

Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by The Highland Council to discontinue education provision at Torridon Primary School and Nursery.

May 2023

1. Introduction

1.1 This report from Education Scotland has been prepared by His Majesty's Inspectors of Education (HM Inspectors) in accordance with the terms of the [Schools \(Consultation\) \(Scotland\) Act 2010](#) ("the 2010 Act"). The purpose of the report is to provide an independent and impartial consideration of The Highland Council's proposal to discontinue education provision at Torridon Primary School and Nursery. Section 2 of the report sets out brief details of the consultation process. Section 3 of the report sets out HM Inspectors' consideration of the educational aspects of the proposal, including significant views expressed by consultees. Section 4 summarises HM Inspectors' overall view of the proposal. Upon receipt of this report, the Act requires the council to consider it and then prepare its final consultation report. The council's final consultation report should include this report and must contain an explanation of how, in finalising the proposal, it has reviewed the initial proposal, including a summary of points raised during the consultation process and the council's response to them. The council has to publish its final consultation report three weeks before it takes its final decision. Where a council is proposing to close a school, it needs to follow all statutory obligations set out in the 2010 Act, including notifying Ministers within six working days of making its final decision and explaining to consultees the opportunity they have to make representations to Ministers and the special provisions that apply to proposals to close a rural school.

1.2 HM Inspectors considered:

- the likely effects of the proposal for children of the school; any other users; children likely to become pupils within two years of the date of publication of the proposal paper; other children and young people in the council area; and in the community;
- any other likely effects of the proposal;
- how the council intends to minimise or avoid any adverse effects that may arise from the proposal; and
- the educational benefits the council believes will result from implementation of the proposal, and the council's reasons for coming to these beliefs.

1.3 In preparing this report, HM Inspectors undertook the following activities:

- consideration of all relevant documentation provided by the council in relation to the proposal, specifically the educational benefits statement and related consultation documents, written and oral submissions from parents and others; and
- visits to the sites of Shildaig Primary School, Gairloch High School and Torridon Community Centre including discussion with relevant consultees.

1.4 As the proposal will lead to the closure of a rural school, HM Inspectors also took account of the council's consideration of any reasonable alternatives to closure of Torridon Primary School and Nursery, the likely effect on the local community and the likely effect of any different travelling arrangements of the proposed closure.

2. Consultation process

2.1 The Highland Council undertook the consultation on its proposal(s) with reference to the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010.

2.2 Torridon Primary School is a remote, rural school. The council mothballed Torridon Primary School and Nursery in 2012. The school has remained mothballed since that time. The Highland

Council's school roll predication shows there are five children of primary school age and one pre-school child in the catchment this year. Children from the area currently attend Shieldaig Primary School which is seven miles from Torridon Primary School. From 2019, The Highland Council have engaged with local residents and community organisations about the potential closure of the school. In November 2022, The Highland Council contacted parents in the area to say they were considering a formal closure consultation and invited comments.

2.3 The statutory consultation for the closure of Torridon Primary School ran from 27 February to 21 April 2023. Copies of the proposal were made available to stakeholders including parents of all pupils attending Shieldaig Primary School and community organisations in the area. A public meeting was held on 28 March 2023, which was attended by 20 members of the public. Four responses were received by the council from individuals and organisations in the area. Several stakeholders expressed concerns about aspects of the original decision and process to mothball the school and how well the council has maintained the site since 2012. Stakeholders expressed concerns about whether closing the school would make the area less desirable for families to move into, although stakeholders also noted that a lack of affordable housing and good employment opportunities are also a barrier. Pupils at Shieldaig Primary School took part in a consultation exercise. 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.

3. Educational aspects of proposal

3.1 HM Inspectors consider that the council has set out a reasonable case for the permanent closure of Torridon Primary School. The council has outlined a range of educational benefits to the closure. Children from the Torridon area currently attend Shieldaig Primary School where they are experiencing opportunities to play and work with their peers from the wider area. Shieldaig Primary School and Nursery was recently refurbished and provides a pleasant learning environment. A few stakeholders expressed some concerns about the arrangements for dining, the lack of parking and levels of traffic on the road beside the school. However, the school grounds are secure and in addition to the play area children have access to a community all weather pitch just beside the school. Shieldaig Primary School has a more consistent roll than Torridon Primary School could offer if it were to re-open. HM Inspectors agree that children from the Torridon area are benefiting from learning alongside the peers from the Shieldaig area. 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 the a small school roll is, in itself, a significant impediment to the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence.

