

SUBMISSION IN RELATION TO THE PROPOSAL TO DISCONTINUE EDUCATION PROVISION AT BADCAUL PRIMARY SCHOOL, REASSIGNING ITS CATCHMENT AREA TO THAT OF ULLAPOOL PRIMARY SCHOOL

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SUMMARY

The temporary closure of the school is already having a negative impact on the local community. In my view this proposal is premature and no full risk assessment has been undertaken of the impacts. There are good prospects for the development of housing and employment in the catchment area- unlike Ullapool, which could benefit Ullapool High School, albeit in a modest way. **Extension of the mothballing seems prudent and would provide flexibility for the future and community resilience.**

Process

The public meeting on 10th September was conducted in a transparent way and the Highland Council (HC) staff and HC member enabled a frank and open discussion. However, it is of some concern to me that this meeting was organised somewhat late in the official process. I know that Hall was booked in some secrecy many weeks before. I appreciate Loch Broom Community Council had been briefed at an earlier stage, but their focus is Ullapool in my experience (as an ex Member). However it was reassuring that the meeting was well-attended by a range of local people and interests, with experience of other school mothballing, local conditions and school and transport issues. Many of the points I make below I picked up from others at the meeting though I have amplified these in some cases.

Current and medium term situation

It was somewhat of a shock when the school was shut in January 2022, but obviously when there are no children, there was no alternative. However, now there are three potential nursery age children in the catchment area. Two more primary age children are currently being home-schooled. The Dundonnell estate has made housing land available and this is being progressed by the Rural and Islands Housing Fund. Sadly lack of finance is slowing this proposal down but a positive move on the extension of mothballing could mean, houses for young families (and single young people) could be planned and built rather than sheltered housing- residents of which will need care workers etc. Also the increasing tourist stock of former homes and new pods is running into constraints due to a lack of staff for cleaning and catering. Badcaul is at the centre of a strategic network of roads, down to Gairloch, Inverness and Ullapool and beyond. Its not at the end of a single track road. The NC 500 runs straight through. Dundonnell is rich in resources. Currently MOWI are building a fish hatchery, to extend their fish farming activities with I understand 16 jobs to be created. There is prawn and lobster fishing in the loch, oyster farming being developed and mussel growing being explored. The situation can change very quickly.

Risk Assessment

The Educational Benefits statement is of course focussed on the education dimensions and not the implications for the local community. The school was the centre for a range of activities including fund raising soup lunches and its loss is felt keenly. However Highland Council and the Scottish Government have a broader remit which hopefully they will bring to bear on their assessment.

But there are some issues regarding educational benefits which were picked up at the meeting, particularly on transport. The report is misleading in using Google maps driving times to Ullapool (see para 11.3) of 41 minutes. This ignores delays in summer due to the ever congested NC 500 on A 832 and A 835, and in winter with ice and snow on the high Fain stretch in particular. Moreover currently pupils have to change buses at Braemore junction, which for young children and special needs pupils is not great to say the least. Additionally, it cannot be assumed there will be willing school bus drivers in the medium term.

The assessment does not consider the adverse effect on Scoraig school which used to work closely with Badcaul school, enabling some working in an age-appropriate peer group. (Our household helped with joint environmental education with the schools). Apparently now Scoraig pupils have to get to Ullapool which is much more difficult . (Boat trip and extended road transport). When Badcaul school was open, many opportunities on music and sport were made available to pupils.

Other aspects.

It is noted in the report that the school buildings are in good condition so obviously an extended mothballing will not be very costly. Also they currently provide an IT link to Scoraig and Achiltibuie schools. It is expected this will not be necessary in 2025, however if you are waiting for BT provision via the R100 scheme, please note we have been waiting 8 years already for this.

Much is made of the very remote rural schools classification, as if that is a negative designation. We have been living here for 12 years, when Badcaul school was functioning. We knew the children who went there, in this time and have been very impressed by their independent outlooks and very varied career outcomes. Also some would like to return, for their future lives. (Sadly our direct contributions have been support to school events and functions, not pupils.)

Mothballing does have a negative impact -families have withdrawn from house purchases due to the lack of a school. Also when hopefully the mothballing will be extended it will be vital to make this as a positive statement about future life in the Dundonnell . On mothballing in January 2022 the HC published a rather negative report in the Ullapool News, our local newspaper about school closure as if it only had a very rich history and that closure was definitely permanent.

It is very unlikely that the school building would have a future community use, if shut. We already have one church building which is likely to be sold, currently used as a community room (where the school meeting was held).

Note: A subsequent addition was made to the above, on 2 December 2024, after the close of consultation – copy below

Dear Mr Jackson

Following our earlier interactions re Badcaul School, (see below), I am enclosing a recent photo of the development of the Fish farm at Ardessie, Dundonnell.

This is a multi million development about a mile from Badcaul school which is to serve other MOWI establishments and presumably generate revenue for Highland Council and the Scottish Government. The employment requirements are estimated to be considerable. So it can underpin the Dundonnell community and its school with planned associated housing development .

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