

THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL

EDUCATION COMMITTEE

PROPOSAL TO REORGANISE EDUCATION PROVISION IN THURSO

EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS STATEMENT

This is a proposal paper prepared in terms of the Education Authority's agreed procedures to meet the requirements of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010.

INTRODUCTION

The Highland Council is proposing, subject to the outcome of the statutory consultation process, to reorganise education provision in Thurso in order to provide modern, sustainable, and high quality learning environments that better meet current and future educational needs.

The proposal forms part of the Highland Investment Plan and the development of a Community Point of Delivery for Thurso.

If approved following consultation, the proposed changes would be implemented following the completion of new accommodation.

The proposal is to:

- provide a new secondary school for Thurso as part of a Community Point of Delivery
- provide a new primary school of up to 16 classes, located within or adjacent to the Community Point of Delivery site
- provide Early Learning and Childcare provision within the new primary school, with existing provision at Pennyland Primary School and Miller Academy Primary School to be discontinued and re-established within the new setting
- discontinue Gaelic Medium Education at Mount Pleasant Primary School and
- provide Gaelic Medium Education provision associated with the new primary school
- retain Mount Pleasant Primary School for English Medium Education,
- discontinue education provision at Pennyland Primary School

Appendix 2

- discontinue education provision at Miller Academy Primary School
- discontinue Additional Support Needs provision at the Miller Academy site, with specialist provision to be re-provided within the new model of provision associated with the Community Point of Delivery.

Clarification on Scope of Statutory Consultation

For the avoidance of doubt, the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 requires statutory consultation in relation to proposals to establish or discontinue schools and make associated changes to school provision.

The proposed replacement of Thurso High School does not in itself require statutory consultation under the Act. However, it forms part of the wider strategic context for the proposals relating to primary school provision, which are subject to this statutory consultation.

Accordingly, this proposal paper sets out a combined and coordinated approach to future education provision in Thurso, while the statutory consultation relates specifically to the proposed changes to primary school provision and associated Early Learning and Childcare, Gaelic Medium Education and Additional Support Needs provision.

SUMMARY OF THE CONSULTATION PROCESS

Proposal Paper Publication

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

- Thurso High School
- Pennyland Primary School
- Miller Academy Primary School
- Thurso Library
- And published on The Highland Council website
 - www.highland.gov.uk/schoolconsultations

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

Education Business Support Team

Caithness House

Market Place

Wick

KW1 4AB

E-mail: Education.Consultations@highland.gov.uk

To request this information in an alternative format, e.g. large print, Braille, audio formats, or suitable language, please also contact:

Education Business Support Team

Caithness House

Market Place

Wick

KW1 4AB

E-mail: 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 of pupils attending Thurso High School, Pennyland Primary School, Miller Academy Primary School, Mount Pleasant Primary School; including parents of pre-school pupils
- ii. The Parent Councils of the above schools
- iii. All staff of the above schools
- iv. Members of Parliament and Members of the Scottish Parliament for the area affected by the proposal
- v. Trade union representatives
- vi. Thurso Community Council
- vii. Councillors representing Thurso and Northwest Caithness ward
- viii. Education Scotland

Advertisement in Local Media

A notice announcing the public meeting will be placed in the John O' Groat Journal and on the Highland Council's Facebook page and "X" account.

Consultation Period

The consultation for this proposal will begin on 19 August 2026 and will end on 30 September 2026. This period allows for the statutory minimum of six weeks, including at least thirty school days.

Public Meeting

A public meeting will be held the week commencing 24 August 2026.

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. Invitations will be sent to all statutory consultees.

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 considered.

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 may 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.

Responses to the Proposals

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

Education Business Support Team

Caithness House

Market Place

Wick

KW1 4AB

Email: Education.Consultations@highland.gov.uk

Or via an online form, a link to which can be found on

www.highland.gov.uk/schoolconsultations

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 officers of The 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, 30 September 2026 at 5pm.

