

NOTE OF PUBLIC MEETING IN CROSS SCHOOL – TUESDAY 1 JUNE 2010

Catriona Stewart Good evening everyone and welcome to this evening's meeting. My name is Catriona Stewart and I'm Vice Chair of Education and Children's Services Committee and with me this evening is Mr Bernard Chisholm who is Head of Education and Resources with the Comhairle and to my right here is Mr Derek Mackay who is the Democratic Service Manager. At the back we have a guest this evening, Mr Doug Marn from HMIE. Mr Ian MacArthur behind us here is recording the proceedings this evening and its very important when it comes to the question and answer session that you wait until Mr Gillies passes you the mike so that we have a true recording of what is being said this evening. The other things we would be grateful if you could ensure that your mobile phones are off because it tends to disrupt you know the recording so we don't want to miss anything of the proceedings this evening. On August 2007 the Comhairle decided to undertake a review of educational provision throughout the Western Isles. Since that time a number of informal conversations have taken place within Communities. As a result the Comhairle agreed to go to statutory consultation on the proposed closure and amalgamation of a number of schools. This meeting is part of the formal consultation process for Cross School. The aim of the Authority is to provide our children with the best educational experiences and outcomes in modern learning environments suitable for 21st century needs within the resources available to us. The Comhairle are facing serious challenges. School rolls have fallen to 3,681 from 6,246 in 30 years and in the last five years alone the pupil roll has fallen by over 300. As education is resourced according to pupil numbers funding has decreased. We have 38 buildings, 18 of which are in poor condition. We face ever tightening financial constraints generally and there is pressure on other council services and budgets for example, community care, roads and transport waste services and we have the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence which will be rolled out from August this year. We are in the process of building six new schools which will mean that 44% of our pupils will be educated in new efficient learning environments in which to deliver the new Curriculum. Our aim in line with Scottish Government Schools Estate Strategy is for our pupils to be educated in new or refurbished buildings by 2018. In order to achieve this we have to reduce the space capacity in our school estate. I will now pass over to Mr Mackay who will go over procedure once the procedure has been addressed the Director's representative Mr Chisholm will speak to the proposal document and then I will open the meeting for questions. Thank you.

Derek Mackay Thank you Councillor Stewart. Now everyone should have received a copy of the Consultation Document. I have plenty of copies available tonight if anyone is wanting them. I'll just pass them around. I would refer everyone to the Sections 2 and 3 of this Consultation Document which are found on pages 3, 4 & 5 which outlines the procedure which has been followed. Now this, sorry Proposal Document was is a result of a decision approved by the Council and has been issued to seek the views of the Community in relation to the proposals within it, you've got the proposals here for Cross School. Now this meeting is taking place as part of the initial consultation period which is due to end at 5pm on 30th June 2010. Now you can respond to that consultation directly to the Chief Executive in writing and there is also an area on the Council's website which is set out to receive email responses so you can respond in writing or by email. Reference has already been made tonight to a note that is being taken of this meeting. We are going to produce a transcript of the meeting and that is why everything is being recorded

and it will be important to speak clearly at the mike when you are asking any questions. It will be useful as well if you could indicate your name before you answer the questions that will help when we produce a transcript of the note. My main purpose here tonight is to take a note of the questions and the responses and be a back up to that transcript and particularly to take a note of questions that officers are unable to answer tonight and if there are any questions that we are unable to answer tonight we will take a note of these and respond to you in due course. You may wish to indicate what is the most appropriate response, whether its directly to you or maybe through the parent Council, maybe that won't be the most appropriate form and if you can let me know before the end of the evening. Copies of the transcript will be available for anyone who wishes a copy. It will take us a few days to produce it following tonight's meeting but we can make that available to everyone. Now the procedure to be followed as part of the proposal document. Once the comments have been received the proposal documents together with any written representations that are received by the Council will be forwarded to HMIE who will then have until 20th August to prepare their own report in relation to the proposals. Officers of the Comhairle then have the opportunity to review HMIE's report and prepare what is called the Consultation Report. Up until now what you've been dealing with is the proposal documents, there will be a further consultation report which will be prepared and would be considered by the Education and Children's Services Committee late in October this year going to the full Council in November of this year and it is at that stage that the Comhairle will make its decision on whether or not it is to close Cross School. From that date Scottish Ministers have six weeks in which to call in the proposal if they have any concerns about any aspects of the proposal. Nothing can be done within that six weeks but the estimated date of implementation of any closure on this document is August 2012, Now in producing this second report, the Consultation report the Council requires to take into account all of the consultation responses together with any comments made by HMIE and that is obviously quite a detailed process. There is another legal requirement that the Comhairle is required to carry an equalities impact assessment in relation to the proposals and again anything that comes out of this evening will contribute to preparing that assessment. That covers, sorry I said August 2012 any closure would be August 2011, I apologise for that. In relation to the responses when you send in a response either written or by email we will aim to acknowledge that within three working days but if you have not received an acknowledgement within say a week of submitting the response if you get in touch with the Chief Executive's Department directly and we will make every effort to ensure that responses come out within three days. Obviously we may be dealing with a large number of responses and I think that is everything I wish to say. I am happy to take any questions about the procedure.

