

25th August 2023

I write in reply to the invite to respond to comments made within the Consultation Report regarding Highland Council's proposal to discontinue the provision of education at Torridon Primary School which is to be considered by members at the Education Committee scheduled to be held on 7th September 2023.

Background

I write as a registered teacher living in Wester Ross with over thirty years experience working within Highland Council, twenty of those as Head Teacher of Torridon Primary until the school was mothballed. Sadly in the run up to the mothballing I was to see a very sad side to Highland Council, prompted by the actions of a number of education officials and staff. Between 2005 and 2010 as a small schools representative, I was to witness an increasing number of Highland Head teachers put under undue pressure as attempts were made to merge or eliminate small schools. Within the Gairloch cluster alone the number of primary head teachers has already been reduced from seven to three now. The extent of the poor treatment of staff has largely been kept from elected members as when these were queried by Councilors at Committee meetings, questions would be averted under the banner of employment issues and reassurances given, education officials knowing that only days previously staff had been pressurised into accepting deals and signing non disclosure forms.

In his submission (Appendix 3iii) Dr Niall MacKinnon referred to a chance meeting in 2009 in Lochcarron where we were to discover we had undergone similar pressures from the same education staff over a number of years as have other teaching senior staff I have met. Plockton Primary no longer having a dedicated Headteacher but now combined under the management of the Head Teacher at High School.

In my own case relating to Torridon, staff, pupils and parents were put under undue pressure for an extended amount of time as attempts were made to undermine the reputation of Torridon School and force its closure. On highlighting my concerns to senior officials in Highland Council I was told to keep quiet about what was going on and in return I could work in neighbouring Shieldaig and Applecross schools, receiving my enhanced salary till 60 but only if I pretended it was my idea and went quietly without a fuss. If not I would be suspended without reason, any warning or form of investigation. This was carried out by two acting officials, on the first day of term, a situation that was to continue until mothballing was completed in 2012.

This prompted a family who had already shown their support to Torridon enrolling their children for preschool nursery education in Spring 2010 to switch to Shieldaig instead after school started in August.

At the time I was unable to speak out but I consider it important that elected members know what has been going on. As stated in my previous response no correct procedures were then followed and to this day a legitimate formal grievance made in March 2016 regarding my subsequent employment with Highland Council remains hidden and covered up by Senior Officials instead of being put to Councillors.

Mothballing attempt, June 2019

In June 2010, reference is made to John Ritchie and Ian Jackson's visit to Torridon to interview staff and parents as 'Exploratory Talks' on mothballing the school. The talks were anything but exploratory, as staff were told they would be out of jobs within weeks and the school mothballed. Although parents backed the Head teacher and teaching staff, showing confidence in the school leadership the day proved extremely distressing for all concerned, I as Head Teacher recording events in a paper, 'A Day of Tears.' It was only the following Monday that Director Hugh Fraser sent a 2 line e mail stating that after consideration Torridon School would not be mothballed after all.

When noting that six jobs were lost within the community due to the eventual closure, the response is that some of these were 'only part time.' This highlights the failure of Education Officials to recognise just how important such jobs are in small communities. It also reflects the issue in June 2010 when the day prior to meeting with staff to tell them they would be out of work, Ian Jackson was phoning to ask for names and contacts as so little research had been done, he and then Area Manager John Ritchie had been unaware that the school employed a Cook or Cleaner. Although part time these were long term, operating five days a week.

Use of Building from 2012 on

The building could have been used productively helping keep it in good order with the option of it retuning to be a school in future if needed. Other schools have done this and continue to do so without formal closure. In 'A Tale of Two Schools', the community in Inverasdale were able to make successful use of the building for 3 years prior to closure being considered. It was mothballed in 2012 at the same time as Torridon, in 2013 an exhibition commemorating the history of the school over a Century being held whilst all requests in Torridon were denied.

Highland Council has a history of neglecting its property and in Torridon this has proved to be deliberate. Have any Councillors been out to see the way things have been left ? Despite 20 solar panels connected on the Schoolhouse roof no attempt has been made to ventilate or clear the plaster and water from a collapsed ceiling now in over two years. Property staff Gavin Alday and Jenny Macrae have witnessed the damage and the continuing spread of damp throughout the schoolhouse . At the very least the carpets should be lifted and plaster cleared to prevent further deterioration to the wooden floorboards.