Involvement of Education Scotland

When the proposal document is published, a copy will also be sent to Education Scotland by the Council. Education Scotland will also be sent, by 16 October 2026, a copy of any relevant 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 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 9 November 2026. In preparing their report, Education Scotland may visit the affected schools and make such enquiries as they consider appropriate.

Review of Consultation Exercise

The 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 as well as 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 Council's Education Committee, 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 November 2026 prior to submission to the Council's Education Committee in February 2027. 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.

Any proposal approved by the Education Committee would require to be confirmed by a subsequent meeting of the full Highland Council. This is currently planned for March 2027.

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, the reissuing of the proposal, or the revision of the timescale for the consultation period. In that event, relevant consultees and Education Scotland will be advised.

Proposal

1. 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 publish or otherwise make available information as to their arrangements for the placing of children in schools under their management (S.28 of the 1980 Act).

1.2 In common with all public bodies in Scotland, The Highland Council also has a duty to provide best value. This includes making arrangements to secure continuous improvement in performance, whilst maintaining an appropriate balance between quality and cost; and, in making those arrangements and securing that balance, to have regard to economy, efficiency, effectiveness, equal opportunities requirements and to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development.

2. Reasons for the Proposal

2.1 A number of existing school buildings in Thurso no longer provide environments that adequately support modern learning and teaching approaches.

2.2 The Council must therefore consider a revised configuration of the school estate to ensure that accommodation is suitable, adaptable, and capable of supporting high quality education for current and future generations.

2.3 In May 2024, The Highland Council adopted a new Highland Investment Plan (HIP), which sets out how the Council will work over the next 10 years to optimise its investment of resources in its learning estate in a prioritised manner to meet the needs of 21st century learning and teaching. As part of this, a new generation of community facilities was envisioned for the Highlands, with Points of Delivery (PODs) providing a range of public services brought together in a single location.

2.4 The Highland Investment Plan identified Thurso as a priority location for investment, including consideration of future secondary school provision.

2.5 The Plan also recognises the need to consider the future configuration of primary school provision in the town, alongside alongside early learning, Gaelic Medium Education and additional support needs provision, to ensure that the overall education estate is suitable for modern learning and teaching and capable of meeting future demand.

2.6 Following approval of the Highland Investment Plan approach, detailed master-planning and engagement work has been undertaken to develop proposals for a Community Point of Delivery in Thurso.

2.7 The existing Thurso High School campus has been identified as the preferred location for the future education-focused Community Point of Delivery, subject to statutory consultation and further design development.

2.8 While the overall site has been agreed in principle, the precise arrangement, scale, and location of individual education facilities within the site will be informed through the statutory consultation process and the subsequent design stages.

2.9 Appendix 2 identifies the location of the proposed community POD and includes the relevant land areas that would be required for each of the component parts, i.e. the Primary School, and other co-located community and partner facilities.

3. Pre Consultation & Engagement

3.1 A programme of informal engagement has been undertaken as part of the development of the Highland Investment Plan and the emerging proposals for a Community Point of Delivery in Thurso.

3.2 This engagement has focused on understanding local priorities for education provision, the condition and suitability of the existing school estate, and the potential opportunities arising from long-term investment in education and community infrastructure.

3.3 As part of this work, the Council has undertaken a programme of informal engagement relating to the development of a Community Point of Delivery for Thurso.

3.4 This has included public drop-in events and facilitated workshops held during 2025, together with ongoing meetings with key stakeholders through established governance and partnership arrangements during 2024, 2025 and early 2026. This engagement was intended to raise awareness of the Highland Investment Plan, explore early options for education provision, and inform the development of proposals prior to statutory consultation.

3.5 Public drop-in events were held to provide members of the community with the opportunity to view emerging proposals, ask questions, and provide early feedback.

