

SAVE OUR RURAL SCHOOLS BRIEFING NOTES

We are collectively writing on behalf of four small, rural high schools in the north west coast of the Scottish Highlands to express our increasing concerns about the disproportionate impacts that the staffing formula and cuts to school budgets are having on our staff and pupils.

As the numbers of young people decline, school roles fall, reduced staffing based on lower pupil numbers results in impoverished educational provision, more pupils leave school at age sixteen, families migrate to areas with better provision, and new families do not inwardly migrate. This negative spiral of numbers and provision needs to be addressed.

We need the Scottish Government and Highland Council to act now to save our rural schools. We urgently need:

- Exemption from the staffing formula for our small schools, and funding to increase staffing capacity in order to provide a **guaranteed core curriculum** for all pupils.
- **Funding based on individual need** for all pupils who require additional learning support.
- **Permanent teaching positions** and stability of teaching provision for our staff and pupils.
- **More attractive ‘relocation’ packages and affordable accommodation** for teachers considering a move to the rural Highlands and incentives for supply teachers.
- **Investment in quality, reliable distance learning courses and support staff** to offer a wider subject choice and enable pupils to study their chosen subjects.

Based on the experiences to date, we urge Scottish Government and Highland Council to consider that any provision of virtual learning needs to be:

- Fully thought through, designed and planned before implementation
- Online only classes - not hybrid. While full courses could include a mixture of in person and online teaching, each individual class taught must be dedicated as solely online or in-person (not hybrid)
- Supported by in person teaching staff in the school
- Supported by consistent, high quality online teaching resources and learning tools - an online ‘learning portal’
- Workable with current timetabling constraints
- Not at the expense of time set aside by the school for valuable extracurricular activities

After years of writing letters, petitioning, and considerably requesting for the small school staffing formula to be addressed, without success, we are left with no choice but to start shouting very loudly.

We hope that raising awareness publically of the impossible situation of continued and progressive understaffing in our and other small rural schools, and how it is affecting not just pupils and staff but the wider community, will focus attention in the coming budget negotiations. It will take a relatively small investment to make a huge difference in maintaining the quality of education provision and improving the wellbeing of staff and pupils.

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Kinlochbervie High School Parent Council - Briefing Note

Background and School roll

Kinlochbervie High School provides a full 6 year secondary experience and is attended by **28 pupils** from a catchment area that extends from Hope to Kylesku. Before the school opened in 1995, pupils attended Golspie High School as weekly boarders. In 2000 the school reached its highest school roll of 100 pupils but this has been in continuous decline as a result of depopulation.

Kinlochbervie High School is part of the 3-18 Associated Schools Group which also includes the 3 feeder primary schools and ELC's of Durness, Kinlochbervie and Scourie. A single Parent Council has been established to represent the 3-18 ASG. Highland Council announced plans to review the 3-18 campus model which may take up to 18 months to complete. This has added uncertainty around the future management and staffing of our school campus.

Staffing Allocation

Our current High School staffing allocation for the 2023/24 academic year is **9.2FTE**.

This includes a 1.62FTE increase following a campaign by the parent council to increase staffing allocation. The current Highland Council formula gave an allocation of 7.58FTE, which the head teacher advised was not sufficient to provide the core curriculum to pupils. Without exemption or modification of the existing staffing formula, our falling school roll will result in proportional decreases in staffing, causing further reduction of subject choice.

Subject Choice and Timetable Constraints

The availability of staff is the driver for deciding the entire curriculum. Our curriculum breadth and depth has been eroded over the last few years due to staff cuts. Many teachers have part time contracts or teach 2 or more subjects to create a full time post, but both can restrict the levels on offer to pupils. For example, a teacher offering 2 subjects can't offer Nat 4, 5 and higher in both subjects due to timetabling constraints. Part time teachers are often covering all classes over 2 days which means triple periods in one day for pupils to meet their required time. Nat5 and Higher pupils are often in composite classes which is unfair to both teachers and pupils where course content differs.