Catriona Stewart Thank you Derek. If there are any questions we can always come back and ask you throughout the meeting. Bernard if you would like to speak to the document please.

Bernard Chisholm throughout the Islands and currently we now have more schools that I will be relatively brief, we are here tonight because of the issues outlined by Councillor Stewart. We as a Department have been promoting greater partnerships with working between schools, we have used strategies such as shared Headships which have operated here and we have implemented Curriculum for Excellence or are implementing it. The Early Years Strategy has been a very significant one and the development of the learning community which has been effective in this area all trying to work towards this delivery in a more efficient education, however for us and the facts are stark school roles have been falling in

the Western Isles for the last 30 years year on year. Here at Cross if you take the roll as it is today it has fallen by 57% in the last 8 years which is a significant drop. This pattern has been repeated we need to deliver the education and strategy of education proposed for schools in Scotland. There is a target that we should educate our young people in condition A or B schools, we will only be able to do this in the Western Isles if we have fewer of them and if we invest in those that we have left. Why are we here in Cross, well because we have a school with spare capacity which is within a few miles of Lionel School which also has spare capacity. Cross at the moment is operating at 19% of its capacity and really for us at the moment while we could accommodate Cross in Lionel we could not accommodate Lionel in Cross so our challenge has been to look at how we can best provide for this area. We are challenged to provide quality education and quality buildings and we set out in the proposal an Education Benefit Statement which is a requirement for us. Of those things we think that through amalgamation we can deliver. We also feel and we want parents to know that we think it is a really exciting time in Scottish education in terms of the new curriculum which teachers here at Cross and Lionel have been working on the outcomes and experience since they were first published. However we do believe that a larger staff and larger peer groupings of children would bring advantages many of these we have outlined in Section 8 but we think there are increased opportunities for pupils both curricular and extra curricular. We think there is greater flexibility in grouping children for learning and teaching and in the deployment of staff we feel a larger staff with a wider range of expertise will increase opportunities for a sharing effective practice more collegial support and a wider range of learning and teaching and we feel that we can provide more management support to the staff that we provide that challenge to. Section 9 of the Report is also a duty on us to consider effective factors specifically affecting rural schools so we have tried to outline in detail in the document all the information that requires and from our point of view I suppose I have talked long enough and would like to give yourselves the opportunity to make your own observations for asking questions. I hasten to say that I might not be able to answer them all but we will come back to you but equally some of your observations may not be questions but you have just may wish to share your own view, that will be recorded and taken into consideration in preparation of any other documentation. Thanks very much.

Catriona Stewart Ok, so I will now open to questions from the floor. It will be easier from the beginning, you know if you would identify, give your name and make sure that you speak clearly into the mike so that we have a true recording.

Kate Barbour My name is Kate Barbour and I'm speaking on behalf of the Parent Council at Cross School of which I am the Chair Person. Obviously I am very disappointed with the proposals for closing Cross School. I have studied the HMIE report for both Cross School and Lionel School and I know which offers the best education for my child for both my children, that's why I chose to take them out of the catchment area of Lionel and put them into Cross School. I'd like to see how that's going to be turned round and that I'm going to be assured that my child who goes to Lionel School will not miss out and that her education will not be in any way compromised by these changes bearing in mind that she will also be one of the children at 11 who has to then go over to the Nicolson as part of the Council's new rationalisation of education. I'm wondering if by the time these children get to the end of their education in the Nicolson if then as parents we will be sitting back and saying if only, its going to be too late then because we will not be able to compensate those children. I'd also like to make the point that parents haven't been mentioned much