3.6 In addition, facilitated workshops were undertaken with young people to gather views on learning environments and future education facilities. Alongside this, Council officers have engaged with a range of stakeholders, including school senior management teams, parent councils, community representatives, elected members and partner organisations.

3.7 An online survey was also carried out as part of the informal engagement process and received approximately 550 responses.

3.8 The survey explored a range of potential models for future education provision in Thurso and highlighted key themes, including the importance of the quality and suitability of learning environments, safeguarding and age-appropriate separation, access to facilities, and safe and walkable routes to school.

3.9 The responses demonstrated a range of views and preferences and have been used to inform the development of the proposal rather than to determine an outcome.

3.10 The Council has considered the views expressed during informal engagement alongside its strategic responsibilities under the Highland Investment Plan and its statutory duties in relation to school education.

3.11 Having reviewed the information gathered and the range of potential options, the Council considers that a statutory consultation is now required to allow all interested parties to comment on a defined proposal for future education provision in Thurso.

3.12 The statutory consultation process will provide a further opportunity for parents, pupils, staff and the wider community to express their views before any final decision is made.

4. Description of the Schools

Thurso High School

4.1.1 Thurso High School provides secondary education for young people across Thurso and the surrounding area and currently accommodates approximately 750 pupils.

4.1.2 The campus comprises a number of buildings dating primarily from the late 1950s and 1960s, with subsequent extensions.

4.1.3 The site is dispersed, with multiple detached blocks, which creates challenges in relation to circulation, accessibility, supervision and overall site efficiency.

4.1.4 In 2022, a routine structural inspection identified significant concerns relating to the presence of High Alumina Cement Concrete within Block A, resulting in its closure.

4.1.5 Following further assessment, Highland Council approved the demolition of this block due to the scale of the structural defects, and temporary modular accommodation was introduced to replace the lost teaching space.

4.1.6 The reliance on temporary accommodation, combined with the fragmented layout of the remaining estate, limits the suitability of the campus for modern learning and teaching.

4.1.7 Although the school has sufficient capacity to accommodate forecast changes in pupil numbers, the forecasts reinforce the importance of ensuring that future accommodation is appropriately scaled, flexible and fit for purpose, rather than continuing to maintain an oversized, fragmented and poor quality estate.

4.1.8 These factors highlight the limitations of the current estate and the challenges in delivering a modern, coherent secondary learning environment on the existing campus.

They provide context for considering how future secondary education provision in Thurso could be delivered from accommodation that is better aligned to current educational standards, supports effective supervision and movement across the site, and offers greater flexibility to respond to future needs.

Pennyland Primary School

4.2.1 Pennyland Primary School is a non-denominational primary school located in Thurso, with associated Early Learning and Childcare provision.

4.2.2 The main school building dates from 1962 and reflects the design standards and educational requirements of that period.

4.2.3 The school currently accommodates approximately 160 pupils across seven classes.

4.2.4 While the building benefits from a range of internal spaces, including a gym hall and specialist rooms, its age and original design limit flexibility, energy performance and the ability to adapt spaces to support contemporary approaches to learning and inclusion.

4.2.5 The integration of primary education and early years provision within a single ageing building places additional pressure on space, circulation and specialist facilities.

4.2.6 The physical constraints of the site limit opportunities to reconfigure accommodation without significant intervention, making the long-term suitability of the building an important consideration in future planning.

Miller Academy Primary School

4.3.1 Miller Academy Primary School is located close to Thurso town centre and serves a large primary population alongside Early Learning and Childcare provision.

4.3.2 The school occupies a historic building originally constructed in the late 19th century, with later extensions and refurbishment, including major works undertaken during the late 1990s.

4.3.3 The campus also accommodates specialist Additional Support Needs provision, including the SCOPE unit, which places particular requirements on accessibility, circulation, support facilities and the relationship between specialist and mainstream spaces.

4.3.4 While the building retains architectural character and strong local identity, its age and multi-block configuration present ongoing challenges in terms of internal layout, accessibility standards and consistency of learning spaces.

