

THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL

EDUCATION COMMITTEE

The proposal is to discontinue the nursery classes at Caol Primary School and St. Columba's Roman Catholic Primary School, replacing them with a single pre-school facility serving both schools.

EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS STATEMENT

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

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

- To discontinue the nursery classes at Caol Primary School and St. Columba's Roman Catholic Primary School, and to replace them with a single pre-school facility serving both schools.
- The proposed change, if approved, will take place for the beginning of the 2025-26 school session.
- For the avoidance of doubt, there are no changes proposed in respect of P1-7 provision at either school.

SUMMARY OF THE CONSULTATION PROCESS

PUBLICATION INFORMATION

Proposal Paper Published

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

Caol Primary School, Caol Joint Campus, Glenkingie Street, Caol, PH33 7DP
St. Columba's RC Primary School, Caol Joint Campus, Glenkingie Street, Caol, PH33 7DP

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,
Highland Council
Charles Kennedy Building
Fort William
PH33 6RQ
Email: Education.Consultations@highland.gov.uk

To request this information in an alternative format, e.g. large print, Braille, audio formats, or suitable language, please contact the Education Business Support Team, Highland Council, Charles Kennedy Building, Fort William, PH33 6RQ

Email: Education.Consultations@highland.gov.uk

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

- (i) Parents/carers of pupils attending Caol Primary School; including parents/carers of pre-school pupils.
- (ii) Parents/carers of pupils attending St. Columba's RC Primary School; including parents/carers of pre-school pupils.
- (iii) The Parent Councils of Caol Primary School and St. Columba's RC Primary School.
- (iv) Members of Parliament and Members of Scottish Parliament for the area affected by the proposal.
- (v) Staff of Caol Primary School and St. Columba's RC Primary School.
- (vi) Caol Community Council
- (vii) The Roman Catholic Church, Parish of St. Mary's, Fort William
- (viii) Trade Union representatives.

Advertisement in Local Media

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

Consultation Period

The consultation for this Proposal will run from 30 September 2024 and will end on 29 November 2024. This period allows for the statutory minimum of six weeks, including at least thirty school days.

Public Meeting

A public meeting will be held at 6.30pm on 6 November 2024 at the Caol/St. Columba's campus. Anyone wishing to attend the public meeting is invited to do so. The meeting will be convened by the Council, will be chaired by a senior elected councillor, and will be addressed by officers of the Education Service.

The meeting will be an opportunity for the public to hear more about the proposal; to ask questions about the proposal; and to have the views of all stakeholders recorded so that they can be 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 will also be recorded.

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

Meetings with Pupils and Staff

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

Responses to the Proposals

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

Education Business Support Team,
Highland Council
Charles Kennedy Building
Fort William
PH33 6RQ

Email: Education.Consultations@highland.gov.uk

Or via an online form, to be found at:

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

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

Those sending in a response, whether by letter or electronically, should know that their response will be open to public scrutiny and may have to be supplied to anyone making a reasonable request to see it. If they do not wish their response to be made publicly available, they should clearly write on the document: “I wish my response to be considered as confidential with access restricted to Councillors and Council Officers of Highland Council.” Otherwise, it will be assumed that the person making the response agrees to it being made publicly available. All written responses must be received by the last day of the consultation period, 29 November 2024 at 5.00pm.

Involvement of Education Scotland

When the Proposal Document is published, a copy will be sent to Education Scotland the Council. Education Scotland will also be sent, by 13 January 2025, a copy of any written representations that are received by the Council from any person during the consultation period. Education Scotland will also receive the summary note of the public meeting that will be held and so far as is practicable a copy of any other relevant documentation. Education Scotland will then prepare a report on the educational aspects of the proposal not later than 31 January 2025. In preparing their report, Education Scotland may visit the affected schools and make such enquiries of people there as they consider appropriate.

Review of Consultation Exercise

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

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

At the present time the Council intends to publish its Report in March 2025, prior to submission to the Education Committee in May 2025. However, this timescale may change depending on the nature of issues raised during consultation, and the need to give full consideration to those issues. In the latter event, the Report may not be submitted until a later Committee meeting.

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

As the proposal involves the closure of a school, Highland Council would be required to notify Scottish Ministers of its decision and provide them with a copy of the Proposal Paper and Consultation Report. The Scottish Ministers would have an eight-week period from the date of that final decision to decide if they will call-in the proposal. Within the first three weeks of that eight-week period, the Scottish Ministers will take account of any relevant representations made to them by any person.

