

Clerk to the Public Petitions Committee
The Scottish Parliament
EDINBURGH
EH99 1SP

Neil Kay,
93 Shore Road,
Innellan,
ARGYLL
PA23 7SP

17th February, 20001

Dear Mr Farrell,

I enclose a petition which I hope will be considered by the Public Petitions Committee.

We have endeavoured to frame the petition in ways that would be admissible to Parliament. We ask it to consider new guidelines for school closures in Scotland and ask it to advise (not instruct) councils on the issue of current school closures. We believe such actions to be within the powers of Parliament.

This is a new petition on framing national guidelines for school closures that follows on from decisions made by the Education, Culture and Sport Committee of Parliament last year. However, we also felt that the Public Petitions Committee should have a note of the individual signatories past contacts with Parliament on the specific issue of the proposed closure of their school, where appropriate, and for information. .

The petition consists of six pages, three pages of which are background documentation, plus eight pages of signatures. The eight pages of signatures interrupt the pagination after page 1.

I look forward to hearing from you,

Yours Sincerely,

Neil Kay

To the Scottish Parliament.

Petition

National guidelines for school closures: the case for parity

We, the undersigned, declare that we are petitioning Parliament on the grounds that current national guidelines for deciding school closures in Scotland are potentially unfair to interested parties, and are inferior to those currently prevailing in England.

The Petitioners therefore request that the Scottish Parliament considers framing national guidelines for school closures that are at least as fair and comprehensive as those adopted in England. We further ask Parliament to recognise that there is a danger that any decisions on school closures made under the current set of national guidelines could be regarded as potentially unfair and prejudicial to the interests of those affected, in the light of opinion and advice expressed by the Education, Culture and Sport Committee, Meetings 27th June and 4th July, 2000. We consequently urge Parliament to ask Councils (and where appropriate, the Minister of Education, Europe and External Affairs) to consider deferring decisions on any school closures until these new guidelines have been established.

Signed

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In addition to the above named (to whom communication concerning the petition should be sent) there are eight other parties to the petition, seven of whom have signed on behalf of a particular school board, and one on behalf of a parent-teachers association. These follow this page.

NAMES AND ADDRESSES OF PETITIONERS

(in alphabetical order of school to which they are associated or representing)

- (1) Duncan Fitzhowie, c/o Abercorn Primary School, Whitequarries, Winchburgh, by Broxburn, West Lothian, EH52 6PL (on behalf of School Board, Abercorn Primary School).
- (2) Hamish Menzies, The Bungalow, Bridge of Orchy, Argyll, PA36 4AD (on behalf of School Board, Bridge of Orchy Primary School).
- (3) John Armour, High Tirsergus Farm, Drumlemble, PA28 6PW (on behalf of School Board, Drumlemble Primary School).
- (4) Stuart Turner, Alderica, Bridgend, Kilmichael, Glassary, PA31 8QA (on behalf of School Board, Glassary Primary School).
- (5) Aileen MacDougall, c/o Newton Primary School, Islay, Argyll, PA44 7PD (on behalf of School Board, Newton Primary School).
- (6) Jim Menzies, Railway Cottage, St Vigeans, Arbroath (on behalf of Parent-Teachers Association, St Vigeans Primary School).
- (7) Ann Macdonald, Eversley, Innellan, Argyll, PA23 7SR (on behalf of School Board, Toward Primary School).
- (8) Neil Kay, 93 Shore Road, Innellan, Argyll, PA23 7SP (member School Board, Toward Primary School).
- (9) Pam MacColl, Achleck, Torloisk, Isle of Mull, Argyll, PA73 6LT (on behalf of School Board, Ulva Ferry Primary School). .

DETAILS OF PREVIOUS APPROACHES

As supporting information to be submitted along with the petition, the petitioners are instructed to supply details of those approached in connection with the subject matter of the petition.

This petition is in fact a specific response to earlier discussions and decisions by the Education, Culture and Sport Committee of Parliament, 27th June and 4th July 2000. In its meeting of 4th July the Committee decided in its discussions on rural schools and school closures “that we submit the reports by Jamie Stone and Cathy Peattie to COSLA and ask it to review its guidelines on school closures; that we submit both reports to the Accounts Commission and ask it to review its guidance on school issues (Convenor, Education, Culture and Sport Committee, 4th July 2000).