Our school is currently unable to offer many potential subjects due to staff numbers and timetable constraints. For example, computing, accounting, drama, modern studies and home economics are not available at any level. Spanish is the only modern language on offer at senior level.

Due to additional planning and teaching time, our staff have reduced capacity to offer extracurricular activities. These activities can provide additional skills and qualifications for our pupils which is an attractive quality to employers and Colleges/Universities. Pupils who participate in extracurricular activities are proven to raise attainment, build social skills, improve mental health and have more positive educational experiences.

Restrictions on subject choice and lack of extracurricular activities has been the deciding factor for some of our children to enrol in other schools out with the catchment area. This has the added pressure of increased travel times for pupils and transport costs for families. One child leaving a small school has a detrimental impact on the other pupils and the wider school community.

Virtual Learning

Our school currently offers limited virtual learning options as there is a lack of support staff within the school. Pupils are not equipped to apply the skills needed for successful learning outcomes. Parents and pupils feel virtual learning is not a suitable substitute for in person teaching due to the limited interaction with instructors.

Staffing Recruitment and Retainment

Staff are often given temporary, one year contracts which prevents job stability and they are likely to consider our school as a temporary stepping stone in their career. They will be the only teacher in that department covering all year groups, responsible for all planning and teaching, which is very demanding. They have no colleagues to cross mark and provide support with course preparation.

Attracting staff to rural schools has further challenges due to the lack of local services, particularly housing provision. Staff have withdrawn from posts due to being unable to access suitable accommodation. Previously, our teachers tolerated living in touring caravans outside of school after an exhaustive but unsuccessful search for accommodation. Some of our part time staff travel from as far as the central belt and stay in local bed and breakfasts which cause additional travel and accommodation costs.

A thriving school is the heart of a community and attracts teachers, families and businesses to the local area. Our community is losing many of our vital services such as childcare and health services which is driving families away to larger villages and towns.

Additional Support Needs

Allocation for ASN staff is no longer needs based and means our school is subject to a further formula that disadvantages small schools. ASN allocation has been reduced despite a significant increase in need across our primary and secondary schools. Our current 3-18 ASG allows ASN and support staff to work between each setting, covering support needs, often at short notice. If the Highland Council review were to change this structure there would be less flexibility to share staff between schools.

Gairloch High School Parent Council - Briefing Note

Background and School roll

89 school role

14.65 staffing provision

Our school is anticipating a reduction to between 70-80 pupils over the next few years. With the current staffing formula allocation, this would mean a further reduction of 5.6 full time equivalent (FTE) staff. It is entirely unsustainable for the school, which is already at breaking point in terms of providing a basic curriculum and qualification opportunities for our children and young people, to consider further reductions in staffing provision.

Current curriculum deficit resulting from 'not fit for purpose' staffing formula:

Part-time staff are currently having to put in full time effort to keep the show on the road, feeling aggrieved and concerned over their workload and value of their subjects. If the situation continues there is a real concern that some staff may consider moving away which would lead to massive risk of gaps in delivery, lack of available and/or quality replacements.

Our school is relying on increasing numbers of part time staff to creatively manage the staffing formula whilst attempting to maintain the curriculum. This will inevitably lead to recruitment issues in the future when these teachers move on. Incoming staff are less likely to come for part-time work. It is down to luck that the school has so far managed to offer subjects through supply such as Art, English and Biology because there were already teachers in the area. This is not a system that our school can rely on for the provision of consistent, quality education.

Due to the shortfall in staff time we are losing subjects:

- Modern Studies and History - disappeared at Higher/Nat 5 at the same time several years ago. For two years, Modern Studies was taught via online provision, the second year of which was a disaster. When it was last delivered it was virtually and there was no staff support provided for pupils enrolled in the course.
- Biology - gaps in delivery due to limited supply/capacity
- English - 0.8 FTE
- French is the only modern language on offer.

There is also some uncertainty about Hospitality being withdrawn next session. Currently, all three Broad General Education (BGE) classes attend Hospitality, and currently another nine Senior Phase pupils. Hospitality provides key employment opportunities for our young people, providing essential life skills and experience. It is an essential element of our current curriculum.

