

## NOTE OF PUBLIC MEETING IN STONEYBRIDGE SCHOOL –MONDAY 21 JUNE 2010

**Present:**       **Mrs Catriona Stewart (Chair)**  
                  **Mr Robert Emmott**  
                  **Mr Bernard Chisholm**  
                  **Ms Lesley McDonald**  
                  **3 parents**  
                  **2 local councillors – Gerry Macleod and David Blaney**  
                  **Ms Joan Esson HMle**

Catriona Stewart    Feasgar math agus faillte gu coinneamh co-chomhairleachaidh a nochd. .  
My name is Catriona Stewart I am Vice-Chair of Education and Children's Services and I will be chairing this evening's meeting. With me I have to my left I have Ms Lesley McDonald who is Head of Executive Office, to my right Mr Bernard Chisholm who is Head of Education Resources and over in the corner we have Mr Robert Emmott who is the Director of Finance and Corporate Resources.

The meeting is being recorded so could I ask that everybody switch their mobile phones off please because it interferes with the microphones I have been caught out myself, not just on silent but off. I had the embarrassment last week of asking everyone to put their phones off and leaving my own on.

At the back of the room we have Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education Ms Joan Esson who is here to join us for the meeting.

Catriona Stewart    In August 2007 the Comhairle decided to undertake a review of educational provision through the Western Isles. Since that time a number of informal conversations have been held throughout our 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 Stoneybridge school. Since March the pupils have been in full time education at lochdar and have settled in very well and are thoroughly enjoying their time at lochdar school. We are here tonight to listen to your views and answer any questions you may have. The aim of the authority is to provide our children with the best educational experiences and outcomes in modern learning environments suitable for 21<sup>st</sup> century needs within the resources available to us. The Comhairle are facing serious challenges, our schools rolls have fallen to 3681 from 6246 in 30 years and in the last 5 years alone the pupil roll has fallen by over 300. As education is funded according to pupil numbers, naturally there has been a decrease in resource. We have 38 buildings, 18 of which are in poor condition and like everyone else we face generally tightening constraints. We have many pressures on other services and budgets such as community care, roads and transport and waste services and from August of this year we also have the implementation of the Curriculum for Excellence. We are in the process of building 6 new schools which will mean that 44% of our pupils will be educated in new, efficient learning environments which will deliver the new curriculum. Our aim, in line with the Scottish Government's Schools Estate Strategy, is for all our pupils to be educated in new or refurbished buildings by 2018. In order to achieve this we have to reduce the spare capacity in our school estate. I will now pass over to Ms Lesley McDonald who will go over procedure after that I will call ask Mr Bernard Chisholm to speak to the proposal document. Thank you.

Lesley McDonald Thank you Chair.

This consultation is taking place in terms of the Schools Consultation (Scotland) Act 2010 which some of you may know as the Rural Schools Legislation which has been passed by Government. This outlines a new process in respect of certain proposals affecting the schools, one of which is a closure of a school, which is the proposal that is in front of you tonight. The document before you is the Proposal Document and forms the first part of the formal process, an informal process may already have been held with parents. This document meets the terms of the Act and provides details of why the Comhairle thinks that it would be a good idea to close Stoneybridge school particularly in Section 8 of the document which is the Educational Benefits Statement. Section 9 of the document is particular to schools which are rural schools and I will say a little more about that in a moment. This consultation period must last for at least 30 school days and in this case it is lasting for 34 school days with the deadline for consultation responses being Wednesday 30 June and these responses may be made to the Chief Executive at the Council, in writing or to the schools consultations email address which listed in the Report.

The purpose of tonight's meeting is to explain a little bit more about the proposal but crucially to find out what you have to say to record your points of view and also to answer any questions that we can, if you ask any questions to which we don't have an answer tonight we will undertake to get you an answer to those questions just as quickly as we possibly can. Following 30 June 2010 - this a new stage this wasn't in the previous legislation, this is an enhanced role for HMIe and HMIe will have until the 20 August this year to prepare a report in relation to this proposal and in doing so they will take account of any written representations that are received. Every written representation we receive will be passed on to HMIe, HMIe may also ask for a summary of those representations and if they do we will provide that and we also hope, as you have seen from the recording, to provide a transcript of this meeting to HMIe and they will prepare there report. In preparing that Report they can gather together which ever information they think is appropriate, they may choose to visit the affected school, they may make reasonable enquiries. Following that HMIe will issue a Report and the Council in producing what is called its Consultation Report must take account of the HMIe Report and any written representations it has received.

Now it is hoped to produce that Report during September so that it is available either at the end of September or very early in October to enable the Report to be considered by the Education Committee the last week in October with a recommendation to full Council on 4 November. By law that Report must be publicly available, it will be available on the website and also anyone who makes a representation will automatically receive a copy of that report and you must have three weeks to be able to have a good look at that before the Council makes its decision.

If the Council were to decide on 4 November that it felt it was appropriate to close Stoneybridge School there is then a six week call in period during which Scottish Ministers can call in the proposal. During the first three weeks of that six weeks Ministers may take into account representations that are made to them. If Ministers choose to call in the proposal the timescale from thereon in will be governed by the Ministers and their consideration.