There has been little or no progress in this matter in the intervening months and indeed the future of COSLA itself is in question. Given this unsatisfactory state of affairs, this petition is designed to provide a constructive basis for formulating guidelines on school closures in general (not just rural schools). It is for the Public Petitions Committee to decide what to do with this petition, but we hope that it will be drawn to the attention of the Education, Culture and Sport Committee of Parliament.

This is the first time we have petitioned on the specific subject of national guidelines for school closures in Scotland. However, the Committee may also wish to know that some schools named here have earlier made representations (or had representations made on their behalf) to Parliament on the subject of specific closures.

The proposed closure of Abercorn Primary School was the subject of a members' business debate on motion S1M-1206, in the name of Lord James Douglas-Hamilton, 13th December 2000.

The proposed closure of St Vigeans Primary School was the subject of a members' business on motion S1M-959, in the name of Alex Johnstone. 20th September 2000, and the subject of PE230 (Public Petitions Committee, 4th July and 12th September 2000).

The proposed closure of Toward Primary School was the subject of PE175 and it was also presented as an indicative case for the proposed closure of five other schools in Argyll and Bute (Public Petitions Committee, 25th April and 9th May 2000, Education, Culture and Sports Committee, 25th May and 27th June, 2000). The school boards of these other five schools (Bridge of Orchy, Drumlemble, Glassary, Newton, Ulva Ferry) are also party to the present petition.

The closure proposals on the six Argyll schools were suspended but were not rescinded, following Cathy Peattie (MSP)'s report on the subject of PE175 to the Education, Culture and Sport Committee, 27th June 2000).

Since Abercorn and St Vigeans are currently operating at over 80% capacity, their closure proposals have been referred to the Minister for Education, Europe and External Affairs.

Petition

National guidelines for school closures: the case for parity

BACKGROUND PAPER

This petition argues for parity in guidelines for school closures in Scotland. By parity, we mean that Scottish schools deserve to be protected by a framework for deciding school closures that is *at least as fair and comprehensive* as in England.

1. BACKGROUND

June 2000, Cathy Peattie MSP submitted a report to Parliament's Education, Culture and Sports Committee which largely endorsed the Toward Petition (PE 175). This petition had argued that the closure consultative process for Argyll and Bute schools was flawed and prejudicial to the interests of affected parties. The Committee unanimously endorsed Ms Peattie's report and wrote to Argyll and Bute Council: "Whether such inaccuracies and flaws (in the consultative process) are prejudicial depends on the extent to which the Council is prepared to reconsider its proposals in the light of valid criticisms that have been made". The Education, Culture and Sports Committee of Parliament also asked COSLA and Audit Scotland to advise on new guidelines in respect of school closures in Scotland. In its preliminary written response, COSLA reported a survey of its member authorities and concluded: "What has emerged from the information provided by the authorities to date is a range of procedures, issues to be borne in mind, good practice and innovative thinking, all devised in an attempt to minimise the disruption and any negative perceptions about a closures/rationalisation programme" (August 2000).

It is difficult to see how COSLA can provide solutions to the issues raised by school closures in Scotland if it does not recognise that problems exist to begin with.

We accept that COSLA and Audit Scotland have legitimate interests in this area. At the same time there are other voices that can and should be heard on this issue. COSLA may be expected to be naturally sympathetic to Argyll and Bute Council's perspective on this matter, and is likely to emphasise the financial arguments for closure, especially given the current relations between local and central government on financial and budgetary issues. As the Council's auditors, the nature of Audit Scotland's responsibilities are likely to encourage it to emphasise financial aspects. But beyond financial issues there are also broader educational, social and economic issues attached to school closures. There are also a wide range of interested parties – including, most obviously, the children themselves, but also teachers, parents and the local communities.

A Solution: a workable and fair model for dealing with potential school closures is provided by the system recently adopted in England. Scottish schoolchildren, parents and communities deserve to be treated at least as fairly and sympathetically as those in England. That is the case for parity, and we set it out in more detail below.