Limited capacity timetable

Some staff are delivering multiple subjects at multiple levels in the same class to try and maximise opportunities for young people.

Staff are already working to full capacity resulting in low flexibility in the timetable. Even when courses are available, some pupils have a limited choice of subject combinations based on the nature of delivery, staff availability etc. This is having a knock-on effect on student attainment.

The concern going forward is that if these issues are not addressed now, this will inevitably result in a greater number of pupils being limited in their options, imposing potentially unnecessary and worrying restrictions on their future career paths.

Reduced capacity for extracurricular activities

Extracurricular activities, which should be more possible within smaller schools, are limited as there are not enough staff to cover classes.

The provision of extracurricular activities, such as those that could lead to careers linked to the local environment e.g. forestry, agriculture, tourism, outdoor education etc. and could lead ultimately to the establishment of rural social enterprises and community-focussed businesses could be a key attraction for parents when considering a move to the Highlands.

It is lamentable that our school, with the projected reduction in staffing, will no longer be able to provide these valuable programmes and opportunities for our school pupils. There are concerns among the community that this ‘narrowing’ of opportunities is having real knock-on effects for our pupils in terms of accessing work beyond school. In addition, the limitations presented by lack of public transport in our area is a barrier to any extra-curricular activities the school can put on.

Lack of attractive teaching positions putting undue stress on current situation

Following the secondment of our Head Teacher (HT), the Deputy Head Teacher (DHT) is acting HT, leaving the DHT post vacant. There were no applicants in the first or second round of this role being advertised. The DHT post is temporarily filled by four teachers from the extended leadership team, each taking on a quarter share of the role. While this creative solution was essential at the time, given the critical situation the school faced, it came at a cost to the already under-pressure teaching hours provided by staff.

To cover the shortfall in teaching arising from this ‘creative solution’, approx. 0.8FTE has been put out to general supply across the week. This comes at an ever-increasing cost to the quality of our teaching provision within the school, not least because quality, in-person, supply teaching is proving very hard to find. Cover teachers are also often teaching subjects which are not their own specialist subject therefore they are more *supervising* classes rather than effectively teaching them.

This is an example of a required ‘creative solution’ that cannot become a default long-term solution. This example highlights the more general issues of the lack of affordable housing and accommodation in the area, the need for better coordination of supply teaching across,

rural schools, and the need for more attractive teaching opportunities for teachers considering relocation to the Highland areas.

Learning support staff:

It is clear that the current system is failing our pupils. Get It Right For Every Child is not being applied.

We have children with high dependency support needs. There is no special school provision available within travelling distance of our area. Currently our school has 1 x part-time Additional Support Needs (ASN) teacher, 3 x permanent full-time PSAs, 2 x permanent part-time PSAs. This year, school management used a Pupil Equity Fund to add hours to this and hire some extra resources. This was a one-off as funds were rolled over from last year. The school has been told this cannot happen again. As such, our school is at an increasing risk of being unable to meet the needs of pupils with ASN.

Staff are already working through breaks and lunch to support high dependency pupils. The knock-on effect this has on the other children with ASN in terms of 'just getting on with it' is heartbreaking for teacher, pupil and PSAs. Many pupils with ASN in our school are simply unable to access education support at their level.

Additionally there is a lack of flexibility for new pupils. If and when new pupils arrive throughout the academic year with ASN, the allocation does not necessarily increase accordingly therefore there is no extra support available resulting in either removal of support from current pupils or no support given to new pupils. Even when resources are allocated, this may take many months to recruit, leaving gaps in provision.

Current virtual course provision is failing our pupils:

The Highland Council's Virtual Academy and the School/College Partnership provided by University of Highlands and Islands was promised as a critical solution to address falling roles and reduced staffing. Our school changed its whole timetable to fit the Highland model and continues to think creatively and adapt where required to ensure access to this provision. However, the current quality and delivery of these virtual courses is failing, with pupils receiving inconsistent learning experiences and mixed attainment as a result.