Note on Corrections

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

DETAILS OF THE PROPOSAL

Legislative Background

- 1.1 The proposal is advanced within the context of all applicable legislation. Amongst other duties, education authorities are required to secure adequate and efficient provision of school education (S.1 of the Education Act 1980); and to endeavour to secure improvement in the quality of school education in schools that are managed by them (S.3 of The Standards in Scotland's Schools Act 2000).
- 1.2 Neither of the affected schools are rural schools within the terms of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010. St. Columba's RC Primary School is a denominational school where education is conducted in the interest of the Roman Catholic Church. However, the pre-school nursery class is not operated under principles of denominational education.

Reasons for the Proposal

- 2.1 This proposal is being advanced for the following reasons:
 - Caol Primary School and St. Columba's RC Primary School share a single campus, but the latter school has suffered a declining roll, with particularly small numbers in the nursery. The nursery was mothballed during the 2023-24 school session, due to low numbers, and mothballing has continued into the current session, pending the outcome of the current consultation.
 - Consequently, no children have attended the nursery class at St. Columba's since the end of the 2022-23 school session.
 - The nursery class at Caol Primary has healthy numbers, with 32 enrolled for the 2024-25 session. This does however represent a fall in the nursery roll compared to 2023-24, when there were 53 children attending.
 - It is therefore the Council's view that a single nursery facility would be appropriate for the two schools and would offer educational benefits. The single facility could provide a high-quality educational facility for children attending, irrespective of which school parents chose for their children at the P1 stage.
 - Children attending the joint campus would have the opportunity to attend either school when they transfer to P1. This is the case anyway, but it will be made clear to all parents that the merged nursery is associated with both schools on the campus. Transition arrangements will be in place for children attending the nursery class, to each P1 class in the associated schools.
 - Although in legal terms the proposal represents a closure of both nurseries and the opening of a new merged one, in practical terms the service will continue from its current location, with the current staff.

Current Details – St. Columba's Roman Catholic Primary School

- 3.1 St. Columba's RC Primary School is a denominational school within the Caol Joint Campus, in the village of Caol, near Fort William. The Joint Campus, which opened in 2015, is shared with Caol Primary School. The building

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addresses, in terms of design and layout, the specific requirements for the appropriate identity and integration of the two faculties within the campus. The school shares some facilities with Caol Primary School –Reception Area, Kitchen and Dining facilities, Assembly Hall, Gymnasium, and external play areas.

- 3.2 St. Columba's RC Primary was formed from a merger of two previous schools, Lochyside RC Primary and Fort William RC Primary. At the time the new campus was designed, a separate nursery was agreed for the new RC school.
- 3.3 The current P1-7 roll of St. Columba's RC Primary School is 11 pupils.
- 3.4 The nursery accommodation at the school comprises a single room with an outdoor area. When last in operation the facility was registered to provide a care service to a maximum of 30 children aged three years to those not yet attending primary school. The room is currently being utilised by the school to provide Additional Support for Learning.

Current Details – Caol Primary School

- 4.1 Caol Primary School forms the other part of the Caol joint campus. The school's new accommodation, opened in 2015, replaced the previous buildings on the same site, which had been of mainly 1960s construction. The new complex includes extensive additional facilities including a community centre, STEM Room, Room 13 Art Studio and Highlife Highland Library on site.
- 4.2 The P1-7 Roll of the school is 216, whilst the nursery classrooms accommodate 32 children at present. The nursery accommodation at the school comprises two rooms with an outdoor area. The facility is registered to provide a care service to a maximum of 60 children aged three years to those not yet attending primary school.
- 4.3 Currently the staffing of the Caol PS nursery comprises:
 - Senior Early Years Practitioner – 35 hours per week
 - 2 Early Years Practitioners at 25 hours per week each
 - 6 Early Years Practitioners at 23 hours per week each

Informal Consultation

- 5.1 On 16 May, Council officials met with three parents who had expressed an interest in enrolling their children in the nursery class at St. Columba's, for session 2024-25. The local parish priest also attended the meeting.
- 5.2 The parents were generally opposed to the nursery class being mothballed or closed. The parents had a commitment to education with a Catholic ethos. They acknowledged that the pre-school stage was non-denominational but were concerned at the potential lack of "follow-through" from the nursery into St. Columba's, as opposed to Caol Primary. Parents also felt the smaller setting would suit their own children better. The parish priest was concerned

about the low roll in the school, and that if the school lose the nursery, the school itself may end up closing. That would be a matter of deep concern to the RC Church.

