

SCHOOL ESTATE: OPTIONS APPRAISAL FOR CLOSURE OF TOLSTA 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 Tolsta School, which involves conducting an Options Appraisal with the community.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 2.1 Tolsta School has now been mothballed for six years, since August 2019. Following consultation with parents of children on the roll at the time, there was unanimous agreement that all remaining pupils would transfer to Sgoil a' Bhac, which was facilitated with minor adjustments to school transport.
- 2.2 Since the mothballing of the school in August 2019, 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 Tolsta School 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. An arrangement has been made with a community group to lease the school hall, and the school building has occasionally been used as office space for locally resident Comhairle staff.
- 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 Tolsta 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, Tolsta School 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 Tolsta School 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: Kathleen Macleod, Executive Headteacher

Appendix:

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 Tolsta School in the region of £12,000 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, Tolsta School 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 Tolsta School have been retained and maintained during the period of mothballing in a condition where the school provision could be reinstated. The school hall is leased to a community group at the present time, and the school building has been used as occasional office space by Comhairle staff and for storage of equipment.
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	Support Children, Families and Young People: <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. Support Caring and Resilient Communities and Quality of Life: <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

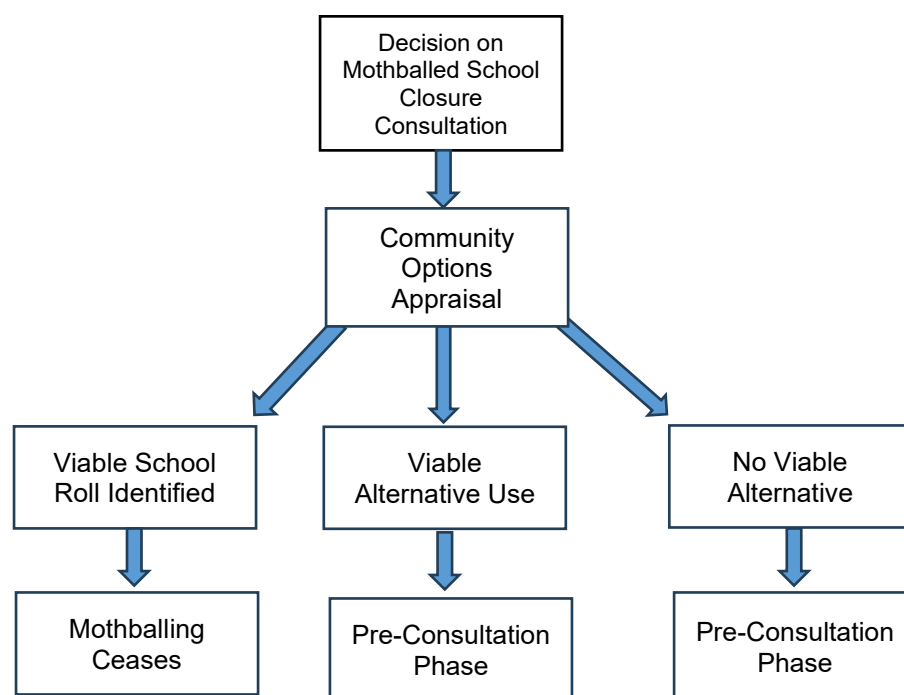
- 5.1 The use of the provisions within the 2010 Act to mothball a school or part-provision is intended as a measure to provide a period of time to allow a new viable roll to develop without having to immediately move to formal consultation on closure.
- 5.2 Tolsta School was mothballed from August 2019 following consultation with parents of children on the roll at the time. The projected roll for 2019 was nine pupils. There was unanimous support for the proposal to mothball, and all pupils transferred to Sgoil a' Bhac with additional transport being provided, as required for primary-age pupils.

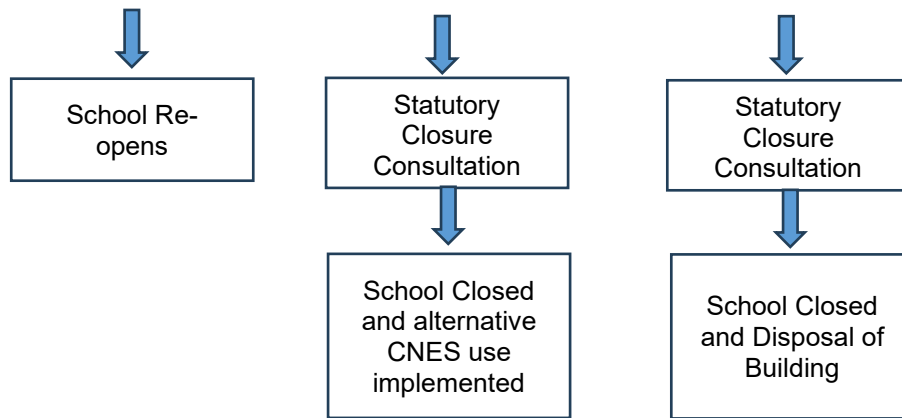
DETAIL

- 6.1 During the period of mothballing of Tolsta School, 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 six-year period of mothballing and to begin to move on statutory processes for the permanent closure of Tolsta School.
- 6.3 Retaining Tolsta School as a mothballed provision incurs annual costs in the region of £12,000 for rates, water charges, utilities and basic maintenance. The costs of reinstating one class at the school would increase annual operating costs to an estimated £188,000, with approximately £20,000 needed to recommission the school after the mothballing period. The lease of the hall would also require to be terminated.
- 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 submitted 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 Tolsta 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 Tolsta School 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 Tolsta School, approval is now sought to move to the first stage of that process, which involves conducting an Options Appraisal with the community.