Courses have been discontinued part way through term, leaving young people demoralised and despondent at a critical time. Pupils are left with no choice but to drop online subjects or accept a 'no grade' due to haphazard support and failures in remote teaching making it impossible for them to complete their online courses.

We have increasing concerns about the quality and consistency of virtual course provision, and ongoing concerns over tracking and monitoring, given the recent merger to form North West and Hebrides University of Highlands and Islands.

Ullapool High School Parent Council - Briefing Note

Background

Ullapool High School delivers six year comprehensive secondary education to pupils from as far afield as Drumbeg, Lochinver, Coigach and Dundonnell. The current school roll is 171 pupils with a FTE teaching staff of 22.47. The school roll is predicted to decline to around 120 in the next ten years with the commensurate decline in teaching staff numbers. The feeder primary schools all have declining rolls with Badcaul already mothballed and Scoraig predicted to go down to zero pupils within the next ten years. As recently as ten years ago Ullapool had a school roll of almost 250.

Subject Choice and Timetable Constraints

General budgetary issues make providing a full and diverse curriculum offer challenging.

It is generally understood that teacher numbers are having an effect on subject choice. The ability to offer a broad curriculum, which meets the needs of all of the young people, is restricted by the staffing allocation.

Pupils felt there was a reasonable choice of subjects when face to face, online and college options are considered as a whole. However, they made it clear that face to face teaching is by far the preferred option.

The pupils further said that they would be concerned with any reduction in the face-to-face teaching options. It was also clear that there were other subjects which the students would like to see including another language, possibly German, drama and engineering.

Limited resources related to the school roll means that seven subjects are being delivered as composite classes of either Higher and Advanced Higher or National 5 and Higher to ensure that the broadest possible curriculum choice can be maintained. Bi-level classes are required, in some subjects, in order to make them viable. The alternative is that some of these subjects may not run.

All the senior level pupils felt that mixed level classes were not beneficial to learning.

Teachers' time is inevitably split between different groups with the other levels studying alone when not engaged with the teacher. The pupils felt that the lessons effectively became like supported study sessions for the individual groups rather than anyone receiving full face to face lessons.

One pupil highlighted that Advanced Higher maths only has one double period per week and that whilst they understand the importance of independent study, they did not feel this was sufficient face to face time to cover that subject's syllabus.

The students appreciate that independent study has its place, particularly in preparation for further education. However, they felt strongly that it should not be used as a substitute for sufficient face to face lessons or supported study.

The parents highlighted many cases where their children have had to make difficult choices due to the limits on choice and timetable constraints. This has resulted in favourite subjects being dropped, excessive amounts of study periods in a single day or students deciding to leave school earlier than they might have.

The parents also pointed out that the subject choice had become narrower at an earlier stage resulting in final choices being made by younger students. They also agreed with the pupils' views on the drawbacks of mixed level classes.

Staffing and recruitment

It is generally difficult to attract, retain and replace teachers. Difficulty with accommodation for half teacher posts and in general is affecting recruitment.

There is very little flexibility in the timetable due to the small number of staff the school currently has. The number of subjects that are on offer simultaneously has to be kept to a minimum in order to fulfil legal requirements in terms of teacher/class non-contact time and to make classes viable.

Virtual Learning and College Courses

The students understand that online courses and college courses offer them a wider range of options.

Technical issues with internet connectivity both at school and particularly at home can interfere with the ability to engage with online learning e.g. connections dropping out, bandwidth not allowing screen functionality and therefore missing content.

The pupils also listed examples of tutors not turning up for online lessons with no explanation given. Other students arriving late for online lessons has resulted in delayed starts which significantly eat into the lesson time. Some lessons occur in the evenings which is not always ideal.

Like all schools UHS is also restricted by the working patterns of part time staff and by online HVA and college timetable. This is predetermined by Highland Council and the UHS column structure needs to fit around it. Further, information on courses and timetabling from colleges needs to be coordinated better so as to facilitate the school's ability to set up its own timetabling and available subject choices.

The pupils felt strongly that the level of interaction in online lessons is greatly reduced compared with face-to-face teaching.

