

CONSULTATION MEETING – PROPOSAL TO CREATE A NEW PRIMARY SCHOOL TO SERVE THE TORNAGRAIN HOUSING DEVELOPMENT

HELD AT CROY PRIMARY SCHOOL – 8 OCTOBER 2024 – 6.30pm

MINUTES OF MEETING

Panel

Cllr. Ian Brown - Chairperson

Ian Jackson, Education Officer, Resources

Fiona Shearer, Area Education Manager

Robert Campbell, Service Lead, Education Capital Programme and Estate Strategy

Hayley Brown, Senior Manager Early Years

Cllr. Glynis Sinclair

Cllr. Morven Reid

In Attendance

Emma Patience, Head Teacher, Croy Primary School

Emma McFarlane, Education Scotland

20 members of the public

The Chairperson – Cllr. Ian Brown introduced himself as an elected councillor and Inverness City Leader, a member of the Council's Education Committee, and welcomed everyone to the consultation meeting.

He continued as follows:

The purpose of the meeting is to discuss the proposal to establish a new primary school east of Inverness to serve the Tornagrain housing development, and to amend the delineated area (catchment area) of the current Croy Primary School, in order to create the catchment area for the new school.

The Council officials present tonight are Fiona Shearer, Area Education Manager, Ian Jackson, Education Officer, (Resources), Robert Campbell, Estate Strategy Manager and Hayley Brown, Senior Manager Early Years. Cllr. Glynis Sinclair, Inverness Provost, is here and also Cllr. Morven Reid. We have apologies from Cllr. Trish Robertson.

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.

Mr Jackson

Thank you, Chair. The opening of a new school 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 22 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 create the new school, 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 22 November, Education Scotland becomes involved. They will conduct their own consultation from 2-20 December. 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 Croy 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.

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 commented that Section 5 of the Paper outlines the educational benefits of the Proposal. The main issue is the projected growth in the local population. If we didn't have the new school, we wouldn't be able to manage the expected number of children within the footprint of Croy Primary. We already have a couple of modular units and eventually the school will be faced with significant overcrowding. We don't have a crystal ball to project numbers exactly, but you are all aware of the number of houses planned. By building the new school, we would expect the numbers at Croy to come back to where they used to be – the number the school was built for.

The Chairperson opened the meeting to the floor.

Q1 – Can you specify the dates of the consultation process. You mentioned this element was due to end on 22 November, but when will Education Scotland start their consultation, and what follows that?

A1 (Ian) – The Education Scotland consultation has been agreed for 2-20 December. After that we review the results of the consultation, the written responses, the Education Scotland report and the results of this meeting. How long that takes depends on the number and complexity of the responses. We have to go back to the Education Committee for a final decision, and it meets 4 times a year. I haven't seen the dates for 2025, but the pattern is usually to have meetings in February, May/June, September and November. The chances are we would be going back to the May/June Committee for the final decision. If that goes through, the issue would then go over to my colleague Robert Campbell's team, who deliver new builds on the ground.

(Robert) - We are aiming to have the new school ready in 2027. Quite a tight timescale, with planning approval, and completing the design. We are undertaking some initial work just now but we can't put in a planning application until after this consultation is complete. What we normally do is create a Stakeholder group, which comprises council officials and elected members, school staff and community reps. That will probably be established next year and will be used as a forum for exchanging information.

Q2 – Is 2027 a realistic timescale? I don't believe it is.

A2 (Robert) – It will be a challenge, but we learned some things from the last new school we opened at Ness Castle Primary. We use standard designs now as much as we can.

Q3 – What contingency plans have you made if the school isn't ready by then? The impact on this school has already been problematic. Children in this community have already seen a loss of green space.

A3 (Robert) – Our school roll forecasts get updated every year, so the closer we get the better we can anticipate. We will monitor what is happening, and if there is a roll issue at Croy, we would make appropriate plans. It's not possible to say at this moment what the plan would be, since we are 3 years away.

(Fiona) – We do our school enrolments in January, for the upcoming August, so we would have a good idea at that point – by Jan/Feb 2027. We wouldn't be waiting until July and then wondering where to put pupils in August. There would be contingency plans. For example, when the new Ness Castle Primary School opened, the building was not ready when we planned, but the school opened – it opened on a different site until the new build was ready.

The Chairperson commented that the Council would wish to see the new school ready as soon as possible. That was our intention.

Q4 – What will the secondary school catchment be?

A4 – (Ian) It will be Culloden Academy. Changing a school catchment is another thing that requires a statutory consultation. Obviously at the moment the whole Croy/Tornagrain area is part of the Culloden catchment for secondary school purposes. If we were to change the Culloden secondary catchment we would need to go through this whole process again. The paper in front of us does not propose any change to the existing Culloden Academy catchment.