If I might, just a couple of administrative points, sorry before I go on to that, this is one process that we are carrying out. This is a new piece of legislation and not quite so new but fairly new piece of legislation is also the Equalities Act and the Council will also be carrying out an Equalities Impact Assessment in relation to the proposed closure of the school. There are particular things that must be looked at in relation to rural schools and these are outlined in

part 9 of the Report and they relate to consideration of viable alternatives to closure, the likely effect on the local community, the likely effect of any different travelling arrangements in consequence of the proposal and these latter two also have to take into account sustainability, carbon footprints and the impact on the environment. Paragraph 2.10 of the document highlights the process for correction of a document and if I could just refer you to paragraph 9.1 there is a statement in that, that I would wish to correct, I believe this is also been done by public advertisement last week and that is that Stoneybridge is not an accessible rural school Stoneybridge has been classified as have all of the schools that we are currently out to consultation on as a very remote rural school. These classifications are made use of in Government returns and statistical returns and the view has been taken that this error does not impact on the remainder of the document. As the three elements that we have looked at are the elements that would have to be looked at, no matter what rurality definition was met but that is an error and we think that the appropriate way to deal with that error is by bringing it to your attention.

Finally just an administrative point, we will aim to acknowledge, if we receive an email representation to acknowledge by email, a written representation we would acknowledge in writing, within three working days of having received that representation. If for any reason you put in a representation it is essential that we capture that and you haven't received an acknowledgement please let us know, contact me as the Chair said, my name is Lesley McDonald and we will find your representation and we will make sure it goes into the process.

Finally, finally this is a plea on behalf of the team back in Stornoway who will be preparing the transcription, if you could give your names before you speak, that would be excellent and if perhaps you speak and then you don't speak again for 15 minutes, it is easy for those in the room who is speaking again but if you could just remind us of your name every so often that would be great to assist the accuracy of the transcript.

I am happy to take any questions as to the procedure, Chair.

Catriona Stewart Seeing as there are no questions I will move onto Mr Chisholm and he will speak to the actual document.

Bernard Chisholm Thank you Chair. We are here tonight because of the main issues which Councillor Stewart has outlined the facts for us are fairly stark. The school rolls have been falling in the Western Isles for the last 30 years and here at Stoneybridge, if you take the roll as it is today the roll has fallen by over 50% in the last 8 years. This pattern has been repeated throughout our islands and so clearly we now have more schools than we need and at the time the Government has published a strategy which sets out our aspiration for schools in Scotland. Their target is that we will have in excess of 90% of our pupils educated in condition A or B schools. Here in the Western Isles we believe we can do this but only if we have fewer schools. Why are we in Stoneybridge tonight? Because we have a school with spare capacity which is within 12 miles of another school, Sgoil lochdar, which also has spare capacity and its operating at 33% capacity presently. While the pupils in Stoneybridge can be accommodated in lochdar, lochdar couldn't be accommodated here in Stoneybridge.

We feel as a Department of Education that we are at a really exciting time in Scottish Education with the introduction of the new Curriculum. Teachers and pupils here at Stoneybridge have been engaged with the outcome and experiences of Curriculum for Excellence since they were first published and have been actually working together attending two days a week and since Easter break they have now been full time in lochdar, so we have a good long background of working well together. What I would like to do it just

make reference to the document again has Lesley as mentioned the initial part of the document in relation to consultation but Section 8 outlines where we considered there to be key areas of benefit. I just wanted to highlight one or two of these. We feel that by combining within Lochdar we have an enhanced learning environment, I think the resources available there are additional to what we have here. We think for the youngsters there are social and educational benefits both in the learning and teaching and in the play and extra curricular environment. We think the young people from Stoneybridge can benefit from the additional facilities with a larger grouping of staff giving greater flexibility on how they are deployed and a broader range of shared practice skills and knowledge. In other areas such as ICT, additional support needs and Gaelic medium education, there is no loss of provision and we have a pre-school provision there adjacent to Lochdar school. We consider that in light of all these things we have a provision which adds to the experiences of the children and provides a good range of services for Stoneybridge community. We have summarised in 8.15 the benefits we consider, increased opportunities both curricular extra curricular, flexibility and grouping of the children for learning and teaching, greater flexibility in the deployment of staff to meet the learning needs and the offer of a wider range of expertises resulting in increased opportunities for sharing effective practice. Section 9, as Ms McDonald had outlined, were the consider actions affecting rural schools, the viable alternative was for our work to be done here which we are not able to see done and in addition to bringing in the numbers of children we believe that would give the benefits in learning and teaching which we are unable to do. You have had the opportunity to have the document now for some time and probably listened long enough to those of us speaking so this is an opportunity for yourselves to make comment on what we are doing and how we are doing it and these, as we have said, will be recorded.

