

SUBMISSION BY ISLE OF LUING COMMUNITY TRUST AND LUING COMMUNITY COUNCIL ON THE LIKELY EFFECT OF THE PROPOSED CLOSING OF LUING PRIMARY SCHOOL ON THE SUSTAINABILITY OF THE ISLAND COMMUNITY

Preamble

The Council's Proposal Document has significant inaccuracies and omissions concerning the likely effect on the local community. The document says (para.18.2) that 'The Council has made an assessment on the sustainability of the community should this proposal be implemented and considers this may have a positive impact'. The Proposal Document contains no assessment of the sustainability of the community should the school close. All it does is indicate that the school building might become 'a community hub' (para.18.11), and that this will help 'to make this community an independent, resilient place to live' (para.18.5). A school is considerably more than a building, yet this aspect is not addressed at all in the Proposal Document. There is only one reference in the Document to anything already happening on Luing in para.18.7, which mentions 'the Atlantic Islands Centre which is used for community events'.

The Council has expressed its commitment to working together in partnership with communities, yet the process of mothballing Luing Primary School and the preparation of its Proposals to close the only School on the island have been undertaken without any apparent interest in supporting the community to identify, address and mitigate the likely effects of any closure. We are merely told that it will be good for us to take on the school building, this on an island of 179 residents with three existing community hubs.

In this submission to the Consultation, the Isle of Luing Community Trust (IoLCT) and Luing Community Council (LCC) provide some essential information about Luing and identify some of the likely effects of the closure of Luing Primary School on the island's sustainability. These are not comprehensive; they are intended to demonstrate the extent to which the Proposal Document has such significant inaccuracies and omissions that it fails to justify any decision to close Luing Primary School. Extended mothballing is the only reasonable decision to be taken in the absence of an adequate assessment of the likely effects of any closure on the community's sustainability.

Luing's ambitions match Council and national priorities

Luing is making every effort to create jobs, build affordable housing, tackle climate change and develop a sustainable economy and community. These ambitions and efforts match exactly with Argyll and Bute Council's priorities for 2022 to 2027, and with the Council's vision of a 'place where people want to come to live, to work and to do business as a result of action to combat and reverse decline'. And they correspond with key requirements of the National Islands Act and Strategic Objectives of the National Islands Plan, including addressing population decline and ensuring a healthy, balanced population profile, improving sustainable economic development and housing, and contributing to climate change mitigation.

The National Islands Plan recognises the importance of 'having a thriving and successful school', which 'contributes to an island and its community in multiple ways'. Families, it argues, 'will often make decisions about where to live based on the presence of good schools'. The presence of a Primary School on Luing was a key factor in the decision of families who moved to the island before lockdown.

Increasing the numbers of families with children and of young and working age people on Luing is absolutely critical to the sustainability (in many senses of this term) of the island community and to

the achievement of the priorities shared by Luing community, Argyll & Bute Council and national Government. The demographic balance must be changed - otherwise island businesses cannot find workers, essential volunteer services (the fire service, the ambulance, 1st Responders, volunteer drivers, and many more) cannot be provided, and elderly and frail residents cannot safely stay in their own homes.

Likely effects of closing Luing Primary School on the island's sustainability

The negative effects of closing Luing school are not hypothetical – some of them have already happened. The mothballing of the school has impacted local jobs (school staff, cleaners, maintenance work...) and taken money out of the island economy. It is possible for the Council to assess the effects on local jobs as they hold information on who was employed (full-time, part-time and as contractors) and the wages and remunerations paid. This assessment of jobs and wages lost should be undertaken as part of the Council's assessment of the effects of closing the school on community sustainability.

There are many other ways in which the closure of Luing Primary School may adversely affect the sustainability of the island's community and economy.

Economic development

As well as a Development Framework for Luing's future, which has recently been formulated after wide community consultation, major investments have been – and are being – made to develop Luing's economy, by island businesses, the Community Trust and external funders. Amongst these are:

- The creation by the farm estate of Wild Luing with eight luxury pods and a communal observatory to support its shooting business and diversify its activities and income.
- Investment in three new boats by the island's creel fishing businesses, which have increased from two to three family businesses.
- External funding of £1.3 million enabled the Community Trust to build the Atlantic Islands Centre (AIC) which opened in 2015. It operates as a community centre and café, and houses the Luing History Group, a vibrant community group researching and promoting the island's heritage. The AIC is used for displays, community meals, evening events, bar nights, workshops and a means by which local artists and crafters can sell their wares and gain an income. For example, in August 2023 sales at the AIC generated £1,000 income for island-based crafters. It is a popular tourist destination in the summer months with a highly-rated café featuring the acclaimed Luing Home Bakers cakes and bakes and island foods such as Luing beef and prawns, thereby promoting local food businesses.
- With significant support from Highlands and Islands Enterprise and Historic Environment Scotland, the Community Trust is developing a small-scale slate venture producing hand trimmed traditional slates, making use of the mineral rights it owns at Cullipool. This would create 5 full-time, year-round jobs as well as generate an income for local projects. Workshops for small businesses are also planned as part of the Development Framework.
- The Community Trust also has plans to create a community garden, to expand the offer of 'Taste of Luing' food for the community and tourists visiting the island.
- High-speed fibre broadband is coming to Luing in 2024 making it more attractive for homeworkers and new businesses.

All these investments and developments are put at risk without a primary school as they depend for their success on attracting enough young and working-age people to the island, who in turn are key to the island's sustainability.