in any of these document and we are a key player in this whole game. I do remember when we had the dialogue with the Council who came out in February I think it was at which the Director was present, the Chief Executive and the Head from Lionel School. It was made quite clear by myself that the parents didn't want the children to be involved in the consultation process yet. We said quite clearly that it was causing stress and anxiety to the children and we didn't want them to part of this process until it was decided that there was a final date and that there was no turning back and at that stage we would take steps to ensure that the children would be transferred in the best possible way. The other point is I would quite like to know the way in which the better environment is going to be created in Lionel School. The two schools are not that similar and Cross School does have access to the modern facilities that are up at Lionel so its not missing out from the swimming pool or the sports facilities although there not on the premises. My final point with regard to the transition is again are parents being listened to. After the last meeting we met with parents to consider the two week period that was spent with Cross children in Lionel School and parents outlined some concerns that we had about the two week period and one was the children being accommodated on the school bus so parents had met and discussed this, a letter was then drawn together and it was taken to Lionel School and staff were consulted at Lionel School, two representatives from the Parent Council went to Lionel, however on the first day when my daughter went to get on the bus to go to Lionel School there wasn't a seat for her, then at the end of the day when she was collected because there were no seats on the bus for her she had been dismissed from Lionel School. She then got home to an empty house, this gives me serious reservations as to my child going to Lionel School.

Bernard Chisholm I'll do my best to make some comment on some but I think a fair amount of what your saying is something that you wish recorded for the purposes of the Consultation but can I first mention about the Consultation. The Consultation document went out and a requirement to consult at the back of the document which you have indicates that contributors would be open to all relevant stakeholders and the group that would be specifically consulted were and we identified all of those groups.

Kate Barbour Whilst I understand that I don't see the point of upsetting children, my daughter was in tears this morning as I left for work. She has been in tears and highly stressed this evening. Does it make sense to include a P4 child at this stage in the game? Or should the parents be asked if they want their child to be there. I really think that you know that as adults we should be making some of these decisions and not upsetting them yet. I just don't think its appropriate.

Bernard Chisholm So well the first point I wish to make is that we had a duty for consultation, we've identified that in the document and we are very aware in the department in the Council that children in all our communities over the extended period of the discussions about the School Estate Review which now for us has been going on for some considerable time are aware of it. They are aware that its going on so it feels right that children and young people should be given the information and an opportunity also for them to ask questions. This is an exercise we are doing in all of the schools, I myself personally am engaged in some of them and while its regrettable that any child would feel distressed or concerned I think for us not to discuss with children so that they understood what it is we're doing for the majority would be a real lost opportunity, especially when we have an obligation as part of this Consultation process to take all these views into consideration. In terms of the performance of our schools can I suggest that as we are consulting on our schools we are confident that our schools offer a high quality of education in all our areas, both schools here in Cross and Lionel neither of them have been

the subject of criticism for under performance in terms of the provision of the education. The strategy that we are looking at is trying to bring together small schools into a much more viable provision where children can get greater opportunities of working together in meaningful groups, teachers can have the opportunity of collegial support with one another and greater flexibility can be provided to the management of the school for the deployment of support. In terms of the transport arrangements for both the schools that we are talking about here, the distance between Lionel and Cross is approximately three miles and any extended travel time would certainly we think be under 15 mins. If there are particular incidents in terms of an individual child I would really wish to look at that separately and I would be happy to look at any circumstances but we have long practice of children travelling on the buses to the schools and have very low incidents of dissatisfaction, the system works well, appears to work well and the children confident in it. In terms of the conversations I think beyond the consultation the Council and the Department were very anxious that such a major decision as amalgamation of schools would only take place when there had been extensive opportunity for parents, staff and others to share their views with the department. The conversations were an opportunity to do that, all of the information was taken back I think was seriously looked at or informed the process and decision for us to undertake the consultation. My last comment would say as we think in terms of the educational benefits there outlined where we think we can deliver it. What is increasingly difficult for us to deliver is the maintenance of buildings. This current building is Condition C, we would like to see it at B or better. We think the facilities which are at Lionel School give an enhanced facility and we think that other than children travelling there during the week on a timetable basis for the area involved we think direct access is best but we do recognise the children and parents for us to improve the school estate overall and to ensure that the resources both ICT, teaching and learning are available. That's increasingly difficult for us to do over the range of buildings with such low capacity and such high staffing requirements. I would mention lastly that in terms of the past groups the amalgamation would provide us composite groups of really small numbers relatively. Our classes if we combine three class groups, would be a primary ½ composite of about 15 primary 3,4,5 of 14 and 6/7 of 16. The gaelic composite would be approximately 18 each and I think these are favourable.

