

Achnamara Village Hall Committee: formal response to Argyll and Bute Council's proposal to close Ashfield primary school

Summary

Achnamara Village Hall Committee are working on the re-generation of the peninsula to provide a sustainable future for our fragile community. In recent years we have completed two Community Surveys and commissioned a Feasibility Study into various options for our future. Having invested considerable time and resource in understanding the wishes of our community we offer an informed view on the Council's proposal.

- **AVHC do not agree that option D is the best decision for our community**
- **AVHC do not agree with the outcome of the Options Appraisal that option B is "Not a reasonable option"**
- **AVHC ask the Council to re-consider option B with a view to implementing this as the option which best supports the Achnamara community, whilst at the same time delivering significant savings for the Council**
- **AVHC request that our Ward Councillors are invited to attend the Community Services Committee, and allowed to vote on our behalf, alternatively if this is not permitted, that the final decision be made by the Full Council.**

Option D: close Ashfield primary school, zone pupils to Tayvallich primary school and realign its catchment area

The Achnamara community do not believe option D is the best decision for us.

We understand the case for closing Ashfield primary school, and the educational merits are well made in the document (*something which the Council were criticised for in the 2013 round of school closures*). We recognise the difficulties the Council has with recruitment of teachers, and appreciate the financial constraints with which the Council now operates. Unless the demographics of the Achnamara peninsula alter significantly in favour of young families, the summary of educational benefit assessment and statement remains true.

The Council claims to have considered the socio-economic impact of closure of the school, and the Proposal document makes several references to this:

- 3.3: *The place of the school in the community was also considered in terms of the impact this proposal would have on the sustainability of the community itself.*
- 4.15: *The Council has also taken special regard to the following factors...*
 - *The sustainability of the community*
 - *Availability of the school's premises and other facilities for use by the school community;*
- 4.16: *In addition, the Council has also considered how to minimise or avoid any adverse effects that may arise from the implementation of this proposal.*

There is very little evidence in the Proposal document to clearly demonstrate that the impact on the Community – outwith educational provision – has been demonstrably considered, and that this can stand further scrutiny.

Whilst we appreciate that the Council is not averse to letting the Community take on the building, option D assumes this to be the case:

It is accepted that a school closure may have an adverse effect on a community, but a community hub could be an asset to the community. If the local plans for the building progress, this could have a positive impact on the sustainability of the community. Formal closure of the school would mean that these plans could potentially be progressed by the community.

The community is rightly cautious about taking on the burden of the school building. Detailed working of the future village plan would be required before any interest could be properly understood. The regeneration of Achnamara is at an early stage and it will take some years to evolve and agree our priorities. The two Community Surveys we have carried out in recent years and the Feasibility Study commissioned to inform our choices, demonstrate that we are serious about a sustainable future for our village.

If all socio-economic impacts are fully considered, particularly referencing Appendices 1 (Community Survey 2) and 2 (Feasibility Study) of this response, we cannot comprehend how the Council can favour Option D over Option B.

Option B: Continued mothballing of Ashfield primary school, with the pupils zoned to Tayvallich primary school

The Achnamara Community believe that option B is currently the best choice. We do not agree with the outcome of the Options Appraisal that option B is “Not a reasonable option”.

In late 2017 Achnamara Village Hall Committee undertook a survey of all residents and property owners of the current school catchment area as potential users of the village hall (Achnamara, Bellanoch, Crinan). Designed to capture high level information about the positives and negatives of living in this rural community with a view to shaping our future, AVHC took the results and began exploring the key areas highlighted. Working groups were established to investigate the key themes. *(The results of this survey were shared with education representatives from Argyll and Bute Council during the pre-consultation phase of this proposal.)*

In early 2019 our second community consultation took place – CS2. (In view of the lack of response to the first consultation from Bellanoch and Crinan, the community requested that it be defined as the Achnamara peninsula.) We were asked if we were in favour of developing the areas explored in the preceding year-and-a-half.