Educational Benefits

- 6.1 The Council believes that the larger numbers of children available at a merged nursery facility for the two schools, would be of benefit. The level to which pupils are able to become skilled in social interaction will depend to an extent on the opportunities afforded to them. The forging of close friendships and the development of self-esteem is enhanced by each pupil being enabled to be part of an age-appropriate peer group of a sufficient size to allow a range of interactions and relationships to form and reform.
- 6.2 The merger would have a minimal effect on the children at the Caol Primary nursery, given that facility tends to have a healthy roll anyway. The effect would be more beneficial to the small number of children who might previously have attended the nursery class at St. Columba's.
- 6.3 The principle of equality of treatment between the two schools will be a vital part of the operation of the new nursery. At present, the mothballing of the nursery class at St. Columba's means that children all attend Caol Nursery class, where there is an expectation that children will transfer to Caol Primary for P1. The proposal, if implemented, will result in a single pre-school setting for the two schools, that takes into account the priorities of both schools and works to achieve a shared vision for the ELC provision. The management of both schools will play an equal role in transition events, and the staff of the nursery itself will highlight to parents that children may be enrolled in either Caol Primary or St. Columba's RC Primary. It is to be hoped that this model will lead to an increase in the school roll at St. Columba's RC PS, compared with the current scenario of the school nursery being mothballed.
- 6.4 The Council is mindful that St Columba's Primary School is denominational and makes provision for Roman Catholic education. There will be no effect on the provision of denominational education in the Primary School. The nursery itself is non-denominational and as such is open to anyone in the community. Concerns expressed by the Roman Catholic Church are addressed at paragraph 12.3 below.
- 6.5 Discussions on the name for the new merged nursery would take place with Stakeholders, should be proposal be approved.

Effects on Staff and School Management Arrangements

- 7.1 As the nursery class at St. Columba's is already "mothballed" there will be no impact on school management arrangements from a formal closure of the facility.
- 7.2 Likewise, there will be no impact on current staffing arrangements. The current early years staff at the Caol Primary nursery class will continue in their current job roles.

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- 7.3 The current staffing at the Caol Primary nursery class is set out at paragraph 4.3 above. If anything, a formal merger of the two nurseries protects the current levels at Caol, since splitting the children between two facilities would mean less children in each.

Effects from differing Transport Arrangements

- 8.1 Highland Council does not provide transport for pre-school children, but in any case, there are no effects on transport, as the two nurseries are located on a shared site.

Effect on the Local Community and Other Users of the Facilities

- 9.1 Sections 3 and 4 above describes how the joint campus contains extensive community facilities. The merger of the two nursery classes will not have any impact on the wider community or on users of the community facilities.

Financial Consequences

- 10.1 The Table at **Appendix B** sets out the Highland Council's assessment of the Financial Implications of the proposed merger. As the nursery class at St. Columba's is currently mothballed, the savings identified are already being made and no additional saving would arise to the Council from closure.

Impact Assessments

- 11.1 The proposal has been assessed as having no impact on the following Equality areas:
- Disability
 - Gender
 - Gender reassignment
 - Pregnancy or Maternity
 - Marriage/Civil Partnership
 - Race
 - Religion or Belief
 - Sexual Orientation
 - Looked After Children
 - Young Carers
 - Children and Young People Living in Deprivation
- 11.2 In respect of age equality, the proposal relates to the pre-school stages of a primary school and as such primarily affects children in the 3-4 age group, and their parents. The proposal is advanced on the basis of educational benefit to the children in the area concerned. No negative age-related effects arise. Age is not a protected characteristic for the purposes of school provision.
- 11.3 The proposal has been assessed against the Children's Rights and Wellbeing Guidance and the Rights of Children as set out by the UNCRC. The proposal

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does not conflict with the rights of children. Item 12 on the UNCRC list, *“When important decisions are being made that affect you, you have the right to give your opinion and to be taken seriously”* will be met through discussion with the children during the consultation exercise.

- 11.4 The proposal will have no impact on any of the criteria identified as potentially affecting climate change.
- 11.5 Any personal information received during consultation will be handled in accordance with Data Protection rules. All those who respond to consultation are advised that their response will be public, unless they request otherwise.

Mitigation of Adverse Effects

- 12.1 As the nursery class at St. Coumba’s is already mothballed, the children who might have attended the facility are already attending the nursery at Caol Primary, or alternative provision in the local area, and will not experience any change from the proposal.
- 12.2 During informal discussions with parents and the Roman Catholic Church, the main concern identified with the proposal was that the merger would lead to children transferring only to Caol Primary School for P1 and not to St. Columba’s, something which was perceived as posing a threat to the future of the latter school.
- 12.3 The Council will address this concern by applying the principle of equal treatment between the two schools, set out at paragraph 6.3 above. It is entirely possible that the future school roll at St. Columba’s may be boosted as a result.

Recommendation

- 13.1 Taking the above into account Highland Council recommends that the nursery classes at Caol Primary School and St. Columba’s Roman Catholic Primary School are closed, to be replaced with a single pre-school facility serving both schools.
- 13.2 This proposal paper is issued in terms of the authority’s procedures to meet the relevant statutory requirements. Following the consultation period, a report and submissions received will be presented to the Education Committee of the Highland Council.

END OF PROPOSAL PAPER