2. THE ENGLISH SYSTEM

There a number of key elements in the English system introduced two years ago:

- (1) A presumption against closure, introduced since 1998.
- (2) Local School Organisation Committees (SOCs) consider closure proposals, these are composed of headteachers and members of the LEA.
- (3) Where SOCs cannot decide on a closure proposal unanimously, it is referred to an independent Schools Adjudicator.
- (4) Guidance to SOCs: school closure only if it is clearly in the interests of education provision in the area.
- (5) Guidance to SOCs includes consideration to be given to a variety of social, economic and educational considerations, including possible effects on the local community.
- (6) Special financial help from central government for small rural schools (£40mill from the Small School Support Fund {SSSF} over two years).

Partly as a consequence of the new system, the rate of school closures in England has declined to about an eighth of what they were 10 years ago. It has created a rational and objective framework for deciding the sensitive issue of school closures, and protected rural schools and communities from the pressures of local pork barrel politics. In England, a group of councillors cannot conspire to close schools elsewhere in other areas of the authority simply to divert resources to their own local schools. It is possible for this to happen in Scotland. A clear and useful overview of the English system from the Schools Minister, Jacqui Smith can be found at www.dfes.gov.uk, archived news release for 9th May 2000, "Government strategy is keeping rural schools alive".

3. FEWER AND BIGGER SCHOOLS = FEWER AND BIGGER CLASSES

(level up, don't level down)

New educational research subsequently published in September 2000 strongly supports a major plank of the Toward Petition. The Toward Petition argued that closure of rural schools could have adverse *educational* consequences. This was in addition to any adverse social and economic consequences for the communities involved. Argyll and Bute Council's own breakdown of the cost implications of closure for the six schools showed that the major projected savings were not those (such as cleaning and maintenance) associated with reducing physical capacity. Instead, the major financial savings were in the form of expenditure on staff (mostly teacher-related), with school closures generally resulting in bigger classes, both for the pupils for the schools being closed, and for pupils in the schools to which they were being transferred. In short, school closures tend to mean fewer/bigger schools *and* fewer/bigger classes. And the major educational effects can be expected to obtain from class size, not school size.

The Toward Petition pointed out that bigger classes at primary school level (particularly in the early years and in the size ranges potentially affected by the closure programme) could be expected to have an adverse educational impact on the pupils affected. It cited an authoritative and conclusive survey of available research in this area by the US

Department of Education to support this point (see www.ed.gov and click on “class size” link). Council officials argued that the US research was not really applicable in a UK context. However, the first major UK study to examine the effects of class size in the earliest years of schooling has found effects consistent with those reported in US (see www.ioe.ac.uk/media, press release for 8th September 2000, “Pioneering Study Supports Smaller Class Sizes”). Translating these latest findings by researchers at London University into Argyll and Bute’s schools closure programme, the effects of school closure could be expected to lead include increased class size, with expected adverse effects on literacy and maths performance for the youngest primary school children.

Perhaps most interestingly, with implications for social inclusion, the London University research echoes the US research in finding that it is the low achievers that benefit most from smaller classes, an implication being that it is this group that would be worst hit by being put into larger classes following school closure. A fundamental implication of all this research is that small rural schools provide potentially high payoffs (to individuals and society at large) in investment in education because these schools tend to have smaller class sizes. It is commonly recognised that a local school can bring major social and economic benefits to the community. To these benefits we can now add clear cut, measurable, and sustainable educational gains associated with maintaining small rural schools. They should be potential benchmarks for raising educational provision generally, not be potential targets for closure - the theme should be: level up, don’t level down

Guidelines and procedures should ensure that mechanisms exist whereby relevant and up to date educational research must be taken into account in considering school closures

4. CONCLUSIONS: THE CASE FOR PARITY

We need at least parity with the England in terms of the issue of schools closure. By parity, we mean that Scottish schools deserve to be protected by a framework for deciding school closures that is *at least as fair and comprehensive* as in England. We argue that the current English system could be taken as a basic framework and customised to the Scottish system, including special financial help for councils with a high percentage of rural schools. A sound and workable system for deciding school closures already exists south of the border and could be virtually taken off the shelf and adapted to Scottish circumstances. Parliament should frame guidelines for school closures with these points in mind. Provision should also be made to make sure that the latest educational research (such as that outlined in Section 3 above) is taken into account in these deliberations.

In view of the seriousness of the issues raised here, we also argue that councils should be requested to defer consideration of, and decisions on, further school closures until new guidelines have been put in place by the Scottish Parliament.