Finance figures show how little has been spent and the failure to keep promises to keep Torridon wind and watertight. In contrast without adequate assessment of the condition of the building at Shieldaig, costs there were to spiral from an initial estimate of £150,000 to £1.5 million to create nursery accommodation in the Schoolhouse.

In response to the view

"If neither of the first two options are taken up, then the Council would dispose of the building on the open market, to realise a receipt for the Council taxpayer. "

Duncan Darroch Deeds

Highland Council have a copy of the old deeds signed by Landowner Duncan Darroch in 1910. which I transcribed myself in 2019 to ensure they were more easily read. Have Councillors been given a copy to read before making any decision ? In them it is a clear provision that he stipulates the Torridon School building should not be sold but be used for educational purposes and teacher housing.

Community use of the building for educational purposes would fulfil this wish but not sale of the property.

It should also be noted that Highland Council refused to sell the Old School building in Diabaig, instead leasing it out , now being run as an award winning café/restaurant by a couple who reside full time in the village.

Placements between local schools.

Socially Torridon and Shieldaig have always maintained good close social links, often meeting together for a range of activities. Children from Shieldaig attended Torridon Nursery class two days a week when preschool education first started in the 1990s. Although we felt very let down when a family decided to move their children to Kinlochewe without any prior warning and following a visit by John Ritchie in 2008, the number of placements to Torridon from both Shieldaig and Kinlochewe exceeded with seven requests.

No option but to travel

Since mothballing in 2012 , throughout the last decade parents were offered no opportunity to place their children in Torridon despite four new families moving into the area. Two other families also expressed interest in living permanently and placing their children in Torridon if it was to reopen. Families had no option but to travel, the majority at their own expense. Those choosing to travel to Kinlochewe were told they would only be given travel expenses if they were to switch to Shieldaig instead.

It is clear that enhanced transport between the communities is much needed. This also applies to older pupils who have difficulty reaching Gairloch High School over 30 miles away for out of hours activities.

As any local will vouch, travel time from Diabaig to Shieldaig far exceeds the 36 minutes Highland Council have now quoted after looking up Google. In Winter this would more than double , especially with stopping time to pick up and drop children off. Far from being frost free the road past Alligin is notoriously poor . Villagers in Diabaig and Wester Alligin have on a number of occasions found themselves trapped by snow and ice, some even resorting to walking 8 miles in to Torridon or digging themselves out when let down by Highland Council's own winter maintenance procedures. Torridon School had a later morning start of 9.30am to allow for this whereas pupils now need to be in Shieldaig for a 9am start meaning an earlier start.

100% Attainment

From 2005 -2012 pupils in Torridon Primary had 100% in Attainment results with plenty individual one to one time with staff. The introduction of Curriculum for Excellence worked well with the manner in which small schools such as Torridon operated, pupil age groups mixing well to work together so I am pleased to read the following statement from Education Scotland.

“ However, in its proposal the council has stated that the size of the school provides significant impediments to the successful implementation of Curriculum for Excellence. HM Inspectors do not support the view that a small school roll is, in itself, a significant impediment to the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence.”

Although the majority of the current Community Council, families and children have moved into the area since mothballing and did not have links with Torridon School when in operation prior to 2012, previous Community Councillors worked hard to hold Highland Council accountable for actions taken over the years.

A bank of evidence was compiled as the Community struggled to understand what was happening and Highland Council's actions without any accountability. It is good to see more interest and alternative ideas being suggested to help ensure the community has a chance to be sustainable.

Touching to read the responses from the younger generation who still have hope in their hearts.

“In this exercise, a majority of children from the Torridon area felt the school should be re-opened. They think more families might move to the area if the school were open. If the school is closed they would like the site changed into a facility they can use for after school activities.”

All too often the decision to proceed to formal closure is taken at Committee , rubber stamped in a matter of moments without any real discussion relating to the consequences for all involved. Please take time to consider all aspects as the story of Torridon continues into a new chapter.

Anne C. Macrae