operative learning groups of various sizes. The very small roll of a re-opened Gergask Primary School would mean that the groups would not only be limited in size but also static, since there would be no possibility of changing the membership of learning groups. A very small roll would also limit the variety of skills that pupils could bring to the groups, and there would be a smaller range of work to use in terms of sharing standards.

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- 9.5 A larger school roll makes it easier for the school to attract visiting speakers and other external partners to work with the children. In many cases external partners look for a certain threshold in the number of children they will be working with.
- 9.6 Working with others across a wide range of settings is one of the core elements of the school curriculum. This includes planning and carrying out projects in small groups, sharing tasks and responsibilities, and being ready and willing to learn from and with others. Working with others also plays a part in the development of leadership skills, which become increasingly important to pupils as they move through their school years and beyond school education into adulthood.
- 9.7 The existence of pre-school classes at Newtonmore Primary School enables a strong transition process for children moving into P1.
- 9.8 The language programme at Newtonmore Primary School aims to develop listening, talking, reading and writing skills. Listening is developed by games, stories, radio & television programmes, music, and use of ICT. The school aims to develop fluency and clarity of expression and to extend vocabulary. Talking is developed by role playing, mime, reporting, interviewing etc. They are also used for the teaching of other languages, which are introduced to pupils as part of the 1+2 language initiative. Once again, the emphasis is on oral work and role play. In all cases, working with others plays an important role.
- 9.9 It is self-evident that an overall school roll in single figures restricts opportunities for team sports and other active recreational activities. It further applies to the health and wellbeing element of the curriculum which involves discussion between pupils about health lifestyle choices. Whilst these problems can be overcome by taking the pupils to participate in activities in neighbouring schools, that in itself involves time out of school in travelling.
- 9.10 As with sports, the larger roll at Newtonmore provides a greater likelihood of pupils benefitting from a wider range of group musical and artistic opportunities, events that are more difficult to deliver with restricted numbers.
- 9.11 The level to which pupils are able to become skilled in social interaction will depend to an extent on the opportunities afforded to them. The forging of close friendships and the development of self-esteem is enhanced by each pupil being enabled to be part of an age-appropriate peer group of a sufficient size to allow a range of interactions and relationships to form and reform.
- 9.12 In summary, there are positive educational benefits to be derived from the closure of Gergask Primary School, due to the significantly increased opportunities that can be provided at Newtonmore Primary. Collaborative working within the classroom, language learning, and artistic and sports activities can all benefit from the greater numbers that are available. Conversely, the roll of a re-opened Gergask Primary School would be insufficient to keep the school viable.

## **Re-allocation of Gergask Primary School Catchment**

- 10.1 A map of the current Gergask Primary School catchment is at Appendix B.
- 10.2 In the event that Gergask Primary School closes, its catchment will be transferred to that of Newtonmore Primary School. The proposed merged catchment is shown at Appendix C.

## **Effect of Differing Transport Arrangements**

- 11.1 As there are currently no children attending Gergask Primary School, no differing transport arrangement would need to be applied in the event of the formal closure of the school.
- 11.2 The driving time between Gergask Primary School and Newtonmore Primary School is given as 13 minutes (source: Google Maps). There may, in the future, be children undertaking this travel time. It is appreciated that potential driving times from the extreme ends of the catchment would be longer.
- 11.4 Calculations of the additional emissions of greenhouse gases arising from the current transport arrangements from Gergask to Newtonmore Primary suggest that the mothballing, and by extension the formal closure of, Gergask Primary, is currently resulting in about 0.9 tonnes per annum of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent emissions. The figures can however only be estimates as emissions are affected by the type of vehicle used for the transport contract, the speed at which vehicles are driven and the type of road travelled.

## **Effects on Staff and School Management Arrangements**

- 12.1 As the school is already “mothballed” there will be no impact on school management arrangements at Newtonmore Primary School from a formal closure of Gergask Primary School.
- 12.2 A continuation of the current mothballing arrangement will have no effect on current staffing arrangements.

## **Effect on the Local Community**

- 13.1 The community of Laggan does have a village hall and therefore has a public space where the community can meet.
- 13.2 Gergask Primary School was not used for school lets prior to mothballing, as this would have taken income away from the community hall.
- 13.3 There are two areas of land adjacent to the school, that have been used by the school under lease agreements. However these will revert to the landowners when the school closes.
- 13.4 Subject to the Council not having any operational need for the building, Highland Council would be keen to work with the local community over the future use of the building and site. Any such proposal would however have to

be progressed within the terms of the Council's current asset management arrangements.

### **Financial Consequences**

14.1 The Table at **Appendix E** sets out the Highland Council's assessment of the Financial Implications of the proposed merger. As the school is currently mothballed, the savings identified are already being made and no additional saving would arise to the Council from closure.

### **Equalities Impact Assessment**

15.1 The proposal has been assessed as having no impact on the following Equality areas:

- Disability
- Gender
- Gender reassignment
- Pregnancy or Maternity
- Marriage/Civil Partnership
- Race
- Religion or Belief
- Sexual Orientation
- Looked After Children
- Young Carers
- Children and Young People Living in Deprivation

15.2 In respect of age equality, the proposal relates to a primary school and as such primarily affects children in the 3-12 age group, and their parents. The proposal is advanced on the basis of educational benefit to the children in the area concerned. No negative age-related effects arise. Age is not a protected characteristic for the purposes of school provision.

### **Rural Impact Assessment**

16.1 Gergask Primary School and Newtonmore Primary School are classed by the Scottish Government as "very remote rural schools". Although the proposal involves a formal closure of service, the service itself has not operated since September 2022. In practical terms the proposal will not change the current position.

16.2 The relocation of service (which in practical terms has already taken place) involves moving local school provision from Laggan to Newtonmore, a distance of 8 miles.

16.3 As set out in Section 9 above, the Highland Council believes that the proposal offers educational benefits.

16.4 The maximum additional travel time for school pupils from the Gergask Primay School site to Newtonmore Primary School is 13 minutes (source: Google

Maps). As school transport is provided by the Council, the proposal would not be expected to have any impact on accessibility to education or on fuel poverty.

### **Mitigation of Adverse Effects**

- 17.1 As all the pupils within the Gergask Primary School catchment are already attending Newtonmore Primary School, no adverse effects arise in respect of current pupils.
- 17.2 There is a potential adverse effect for future children in the length of journey from the Gergask catchment to Newtonmore, details of which are provided above, which would not arise if Gergask Primary remained open. As the school has been mothballed since 2022, the current pupils are already making this journey. The population in this area is accustomed to making long journeys to access things that people in urban areas take for granted.
- 17.2 Funded school transport will be provided to P1-7 pupils from the Gergask Primary School catchment who are attending Newtonmore Primary.

### **Recommendation**

- 18.1 Taking the above into account Highland Council recommends that Gergask Primary School, currently “mothballed,” is closed and the catchment area re-assigned that of Newtonmore Primary School.
- 18.2 This proposal paper is issued in terms of the authority’s procedures to meet the relevant statutory requirements. Following the consultation period, a report and submissions received will be presented to the Education Committee of the Highland Council.

### **END OF PROPOSAL PAPER**