Q5 – Why is there is no current plan for any future expansion of Croy PS, even when there is also a housing development in Croy itself?

A5 – (Robert) – We have the current demountable units on site. We will keep them as long as they are required. We probably won't need to retain all of them though.

Q6 – So when Tornagrain opens, you expect to remove the demountables at Croy?

A6 (Robert) – That is the expectation. As soon as units become surplus they will be removed.

(Fiona) – It depends on the roll.

(Ian) – Broadly the Council works on the basis that we can take 25 children per class – that's leaving aside the nursery – so if you have 4 classrooms you can take 100 pupils. We expect that once the school at Tornagrain opens, the roll at Croy will drop back to more historic levels, and that we will not need all the capacity we currently have or have planned.

(Robert) – The nursery would potentially require two rooms.

Q7 – What is the predicted roll for the new school on Day 1 of its operation?

A7 (Robert) – That is quite difficult to predict. It depends on how many Tornagrain children already attending Croy decide to move. Some might stay, especially if they are in the upper stages of school. If a pupil is already in say, P6, they might just decide to finish their time at Croy. The new school might not be full on Day One, but we would expect it to build up over time.

(Fiona) – In the case of Ness Castle, for example, we wrote to the parents when the new school opened, to say that anyone up to P5/6 would be expected to attend their catchment school. That was the presumption, but obviously there is the aspect of parental choice, and some families chose to put in a placing request for their existing school. The numbers at Ness Castle weren't what we had predicted on Day One, and I don't think we had any P7s at all, but the numbers are building up now. It's really

hard to put a number on the Day One figure though, because we don't know what individual parents will do. We will meet parents closer to the time, to talk through options.

Q8 – The proposed Tornagrain catchment area seems to leave out part of old Tornagrain, which is left as part of the Balloch catchment. Surely it would be better if they were included in the new Tornagrain catchment?

[Some confusion followed about the area being discussed. Ian J wrongly thought we were discussing areas in the Ardersier or Cawdor catchments, but it was eventually clarified that the area in discussion related to a small group of properties which lie just inside the current catchment of Balloch Primary School].

A8 (Ian) – Changes to catchment areas are another type of proposal that are subject to statutory consultation, so we could consider that, but we would need to consult with all the parents in Balloch Primary about that change.

(Fiona) – We kept within the current Croy boundary when we proposed the new catchment.

Q9 – So you simply split the existing Croy catchment into two?

A9 (Ian) – Yes, but the point about the geography is well-made.

Q10 – To me, it's ludicrous that old Tornagrain isn't included in the new school catchment.

A10 (Fiona) – Old Tornagrain is currently part of the Balloch catchment, so changing that would require another consultation.

Q11 – But you would literally have houses separated by a road, being in different catchments?

A11 (Fiona) – We have that in lots of places. I live in Nairn, and there are places where you can live in a street where the houses on either side of the road are in different catchments. As Ian said, this is something we can look at, but it would require full consultation with Balloch parents.

Q12 – How does that process happen? Is that community driven?

A12 (Fiona) – This is a consultation and so an opportunity to give us your views.

(Ian) – The Council would have to advance a Proposal like this one. There would have to be a consultation, and we would have to have another public meeting like this one. In that sense, it would have to be led by the Council, but the Council can respond to identified community demand for a change.

Q13 – So does this feedback today trigger a consultation?

A12 (Ian) – Not necessarily. We have to consider all the responses to this consultation exercise, and when we report to the outcome of the consultation to elected members, we would say whether we agreed or did not agree with the points raised.

Q14 – For old Tornagrain, it will be 4 miles to Balloch Primary, and less than a mile to the new school. It's ludicrous.

A14 (Fiona)– I mentioned earlier about placing requests. If parents in old Tornagrain wanted their children to attend the new school, they could always make a placing request.

Q15 – Since it's far less distance to the new school, why haven't you just proposed changing the catchment?

Q16 (Fiona) – The decision taken by the Council was to consult on creating a catchment for this new school, formed from within the existing boundaries of the Croy PS catchment.

Q17 – But you have decided to change things so that houses on one side of the road are moved into Balloch?

A17 (Fiona) – No, we haven't. Those houses are currently part of the Balloch catchment, and under this proposal they would stay where they are. There's always going to be a boundary somewhere. Old Tornagrain is currently in the Balloch catchment, new Tornagrain is currently in the Croy catchment. It's not any different, except in that the new school will be closer to old Tornagrain than Croy PS currently is.

Q18 – A lot closer!

A18 (Fiona) – Yes, but as I have said parents can submit placing requests. There are certain legal grounds in which we refuse these, but generally they are granted.

Q19 – It's all very well saying people can apply, but if a lot of children apply, then there's a chance some might not be accepted.

A19 (Fiona) – It's a good point, and you know the area better than I do.

