



SCHOOL ESTATE: OPTIONS APPRAISAL FOR CLOSURE OF BERNERA SCHOOL

Report by Chief Officer, Education and Children's Services

PURPOSE

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to seek approval from the Comhairle to begin the statutory consultation process for the permanent closure of Sgoil Bheàrnaraigh (Bernera School), which involves conducting an Options Appraisal with the community.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 2.1 Sgoil Bheàrnaraigh has been mothballed for four years, since August 2021. Following consultation with parents of children on the roll at the time, there was unanimous agreement that all remaining pupils would transfer to Sgoil nan Loch with additional transport being provided to facilitate this.
- 2.2 Since the mothballing of the school in August 2021, the decision has been reviewed on an annual basis and considered by this committee, as is required by the School (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010. There have been no formal requests or expressions of interest from any party to reinstate provision at this school, and no new viable roll has been identified in that time.
- 2.3 During the period of mothballing, the buildings at Sgoil Bheàrnaraigh have been retained and are subject to basic maintenance to preserve condition. The Department also continue to pay all building related fees, rates and charges for the premises.
- 2.4 At the last review of mothballing in June 2025, it was agreed by the Comhairle to initiate statutory consultation in relation to closure. The first stage of that process is to seek approval to conduct an Options Appraisal for the school. Such a decision is required to be a matter of record.
- 2.5 The Options Appraisal will provide opportunity for the community to give views about the future of the school and to inform the Comhairle's decision making about the status of the building and provision in the area. The process will include holding public engagement sessions in the area and the gathering of views through an online survey.
- 2.6 It is a requirement to be stated at this stage that full closure of the school is an option that will be included in the proposed appraisal. If the appraisal highlights that closure is the only viable option, the Comhairle will then consider moving to the Pre-Consultation stage, as defined in the Act, at a future meeting.
- 2.7 In terms of the School (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010, Sgoil Bheàrnaraigh is classified as a rural school and is, therefore, subject to the additional consultation steps set out in Sections 11A to 13 of the Act and referenced in the accompanying Statutory Guidance.



RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 It is recommended that the Comhairle:

- a) agree to conduct an Options Appraisal for Sgoil Bheàrnaraigh to permit the views of the community to be taken, noting that one option to be considered is permanent closure of the school;
- b) support community engagement and participation in the Options Appraisal process; and
- c) agree to receive a Report on the findings of the Options Appraisal to permit consideration of next steps.

Contact Officer: Patricia Macleod, Executive Headteacher

Appendix: None

Background Papers: [School \(Consultation\) \(Scotland\) Act 2010 – Statutory Guidance](#)

IMPLICATIONS

4.1 The following implications are applicable in terms of the Report.

Resource Implications	Implications/None
Financial	<p>There are minimal financial implications to agreeing the recommendations of the report in terms of the commitment of officer time but that is expected to be able to be managed within existing deployments without the need for additional resource.</p> <p>There are on-going financial impacts of retaining the mothballed provision at Sgoil Bheàrnaraigh in the region of £14,000 per annum.</p>
Legal	<p>Initiating processes to consider permanent closure of a school is a recognised action within the School (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 Statutory Guidance.</p> <p>In addition, Sgoil Bheàrnaraigh is formally classified as a rural school and is, therefore, subject to the additional requirements set out in the act at sections 11A to 13.</p> <p>The Comhairle has authority to undertake this work as it relates to the statutory functions of the Comhairle under the School (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 including those relating to approving proposals, and the requirement of authorities to conduct pre-consultation in relation to potential closure of rural schools.</p>
Staffing	None
Assets and Property	The buildings at Sgoil Bheàrnaraigh have been retained and maintained during the period of mothballing in a condition where the school provision could be reinstated.



Strategic Implications	Implications/None
Risk	The recommendation does not impact on any currently identified strategic risks. Once a decision is made, further consideration will be given to risk implications.
Equalities/Child Rights	An initial/equality impact assessment is not required at this stage of the process as the Comhairle is seeking to conduct an options appraisal. It will be required should a decision be reached to progress to the next stage.
Corporate Strategy	<p>Support Children, Families and Young People:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ensure schools and lifelong learning are at the heart of our communities, with particular emphasis on Gàidhlig, digital skills and new technologies. <p>Support Caring and Resilient Communities and Quality of Life:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nurture the safety and resilience of our communities.
Environmental Impact	None
Consultation	Consultation on this matter is defined in the 2010 Act, as detailed in the Legal Implications, above.