- Catriona Stewart Thank you very much Mr Chisholm. I will now invite you to put questions to us or make your views known and I would remind you that, if when you want the mic, if you just say your name.
- Donald Macisaac Hello I am Donald Macisaac, I am the Chairman of the Stoneybridge Committee. One of the questions is, this cost saving of £127,000 where does that end up, does it go back into one big pot or does it go towards Lochdar school for maybe some improvement? If they are needing to put windows in or whatever.
- Robert Emmott The cost of running the school right now is £127,000 there will be savings, the largest saving around changes in teaching staff and there are some savings in premises costs which will increase once some future is found for this building but there will also be additional transport costs because it is obviously costing a bit more to move the children, I think about £20,000 or so. I can get you a precise figure if want. The Council has agreed in principle that it wants to put any savings from closing the schools into improving the quality of the remaining schools. Now it hasn't decided exactly how much but I think the principle is there, that the aspiration is there to get all of its schools up to the same standard. So I suppose the short answer is the intention will be that all of the estate would get up to the same standard as we are seeking to achieve with the new schools that are being built and I think that is something, once the consultation process and the review of the estate has been concluded, the Council will come back and have a look at it.
- Bernard Chisholm Lochdar School would require work to get us up to the condition B standard and the commitment is that all the children going into a receiving school would have the schools taken to that standard.

- Donald Macisaac You also say there is additional transport costs at the moment, is the transport going to stay the same in August on the new term as it is currently? Or is there going to be any changes on the transport?
- Robert Emmott I am not aware of any plans to change the transport, I am happy to check that and come back to you. I mean if the transport is in place for the children now, unless Ms McDonald knows better.
- Lesley McDonald Similarly I am not aware of any plans to amend the transport but if there are any issues with the transport that is currently provided I would be happy to take them back to our Transport Co-ordination Officer.
- Donald Mackay There are no issues at the moment but just incase there are any changes in August.
- Lesley McDonald Yes we will get back to confirm but we generally work on the principle that if something isn't broken we don't try to fix it, if something is working.
- Donald Mackay I have got another one. At present there is no use of this building, has anybody approached you with a proposal of any ideas in using the building?
- Lesley McDonald I am not aware of any specific approach, mind you it may not have come to me. In February of this year the Council approved a new policy on disposal of surplus assets because I think it's not exactly a secret that asset management is something the Council has not been doing effectively for sometime in common with many other councils. So we now have a policy which indicates that if a property becomes surplus to the Council's requirements, so that is the first place we would look at, does a council department have a use for the property then again, in line with Government guidance the first place we would offer the property would be to the Registered Social Landlord, to HHP, to see if they had any requirement for it for housing, with a view to getting affordable housing into communities. If HHP had no interest the next thing we would do would be gather community interest in the property and, I can easily email the Report to you, there are timescales for that and we would ask the community interest or interests within a certain length of time to submit a business plan for what they hope to do because again we have had experience in the past where we have agreed in principle, elsewhere in this ward, to transfer things to the community, the business plan hasn't happened, the property has got into a worse condition. So there are timescales every step of the way. If a community interest could be established we would look at the terms and conditions of sale to any such community interest and if that were not to be the case the final option would be disposal of the property on the open market but if you have an email address or postal address I would be happy to send you a copy of that policy.
- Donald Macisaac Ok thank you.
- Bernard Chisholm I understand Donald but I don't have the details yet but I do believe there may have been a community interest and I think there was an intention by maybe the community, I don't know the details of the proposal to write to the Chief Executive and if that is received it would be taken in consideration with the policy with a view, is it a viable option on what could be done?

- Catriona Stewart Any more questions? Are you sure there are no more questions or observations anybody would like to make? The Comhairle will review the proposal having regard to the HMle report, written representations that it has received and oral representations made to it by anyone at the public meeting. A Consultation Report will then be prepared and this Report will be published in electronic and printed formats and it's availability will be published in local newspapers. The Report will be available on the Comhairle website and from Comhairle offices as well as the lochdar school, free of charge. The Consultation Report together with any other relevant documentation will be considered by the Education and Children's Services Committee who will make a recommendation which will then be considered for approval by the Comhairle. Should the Comhairle decide to close the school at this stage it is required to notify the Scottish Ministers of the decision and provide them with a copy of the Proposal Document and the Consultation Report in accordance with the Schools Consultation (Scotland) 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 5.00pm on 30 June 2010. These should be sent to Mr Malcolm Burr, Chief Executive of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Sandwick road, Stornoway or electronically to [schoolconsultations@cne-siar.gov.uk](mailto:schoolconsultations@cne-siar.gov.uk) and that address is in the proposal document. I would just like to thank you all very much for your attendance here today and so pleased that the children are thriving in lochdar school, I know it is a very sad day for the community, we do appreciate that it is difficult. Thank you all very much
- Mairi Macinnes I have had a long association with this school and being a Headteacher gives you lots of opportunities to do lots of things in a community and we have had good support in moving the children to lochdar but it is sad to see the school closing.
- Catriona Stewart We all appreciate that and do feel for any community, we really do.
- Bernard Chisholm We are very much grateful for the support of parents throughout the entire process that we have engaged and Donald as chair and everything, it has been really appreciated. Very grateful for everything you have done.