(Ian) – And that's the whole point of having this meeting, so that we can get these local views, and pick up issues that we might not have thought about. I think we might well go ahead with building this new school, if people are in agreement, but we need to think about changing that catchment boundary in a separate exercise. It might be sensible to do that, but we would need to consult Balloch parents.

(Fiona) – If were to consult the Balloch parents about changing that small bit of the catchment, the parents of those children would still have the option of keeping their children in Balloch, and because the children were already there, any placing requests would be granted.

Q20 – I would suggest we carry on with this proposal, and go back later to consult with the Balloch parents about that one area.

A20 (Fiona) – Agreed, that issue does not need to delay this consultation.

The Chairperson commented that no decisions would be taken tonight. The meeting was to listen to people's views. We will take notes and get back to people.

Q21 – There is no easy way down from Croy to the A96 for children on foot. They would have to walk along the main road.

A21 (Ian) – Robert talked earlier about a Stakeholder Group. If we get agreement to set up the new school, then there will be more detailed consultation with stakeholders. The Council has a Road Safety Team and when we build new schools, we look at a process called "Safer Routes to Schools" which is all about encouraging children to walk and cycle to school. I don't know if anyone is familiar with Ben Wyvis Primary in Conon Bridge, which was formed from two previous schools in Conon and Maryburgh. A lot of road safety measures were put in as part of the planning for that new school, and that is the type of process we would follow for this new build, so absolutely, we are all about promoting walking routes to schools.

Q22 – Can I just ask about the planning for the development shown at Appendix C? Who is the current owner of that land? How is the budget for a school like this established?

A22 (Robert) – The land is covered by a S.75 legal agreement, and it was agreed between the landowner and ourselves as to when that becomes available, based on certain trigger points around the number of houses. We are having ongoing discussions with the Estate. There is a budget identified as part of the Council's Capital Programme. There is quite a bit of pressure on the capital programme, so we have tested the site and we can fit 16 classrooms onto it, but there won't be 16 classrooms from Day One. The school will be built in 4-classroom blocks, and on Day One there will either be 8 or 12 classrooms – 8 classrooms would give us a capacity of 200, so it depends on the starting roll. The Capital Programme is kept under continuous review, and developer contributions are part of the funding as well.

Q23 – The community appreciate the decision to keep the existing Croy Primary open, but what does the future hold? The school has to take up the slack pending the construction of the new school. The impact on Croy Primary has been substantial, with children and the community losing recreational space. How do we make sure that the children at Croy Primary get the same opportunities as those at the new school?

(Fiona) – Croy is an established school, so it's not a case of children just coming here while they are waiting for their new school. Where we have opened other new schools, some parents have chosen to stay because that is their child's existing school. They are happy and settled and don't necessarily want to leave.

Q24 – Are there any plans to improve the school's accommodation? It was built in 1998.

A24 (Robert) – In terms of condition, it's not one of our best, but we have a lot worse than this. It's not just Condition, it is also assessed for Suitability – what level of facilities are offered? This school was built to the standard for that time. A new school would be built to a different standard. We would consider all of that.

Q25 – Five or six years ago we had conversations about soundproofing this hall, but the issues are still ongoing. Our children can't hold Christmas pantos in here because no one can hear what is going on. You can come up with money for a new school but not for improvements to existing ones.

A25 (Robert) – We do have money for improvements to existing schools, though it's fairly thinly spread. Once we get over the pressures of the next few years, we do need to look closely at what we need in this school.

Q26 – It just seems a bit ridiculous that so many years have passed without this being sorted.

A26 (Cllr. Sinclair) – I have represented this community for nearly 20 years. Local councillors fought to retain the school, and we did not do that to let the school go to rack and ruin. The thing I most wish we could improve on is a play area for the kids at this school. There is hardly any space for the children to play, and a lack of access to the playing field. The hope is that, as things progress, we can make more of an area for play.

(Fiona) – Hayley and I, and Robert and I, have been talking about that over the last week or so. We are looking at that.

Q27 – The playing field was a community facility, and then it was fenced off. Kids are now playing football in the streets because there is nowhere else. That playing field should still be available to the kids.

A27 (Cllr. Sinclair) – I believe that the field was fenced off for health and safety reasons.

(Fiona) – Yes, because it is part of the school grounds.

Q28 – It isn't. It is a public play park. The land was gifted to the community.

Q29 – The Community Council passed that land to the school on the basis of an email from Robert Campbell that promised access for the community. I understand though the safety issue when the children are actually attending school.

A29 (Fiona) – There is also an issue at weekends, in terms of unlocking and locking gates, and that is the issue Hayley and I have been discussing, to find a solution.

Q30 – As an extension to that, can I just mention that we have to pay for access for a volunteer-run football club at weekends. That's not ideal. It's expensive!