Depending on location the early transport departure time from Ullapool can make it difficult or impossible for students to take up the UHI college option. College courses are always on Friday. This inevitably clashes with timetabling issues meaning pupils have to miss other timetabled lessons on Friday. Quality of learning at the courses is not always of a sufficiently challenging level leading to disinterest in content.

Extra curricular

The geographical spread of the catchment area provides constant challenges with school events and extra-curricular activities for pupils in more rural locations.

There is a reasonable choice of extra-curricular activities; this is inevitably reliant on ‘out of hours’ support from staff, parents and volunteers. Whilst people in the school community are generally happy to go the extra mile this should not be taken for granted and used as a way of not properly resourcing the children’s education.

Farr High School Parent Council - Briefing Note

Background and School roll

69 school role

12.8 staffing provision

The school is anticipating that pupil numbers will be maintained at around 70 pupils over the next few years. This will be very difficult for the school to sustain as it is already at breaking point in terms of providing a basic curriculum and qualification opportunities for the pupils.

Current curriculum deficit resulting from 'not fit for purpose' staffing formula:

The staff are hugely committed and many are dual qualified, in order to offer as wide a range of subjects as possible.

However, the school is unable to offer some subjects. Senior pupils can pick up some of these through studying at the UHI however the school cannot offer them to our pupils in S1-3.

The school can no longer afford a Gaelic teacher or a Technical teacher. This is a concern as so many of the pupils go on to take apprenticeships and historically, a number have followed a career in Gaelic. The school continues to explore alternative ways to offer these subjects and if the pupil numbers go up, the school will prioritise appointing a technical teacher.

The school's ability to offer SQA wider achievement awards is limited as most staff are at or almost at their full teaching capacity.

Limited capacity timetable

The way the timetable is structured is dictated in part by the fact the school has some part-time staff. It can be very challenging to attract applicants for all positions and particularly those which are offered part-time.

In general, pupils would not have more than 2 periods of any subject in a day other than on a Friday when the senior options are blocked against the college, so pupils receive 3 periods of their subject on this day.

Reduced capacity for extracurricular activities

Extra-curricular activities are offered twice a week. Clearly, however, the less staff that are available, the smaller the range that can be offered. The biggest issue is lack of transport afterwards, again in part due to having resources to run the transport.

Lack of attractive teaching positions putting undue stress on current situation

There is very little housing available within travelling distance of the school. This, along with a complete lack of childcare, is a barrier for people who might otherwise wish to apply for jobs in the school.

Learning support staff:

The school receives an allocation of support staff on a yearly basis, which is usually confirmed close to the end of the academic year. There are almost no relief staff available, meaning when a classroom assistant is off, there is nobody available to cover.

The school is trying to attract more people onto the relief list. The school has a number of pupils with high dependency support needs which makes this situation even more serious when the support staff are unavailable.

Current virtual course provision:

In general the college courses our students study virtually (e.g. psychology) work well, though this depends on the learning and teaching they receive from the teachers/tutors. The children gain a great deal from having this as an option.

SAVE OUR RURAL SCHOOLS: A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

With relatively little investment and a necessary change in policy, it is possible to save our rural schools, attract more families to our communities, provide qualifications and skills to our young people to encourage them into the workplace and to boost the local economy, helping to reduce rural depopulation.

We call on Highland Council and the Scottish Government to better resource our schools to:

- Provide a base-level curriculum in all our schools prioritising face-to-face teaching where possible and supported by properly resourced and strategically planned virtual course provision
- Provide capacity within our schools such that we can support each other in the provision of additional subjects
- Properly assess our school pupils for their additional needs and provide the support required to bolster their learning and their confidence
- To once again provide essential extracurricular activities for our school pupils to inspire them to continue to further education, to take up jobs or set up local social enterprises or community-focussed organisations
- Enable staff to dedicate time to support pupils who wish to broaden their education through virtual course provision
- Help us recruit new staff and supply teachers with attractive relocation packages and incentives

This Briefing Note was produced by:

Farr High School Parent Council, Gairloch High School Parent Council, Kinlochbervie High School Parent Council, Ullapool High School Parent Council

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