- Catriona Stewart Thank you Bernard, any more questions. Please don't be shy. You are aware that the proposal date is that education provision should be discontinued with effect from 30 June 2011 and that the pupils would continue education at Lionel School from 18 August 2011.
- Anthony Barbour Is there any particular reason why Cross School is closing next year rather than the following year as lots of other schools are.
- Bernard Chisholm I think we have a challenge as you can see in front of us we have reducing our school estate or looking to consult on a reduction from 38 schools down to 20s, 12 or 13 currently in consultation for a significant number. We have had to look at what is feasible for us to do over a reasonable time period. There is a significant amount of work in managing. We have set a date sufficiently we think far in the future that we can undertake all the work we require. We have also done a consultation from the Butt to Barra to ensure that it was a complete review of the education estate, clearly we are making commitments that the receiving school will have the resources that we have indicated or the investments so that all our schools meet a certain standard and to achieve that we need to put in place both the finance and the building work. So we have looked at the Schools in terms of issues of capacity, size, role, savings etc and we have looked to set a programme that we

think is reasonable to consult on. However it would be available to anybody to take a view that's different so that and we would note that.

Kate Barbour Kate Barbour again, the Chairperson of the Parent Council. Just with that comment there about the next School being prepared for the extra children going into it. If it would be 3 classes at the moment there are 2 english medium and 2 gaelic medium where would be the extra classroom come from for the english medium.

Bernard Chisholm Cross School is, sorry Lionel School is currently operating at about I think its 54% capacity to 57% capacity so we do have capacity in the school for the class. There certainly is a school to take many more pupils than it currently has. I mention at the conversation and obviously at the Consultation we recognise in the Department the attachment communities have towards the resource that is their school. This has come about for the issues we have outlined, we do appreciate the role the school has played, the support the community has always given, the attachments of the children but we do recognise particularly over the recent years of the increased kind of connections between the Schools and we do hope and work towards a strategy here that is designed to try and increase resource and build on what were doing but unfortunately over recent years with those falls in numbers we are challenged by the reality of our situation.

Catriona Stewart If you have no more questions do we have any observations that anybody would like to make?

Anthony Barbour I would just like to say that obviously I do not agree with the proposals and alongside I know now is not the time to start discussing the next problem at Lionel School where there is a proposal to close the secondary there but we're not happy about that either bearing in mind we have children that will now be going possibly to Lionel School and then having to go to the Nicolson next but I assure you that will be raised at the next meeting at Lionel School.

Catriona Stewart That's fine. Thank you Mr Barbour. Well if there are no more questions and no more observations the Comhairle will review the proposal having regard to the HMIE Report written representation that it has received and oral representations made to it by anyone at the public meeting. A Consultation Report will then be produced. This Report will be published in electronic and printed formats and will be published in local newspapers. The report will be available on the Comhairle website and from Comhairle offices as well as the schools concerned, this one free of charge. The Consultation Report together with any other relevant documentation will be considered by the Education and Childrens' Services Committee who will make a recommendation which will then be considered for approval by the Comhairle. Should the Comhairle decided to close Cross School at this stage it is required to notify the Scottish Minister of the decision and provide him with a copy of the Proposal Document and Consultation Report in accordance with the Schools Consultation Act 2010 within 6 working days of the decision being made. Scottish Ministers have a 6 week period from the date of that final decision to decide if they will call in the proposal. Until the outcome of the 6 week Call In process has been notified to the Comhairle, the Comhairle will not proceed with the implementation of the proposal. The deadline date for the receipt of written submissions is 5pm on 30 June 2010. These should be sent to Mr Malcolm Burr, The Chief Executive of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar at Sandwick Road, Stornoway or electronically to schoolsconsultations@cne-siar.gov.uk and that again is within the Proposal Document and I thank you very much for coming out this evening and meeting with us.

Bernard Chisholm Thanks very much