BACKGROUND

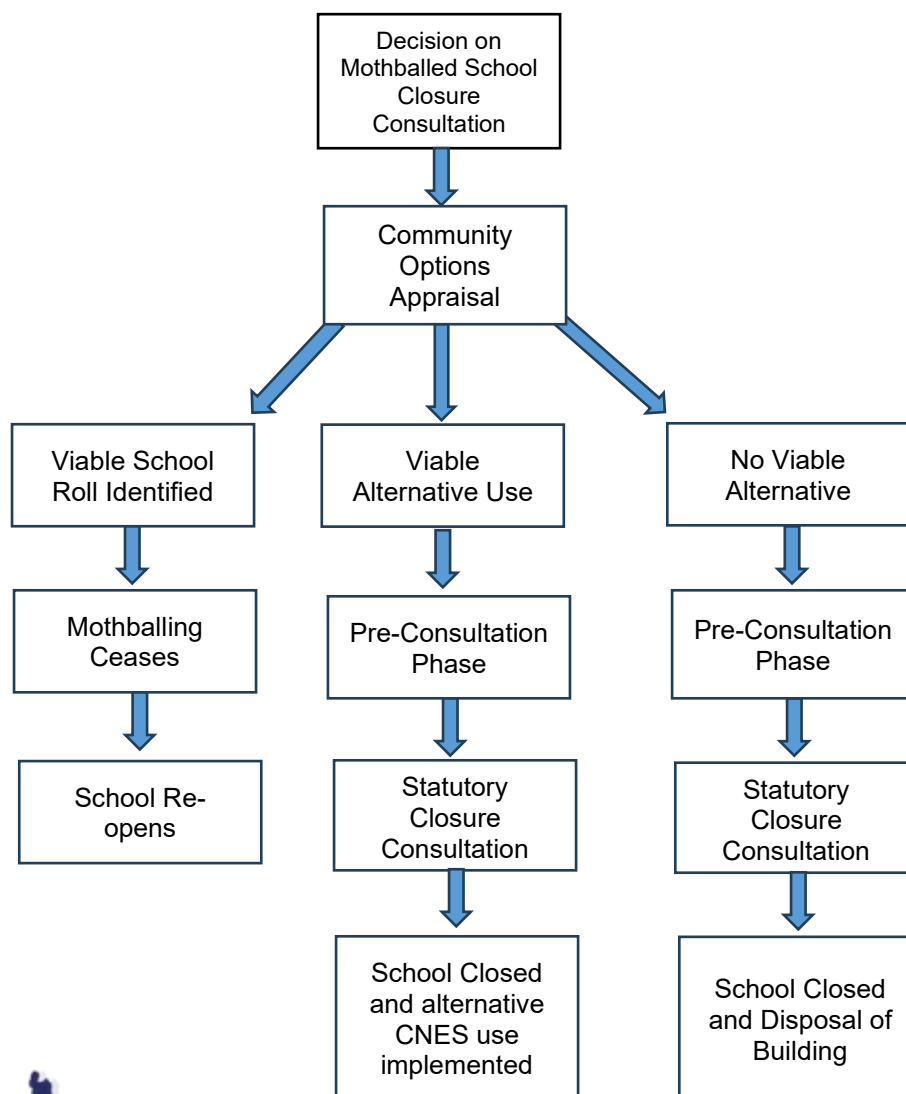
- 5.1 Sgoil Bheàrnaraigh was mothballed from August 2021 following consultation with parents of children on the roll at the time. The projected roll for 2021 was three pupils. There was unanimous support for the proposal to mothball, and all three pupils transferred to Sgoil nan Loch with additional transport being provided, as required, for primary pupils. Since that time, the Sgoil Bheàrnaraigh building has been retained and is subject to basic maintenance to preserve its condition.

DETAIL

- 6.1 During the period of mothballing of Sgoil Bheàrnaraigh, there have been no requests received to enrol in the school despite it being available to do so annually in the Comhairle's school enrolment exercise each February. No expressions of interest have been lodged and there have been no representations from other groups or bodies to consider re-opening of the primary school.
- 6.2 It was agreed by the Comhairle in June 2025 to recognise the lack of enrolments during the four-year period of mothballing and to begin to move on statutory processes for the permanent closure of Sgoil Bheàrnaraigh.
- 6.3 Retaining Sgoil Bheàrnaraigh as a mothballed provision incurs annual costs in the region of £14,000 for rates, water charges, utilities and basic maintenance. The costs of reinstating one class at Sgoil Bheàrnaraigh would increase annual operating costs to an estimated £155,000, with approximately £10,000 needed to recommission the school after the mothballing period.



- 6.4 The first stage of progressing with the statutory procedures agreed at the June sitting of the committee is to commence an Options Appraisal with the community to consider the options for the school. Legislation requires that it is clearly stated that one of the options to be considered in the appraisal is permanent closure. Consent is now sought to progress to the Options Appraisal stage.
- 6.5 Once concluded, a Report will be taken to a future meeting of the committee to permit Elected Members to consider the findings of this exercise and to reach a decision on the future of the school.
- 6.6 The Comhairle holds the powers to undertake this work as it is a recognised statutory function of education authorities, as defined in the School (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010. Said legislation and its supporting Statutory Guidance defines the processes that must be followed in respect of undertaking such a function.
- 6.7 Definitions in the legislation confirm that Sgoil Bheàrnaraigh is recognised as a rural school and the Act places additional conditions on the consultation process for such schools, including an additional pre-consultation stage where viable alternatives to closure are required to be considered. Legislation defines a presumption against closure for a classified rural school, and the Comhairle must ensure that all alternatives to closure are fully and robustly explored prior to entering into the statutory consultation phase.
- 6.8 The typical process of consideration about the future of a mothballed school is set out below.



CONCLUSION

- 7.1 Following approval in June 2025 to commence preparations to explore closure of Sgoil Bheàrnaraigh, approval is now sought to move to the first stage of that process, which involves conducting an Options Appraisal with the community.