3.2 Stakeholders who met with HM Inspectors understand the challenges the council faces in providing education in remote rural areas. Overall, almost all accept the proposal to move from Torridon Primary School being mothballed to permanently closed. Children from the Torridon school catchment area who met with HM Inspectors had mixed views about the proposal. They liked the idea of Torridon Primary School re-opening but did feel that if that were to happen they would miss their friends who attend Shieldaig Primary School. They are settled in Shieldaig Primary School and spoke positively about their teachers.

3.3 Stakeholders who met with HM Inspectors spoke about the need for the council to work with the community to establish wider plans for services across the area. They have concerns about the pattern of school provision in the area of which this proposal to permanently close Torridon Primary School and Nursery is a part. Torridon Primary School is located between Shieldaig Primary School, where the children from the area now go to school, and Kinlochewe Primary

School. Kinlochewe Primary School was mothballed in summer 2022. Several stakeholders expressed the view that on paper the Torrison school building and location look like the best option if only one of the three are to remain open. However, they understand that, at least for now, most of the children across this wider area live in the Shieldaig catchment area. The proposal paper states that the Torrison site has capacity for 25 children, less than the projected roll at Shieldaig Primary School in coming years. A few stakeholders are concerned about the lack of early learning and childcare in the Torrison and Kinlochewe areas. Stakeholders want to engage further with the council to look at children's access to educational opportunities and the provision of early learning and childcare across the wider Shieldaig, Torrison and Kinlochewe areas.

3.4 As the proposal will lead to the closure of a rural school, HM Inspectors also considered the factors to which the council should give special regard. Children and young people from the Torrison catchment area who met with HM Inspectors expressed frustration about how a lack of transport limits their opportunities to take part in out of school activities. They also spoke about occasionally having very challenging journeys to school, especially in the winter. However, they see this as an issue that the re-opening of Torrison Primary School would not fully resolve. A small number of children that attend Shieldaig Primary School from the Torrison and Kinlochewe catchment areas can face journeys to school of over 30 minutes especially in poor weather. The council state that should Torrison Primary School re-open only one of the five children in the area would be entitled to school transport as opposed to all five in the area who currently receive transport. They would all have shorter school journeys. However, it is likely that use of energy in re-opening and running the school would offset the environment benefits from these shorter journeys.

3.5 The council has engaged with the community in regard to this proposal and alternatives to closure. The site has been unused for years and community representatives now want the situation resolved. Community organisations want to ensure that the building and surrounding land is used for community benefit and not sold for commercial use. Torrison and Kinlochewe Community Council (TKCC) are being pro-active in considering how the site of Torrison Primary School and Nursery could best be used if this proposal is agreed. Torrison has an existing community centre which provides a range of services including a cafe. TKCC are exploring whether the school site could be used, at least in part, to provide educational opportunities to build on what is offered at the community centre. They would welcome working with the council and local schools to explore this further.

4. Summary

HM Inspectors consider that the council has made a clear and reasonable case for the permanent closure of Torrison Primary School and Nursery. Children from the area are settled in Shieldaig Primary School and Nursery. They enjoy learning alongside peers from the wider area. Stakeholders now largely accept the closure of the school. However, they want to work with the council to explore how best the provision of early learning and childcare, and school provision across the wider area, can be sustained and developed. Children from the Torrison catchment area would like more support to engage in out of school learning and social opportunities. This includes having more opportunities in the Torrison area and better transport to enable them to participate in activities in Shieldaig and Gairloch. Community organisations are taking a pro-active approach to considering how the building could be used for community benefit. If this proposal is

agreed it will be important that the council work with community members, including children and young people, in regard to the future use of the site. The council should do this in a timely manner to avoid the condition of the building deteriorating further from not being used.

HM Inspectors
May 2023