- Do you support the idea of a **community hydro** in Achnamara?
90.6% overall (81.8% village residents)
- Would you support the **community developing and owning new houses**?
78.8% overall (68.2% village residents)
- Would you support the **community buying land to create self-build plots**?
78.8% overall (86.4% village residents)
- Would you support **ACHA developing new houses** in Achnamara?
70.3% overall (52.4% village residents)
- Should we look at **buying some of the forest** around Achnamara?
85.9%
- Do you think the community should look at **buying land** to help **create better facilities for users of the Loch**?
82.8%

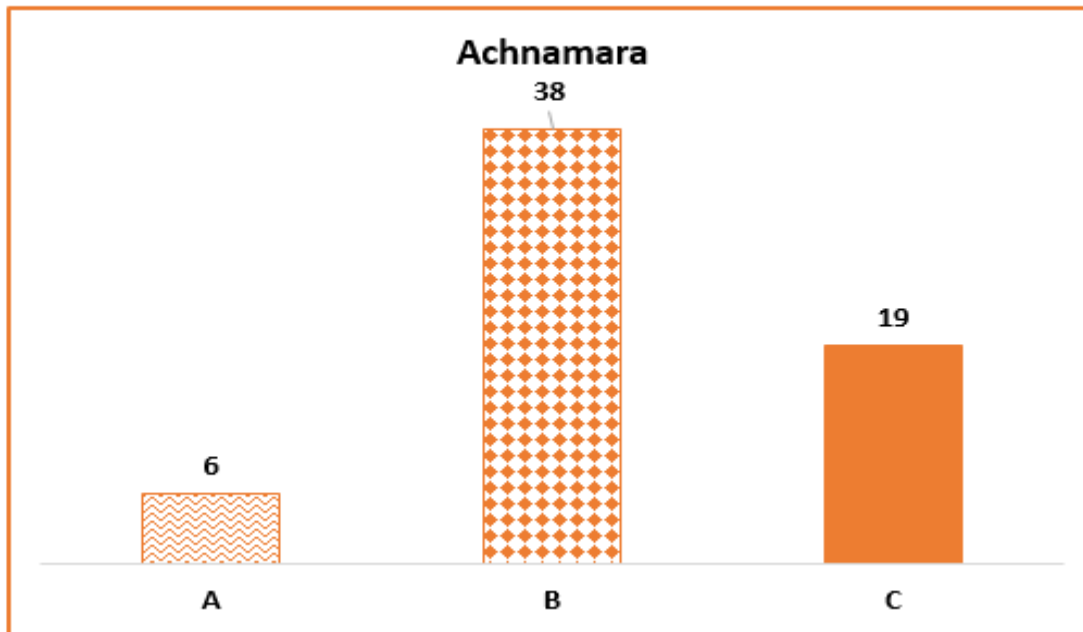
Our recent Community Survey (CS2) asked residents what should happen to Ashfield School.

- A. Re-Open now
- B. Mothball for a further period
- C. Close

The fact that so few people voted for re-opening the school demonstrates an understanding of the Council’s predicament and a realisation of how opinions have changed since the first proposal to close the school in 2013.

60% of the Achnamara community want the school to be mothballed for a further period whilst we consider our options for a sustainable future. *(63 responses.)*

What do you think should happen to Ashfield School?



As a community we need to create our own road map of how best to prioritise and deliver on our aspirations. At this stage, it is too soon to know if the school building will feature in the long term plan for Achnamara. **We propose that for our community, option B would be preferable to the Council's desired option D.**

Several important points regarding retention of the building have been noted by the Council during the pre-consultation phase of this process, captured in the Proposal document as follows:

- 3.9: *there is a will that the school be retained for community use and not be allowed to fall into disrepair.*
- 17.5: *The opportunity for the local community to acquire this building could be key to helping to make this community an independent, resilient place to live.*
- 17.10: *During the pre-consultation phase, some members of the community supported closure of the school with the suggestion that the building and adjoining grounds could potentially be retained for community use. Most people who attended the pre-consultation meeting felt that the school building should be retained for community use and not allowed to fall in to further disrepair, as that would adversely impact on the community's access to the premises.*

We refer the Community Services Committee to our Achnamara Community Survey 2 (appendix 1) and Feasibility Study (Appendix 2) in the hope that this demonstrates that there is much for us to consider as a small community. An important element is the school building, but this is one piece of the jigsaw and cannot be considered in isolation.