A30 (Fiona) – It's a school let issue, which is also linked into the access issue. We are taking this up with our colleagues in the Property Service and in Cleaning, Catering and Facilities Management. Letting charges are applied throughout our school estate.

Q31 – Who can we contact about this? It's the number one issue within the community.

A31 (Fiona) – Myself. I can link in with the other service. I am working during the October break although I won't get to it this week.

Just for myself, I would like some clarity on this issue of what the area was and what it is.

Q32 - I have some correspondence between the community council, the Parent Council and Highland Council about the transfer of the land. I could forward that if it would be useful.

A32 (Fiona) – Yes please. That would be helpful.

Q33 – A few of the issues that are being raised here, are at a tangent from the direct issue of the new school. On those issues, the Parent Council are looking at what funding they can get at. What we are hearing is that there might be options. I think the Parent Council would probably welcome another meeting with the Highland Council to apprise you of the different options for addressing and delivering on some of these issues. It is important to understand what funding pots exist and to look at the opportunities that might be there. That might be a way forward alongside the separate discussions for the new school.

A33 (Fiona) – Happy to do that.

Q34 – You mentioned developer contributions for the new school. Has any of that been ring-fenced for Croy Primary, bearing in mind that the building ratings for Croy are "B" whereas the new school will be "A" rated?

A34 (Robert) – The developer contributions are in relation to the new accommodation required as a result of the housebuilding.

Q35 – So is there any intention to bring Croy Primary up to “A” building standard?

A35 (Robert) – We have a policy that all our buildings are rated at least “B”. We have quite a lot of schools rated “C” which is “poor”. Our priorities are to get the “C” rated schools upgraded and to maintain “B” rated schools at their current rating as a minimum. Clearly if they were left unattended they would slowly deteriorate. So Croy will need investment in roofs, windows etc.

Q36 – So there are now plans to invest further in Croy?

The Chairperson commented that it was a Highland-wide plan that prioritised the schools in the worst condition, wherever they are.

Q37 – I understand that, but we will have a brand-new shiny school a short distance away.

The Chairperson commented that this wasn’t unique. He lived near to Drakies Primary. A great school but one with dated accommodation, with new schools nearby. The presence of those schools doesn’t downgrade Drakies though. The pupils are happy there and want to stay. He advised that he understood the feeling that Croy is being forgotten about, but it won’t be.

(Cllr. Glynis Sinclair) – I will make sure Croy is not forgotten about!

(Hayley Brown) - We have invested in the nursery. There are now two nursery rooms, with more space than before, with free flow design.

(Fiona Shearer) – So there has been investment. The difficulty we have in Highland is that we have around 200 schools. As the Chair said, we have to look at our schools on a Highland-wide basis, and there are a lot of schools that are not in as good condition as this one.

Q38 – If this is the school for Tornagrain at the moment, why can’t some of the developer contributions be put into Croy Primary?

A38 (Robert) – The new housing at Tornagrain is putting pressure on the school estate. There are formulas for calculating developer contributions, based on the additional capacity we have to provide as a result of the children coming out of the new housing. All the additional school capacity required is related to the Tornagrain development.

Q39 – There’s also the extra school roll generated at Croy from the “Scotia” development. Surely that should come to this school?

A39 (Robert) – Developer contributions are linked purely to requirements for new capacity.

Q40 – So developer contributions from Scotia Homes are not coming to Croy?

A40 (Robert) – If there are developer contributions for the smaller Croy catchment that is something we could potentially look at, but the Tornagrain contributions will be directed to that school.

Q41 – Have previous developer contributions from Scotia gone to Croy?

A41 (Robert) – We have spent quite a lot of money on Croy, but we will review that position.

Q42 – Until the new school is built, children have to come up and down the road from Tornagrain to Croy. It is a dangerous route that needs major investment.

A42 (Robert) – We mentioned earlier that we have a Road Safety Team. I don't know if they have made an assessment of the route.

Q43– In wintertime there is ice all the way along and it is only a matter of time before a child gets killed.

The Chairperson commented that, again, that was not a question about the new Tornagrain Primary School, which is what we were here to discuss.

(Fiona) – I don't know whether the Road Safety Team have a current plan for Croy Primary, but I can follow that up with them on the basis that the circumstances around the school have changed.

Q44 - When Scotia Homes purchased the land for their development, they gifted an area of woodland to the community and school, but the actual cost of making that ground useful meant that it is still there. It's an area of land that could be looked at to create green space for the children, if funding were available.

The Chairperson commented that the phrase "if funding were available" was the all-important one.

Q45 – It should come out of the developer contributions from Scotia Homes.

A45 (Robert) – There is an existing decision on the use of developer contributions in relation to Tornagrain.

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 22 November 2024**. 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.