4.3.5 Although refurbishment has extended the usable life of the building, the inherent constraints of the historic estate limit opportunities to create flexible, modern accommodation capable of supporting integrated provision at scale without significant further intervention.

Mount Pleasant Primary School

4.4.1 Mount Pleasant Primary School is situated across the river on the East side of the town.

4.4.2 The school currently accommodates approximately 189 pupils across seven English Medium classes.

4.4.3 In addition to mainstream provision, the school includes Gaelic Medium Education provision, Early Learning and Childcare provision, and specialist Additional Support Needs provision serving the Associated School Group.

4.4.4 The school plays an important role in delivering both mainstream and specialist provision within the Thurso area, including its role in supporting pupils with additional needs and providing access to Gaelic Medium Education.

5. Strategic Context

5.1 Taken together, the existing education estate in Thurso comprises buildings of varying age and design, many of which were not constructed to support modern expectations around learning environments, accessibility, inclusion and efficient site layout.

5.2 While pupil numbers across the Thurso catchment are forecast to change gradually over time, the primary drivers for reviewing education provision are the condition, layout and physical suitability of the buildings themselves.

5.3 The Highland Investment Plan identifies Thurso as a priority location for education investment and provides an opportunity to consider education accommodation holistically, ensuring that future facilities are well designed, appropriately scaled and capable of meeting current and future needs. This

includes consideration of early learning, Gaelic Medium Education and Additional Support Needs provision as part of a coordinated approach to education delivery.

6. Educational Benefits

6.1 The purpose of the proposed reorganisation of education provision in Thurso is to secure clear and lasting educational benefit for children and young people. The existing pattern of education provision is delivered from buildings that were designed for an earlier model of education and which are constrained by their age, condition and layout.

6.2 These constraints limit the ability of schools to provide learning environments that fully support contemporary approaches to teaching, learning, inclusion and pupil wellbeing.

6.3 The Highland Investment Plan provides an opportunity to address these challenges through the replacement of Thurso High School and the coordinated consideration of primary school provision.

6.4 A new secondary school would offer modern, purpose-designed accommodation capable of supporting Curriculum for Excellence, senior phase pathways, digital learning, and a wider range of experiences and achievements within a coherent, secure campus.

6.5 This would also improve accessibility, internal circulation and supervision, supporting a safe and supportive learning environment.

6.6 Considering primary school provision alongside secondary replacement allows the Council to explore whether educational benefit can be delivered through a more integrated approach.

6.7 New primary accommodation, designed to modern standards, would provide flexible learning spaces, improved facilities for group work and specialist support, and environments that can better support inclusion, nurture and wellbeing. Such accommodation would be designed to support early years, primary education and additional support needs in a planned and coordinated way.

6.8 The proposal also offers educational benefits through improved transitions. Closer alignment between early learning, primary and secondary education has the potential to strengthen continuity of learning, support more effective transitions, and enable earlier engagement with support services where required. Modern accommodation can also support stronger partnership working with other services, helping to meet the wider needs of children and young people.

The proposal also provides the opportunity to strengthen Gaelic Medium Education through co-location within a single campus, supporting continuity of immersion, improved transition into secondary Gaelic provision, and a more coherent 3–18 learner pathway, subject to the outcome of consultation.

6.9 While pupil numbers are forecast to change gradually over time, the educational case for the proposal is not driven by roll forecasts. Instead, the proposal focuses on ensuring that education in Thurso is delivered from accommodation that is appropriate in scale, flexible in use, and capable of supporting high-quality learning and teaching for current and future generations, rather than continuing to rely on an oversized, fragmented and poor-quality estate.

6.10 The Council recognises that current Additional Support Needs provision in Thurso is delivered through a combination of specialist bases supporting a range of needs across the Associated School Group.