Housing plans

Affordable housing is a key factor in attracting young and working age people to stay on Luing. Like many island and rural areas, Luing has too many houses that are empty or underused and that, even when they come on to the market for sale, are unaffordable to local people. Help with bringing more of the existing housing stock into permanent occupation by island residents, especially families, is essential. One large house has received planning permission and Listed Building consent to be split into two, creating a new family-sized unit for affordable long-term rent; the building work is projected for 2025 due to the demands on local builders and additional difficulties and costs of building on an island. Efforts are being made to encourage other owners to make accommodation available as a long-term let.

More substantially, the Community Trust is working on the development of affordable homes on the island to cater for young people and families, with possible sites identified. A housing needs survey led by the Community Trust and Community Council is currently underway; this will identify the specific housing needs of residents, businesses and those wishing to live and move here, enabling concrete plans to be drawn up for new-build affordable housing.

Viability of island businesses

There is no shortage of business enterprise and innovation on Luing, as some of the examples of economic development above demonstrate. However, all businesses on Luing struggle to find staff whether it be self-catering owners needing staff to clean houses, café staff needed at the Atlantic Islands Centre or young apprentices to join fishing crews and construction businesses. Finding staff to work in the café has become increasingly difficult with many of the younger people moving away to cities for full-time jobs and more affordable accommodation. As the population ages there are fewer people available as apprentices, employees or to run businesses. This is already limiting the growth of island businesses. Closure of the school is only likely to amplify this effect by discouraging young families to live here and putting local businesses at risk in the future.

Sustainability of community services and facilities

The Isle of Luing is a dynamic island where the community puts in a huge amount of unpaid, voluntary effort into maintaining island services. The list of community services and facilities that are maintained by volunteer effort includes:

- the fire and emergency service, and island ambulance,
- a First Responders service,
- social care of elderly people in their own homes,
- running and maintenance of the two village halls,
- running of the shopping bus service and volunteer driving,
- organisation of social events outdoors and indoors throughout the year,
- spot maintenance of Council infrastructure including road repairs and verge cutting;
- the promotion of Luing's heritage through displays, surveys, social media and merchandise,
- and not least the Community Council and Isle of Luing Community Trust.

The community is the island's biggest asset, but even now it is becoming more and more difficult to find people able and willing to contribute as volunteers. Without an increase in young and working-age people even key services that ensure the community's safety cannot be maintained. At a time

of cutbacks in Council-run services, the work of volunteers and community bodies becomes ever more important.

In addition, essential health and care staff are needed to look after elderly people on the island. In the past almost everyone was able to stay in their own home even when they became frail and dependent on external support. This is no longer the case, and the island is becoming a less safe place for people who are less mobile and frail.

Long-term sustainability of the island

The greatest threat to the sustainability of Luing's community is its aging population. Luing must increase the number of young and working age people living on the island, and it is possible to make this happen. Over 30 people have come to live on Luing since 2019 including four families with seven children between the ages of 6 months and 8 years. Right now, there are family members who would like to return to live on Luing providing there is housing, but they need a local primary school for their children.

The economic development, housing and business plans all contribute to making Luing more attractive to young people and families, and should lead to an increase in primary aged school children over the next few years. But closure of the primary school could put all the plans at risk. Easy access to good schooling for nursery and primary school children is one of the most important criteria when young families are thinking of moving to an area.

Extended mothballing is essential

Luing Primary School is an asset that supports the investments now being made to grow Luing's population and economy. It was mothballed during lockdown, a time of great disruption, yet has only been given the standard 3 years before closure. Extended mothballing is required as a necessary adjunct to the planned developments, strengthening their chances of success and making it more than likely that they will attract young people and families to Luing.

The Council's Executive Director for Education argued at the Consultation Meeting on Sept 4th that Skipness Primary School was mothballed for six years because of covid, preventing the Council from organising the necessary consultation process. It was however possible for Luing Primary School to be mothballed at this time. Lockdown not only prevented Luing community from reacting to and addressing the Council's mothballing of the School, but also put a brake on the Community Trust's plans for housing and economic development. If Skipness School could be mothballed for six years due to covid, then Luing Primary School should be mothballed for at least an equivalent length of time, thus allowing Luing community to make up for the lost time and the actions that would otherwise have been taken.

The current annual cost estimated by the Council for mothballing Luing Primary School is £12,064, which is very high for a small building in good condition that is not being used. The estimate includes nearly £3000 of energy costs and £1319 of 'unspecified other' costs, as well as £5643 for 'facilities management', which seems very high considering there are no costs for cleaning, security or building maintenance and management. It is strongly recommended that a detailed breakdown of the estimated costs is provided, and that an independent assessment of the estimated costs is made.

Finally, the Islands (Scotland) Act requires that impacts of school closures are assessed for *individual islands*, recognising the proposals may affect different island communities in significantly different ways. The 2010 Consultation Act establishes a procedural presumption against the closure of rural schools. Together they require a detailed assessment of the likely impact of the closure of Luing

Primary School on the specific circumstances of Luing's community and its sustainability. This assessment can only be done in consultation with those who know Luing best, the island community and its representative organisations. We are ready to engage as partners with the Council to identify the issues and undertake a thorough assessment of the likely impact of the closure of the school. The assessment must do full justice to the momentous decision being considered, and to ensure that the shared ambitions of Luing community and Argyll & Bute Council are achieved. As Argyll and Bute Council's Priorities for 2022 to 2027 state: **We have a vision for a successful, vibrant Argyll and Bute with a growing population and a thriving economy. A place where people want to come to live, to work and to do business as a result of action to combat and reverse decline. We see the potential for thriving local economies that support our rich mix of remote, rural and island communities.**

Isle of Luing Community Trust and Luing Community Council – September 11 2023