In addition to the requirements of the local community, the needs of North Knapdale Church must also be considered. One of the last remaining public buildings, Inverlussa Church held its final service on Sunday 12th May, prior to closing its doors for the last time. Church of Scotland are examining the use of their estate and local members are working on a mission plan. There is a desire to keep services going in Achnamara, which leaves the hall and school as the only potential buildings.

The pre-consultation appears to have positively influenced the Council's thoughts on the building in relation to community use:

7.2: As part of the consultation process the Council would be open to discussion with the community in regard to the future of the building... This may provide the community with an opportunity to utilise the building as a driver for community benefit and potential regeneration that could also enhance the sustainability of the community.

17.9: Indeed, the school closure may help to empower the local community should the community wish to undertake an asset transfer process for the building.

Option B would allow the community to effectively “try before you buy” over the short term, and add value to an informed decision. Option D would potentially force our hand before our long term plan has evolved.

The cost differential between option D and option B is quoted as £5,785 p.a.

We respectfully offer up suggestions as to how to reduce this cost during the requested 5 year further moth-balling:

1. **Grounds Maintenance £453 p.a.** – in the Council's own internal employee suggestion scheme an award was made for the suggestion to not carry out grounds maintenance on mothballed schools. If this had been implemented the entire £453 would be saved. If the Council wished to carry out minimal ground maintenance, the community could offer to do this instead.
2. **Energy costs £2,365 p.a.** – the security lighting could be retimed to minimise its use. The internal temperature settings could be lowered by a few degrees to reduce the heating costs.
3. Pupil transportation costs – these are applicable to options B&D. A pupil transport vehicle collects children from Achnamara and drives them to Tayvallich. At the same time, a car collects pupils from Crinan and takes them to Tayvallich. Could children from Crinan be transferred to the Achnamara vehicle at the Barnluasgan car park to prevent both vehicles driving the full distance every school day?
4. If the community decides it wishes to build a replacement village hall, we would enter into discussions with the Council about use of the school on a temporary basis - as the only remaining public building in the area.

We formally request that the Community Services Committee give serious consideration to overturning the preferred option D in favour of option B.

We believe this is in the best interests of our community whilst still delivering significant cost saving for the Council.

Ward Councillor representation at the Community Services Committee

We understand that the Community Services Committee is empowered to make the final decision in relation to school closure proposals.

Ardchattan Primary School – which is also facing closure – is represented on this Committee by three of the four Elected Members for Oban, North & Lorn (including Keiron Green as Vice-Chair of the CSC).

Ashfield Primary School has no representation at the CSC, as none of our Ward Councillors sit on this Committee. We therefore request that our Ward Councillors be allowed to attend and vote on our behalf, or that the ultimate decision be referred to Full Council.

Conclusion

In concluding, we draw your attention to three particular bullets in point 1.8 of the introduction to the proposal, namely the Council's agreed priorities:

- *We make the most of our assets to build the local economy*
- *We support individual and community wellbeing*
- *We strengthen and empower our communities*

We firmly believe that option B allows the council to demonstrate their commitment to this for the rural community of Achnamara, whereas option D could be interpreted as abandoning us. By working with us, this can be achieved without forsaking the principle of another key priority:

- *We manage our finances prudently*

The Community of Achnamara are at the beginning of a self-motivated journey of re-generation and we therefore implore the Council to implement option B, by agreeing to further mothballing Ashfield Primary school for a period of five years.