6.11 The proposal includes the reprovision of Additional Support Needs currently delivered at Miller Academy within a new model of provision. This provides the opportunity to deliver specialist and enhanced provision within modern, accessible accommodation designed to support inclusion and meet identified needs across the Associated School Group.

6.12 The Council considers that these potential educational benefits justify proceeding to statutory consultation.

6.13 The consultation will allow parents, pupils, staff and the wider community to consider whether the proposal delivers sufficient educational benefit and to influence how future education provision in Thurso should be shaped.

7. Impact on School Transport

7.1 The Council recognises that any reorganisation of education provision has the potential to impact on school travel arrangements for some children and young people.

7.2 School transport has therefore been considered as part of the development of this proposal.

7.3 At this stage, no detailed transport routes have been determined. Any future transport arrangements would be developed following the conclusion of statutory consultation and in line with the Council's school transport policy.

7.4 Pupils who are entitled to free school transport under existing policy would continue to receive this entitlement. The proposal does not alter the Council's statutory duties in relation to school transport.

7.5 The identification of the existing Thurso High School campus as the preferred location for future education provision reflects its established role, central location and accessibility within the town. The site benefits from existing transport infrastructure and established travel patterns.

7.6 Active travel has been an important theme emerging from informal engagement. Any future arrangements would take account of opportunities to support safe walking and cycling routes where appropriate, alongside the provision of school transport for those who require it.

7.7 Should the proposal be approved following consultation, the Council would engage further with parents and carers to confirm individual travel arrangements and ensure that transport provision continues to meet the needs of children and young people.

8. Integrated Impact Assessment

8.1 In line with the Council's Integrated Impact Assessment framework, an initial Integrated Impact Assessment screening has been undertaken in relation to this proposal.

8.2 The screening has considered potential impacts across equality, children's rights and wellbeing, human rights, island and mainland rural communities, data protection and climate change.

8.3 The proposal has been identified as having potential positive impacts, particularly in relation to:

- children and young people's rights and wellbeing;
- accessibility and inclusion, including for children and young people with additional support needs; and
- the provision of modern, fit for purpose education environments.

No adverse impacts have been identified at this stage.

8.4 The screening recognises that the proposal relates to education provision within a small remote town serving a wider mainland rural catchment, and that further consideration of accessibility, transport and community impacts will be informed by statutory consultation responses.

8.5 At this stage, the proposal relates to statutory consultation only. A full Climate Change Impact Assessment would be undertaken and reported as part of any subsequent decision to progress new school provision. Potential impacts, including those associated with construction, energy use and travel, would be considered as part of that process.

8.6 As the proposal is to undertake statutory consultation only, the Integrated Impact Assessment screening concludes that a full Integrated Impact Assessment is not required at this stage.

8.7 On the basis of this, the Council will determine whether a full Integrated Impact Assessment, is required prior to any final decision being taken. This will be informed by:

- Education Scotland's report; and
- further development of the proposal.

9. Recommendation

9.1 Taking account of the matters set out in this proposal paper, The Highland Council recommends that education provision in Thurso be reorganised through the replacement of Thurso High School, Pennyland Primary School and Miller Academy Primary School with a new secondary school and one associated primary school within the Thurso Community Point of Delivery, including Early Learning and Childcare provision and potential Gaelic Medium Education provision, while retaining Mount Pleasant Primary School.

9.2 This proposal paper is issued in accordance with the Council's procedures and to meet the relevant statutory requirements of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010.

9.3 Following the conclusion of statutory consultation, a report summarising the consultation process, responses received and Education Scotland's report on the educational aspects of the proposal will be presented to the Education Committee of The Highland Council for further consideration and decision.

Appendices A&B show the location of the existing Thurso High School campus, which has been identified as the preferred location for the future Community Point of Delivery, subject to statutory consultation, together with the locations of existing primary schools within Thurso.

The precise layout and configuration of facilities would be developed following consultation.

End of Proposal Paper