



COMHAIRLE NAN EILEAN SIAR

# Learning in the community

## Council faces hard choices over education

By Katie Macleod

**C**ouncils across the country are having to make tough choices in the current economic climate, and the Western Isles Comhairle is no exception. "There are no easy choices left," says Council Leader Angus Campbell, explaining that over the last three years the council have had the biggest reduction in funding of any local authority.

It is a challenging time for the Comhairle, which is faced with the task of finding over £6 million in savings between now and March 2015. The current budget strategy was put into place in March of last year, and following individual departments identifying savings in excess of the necessary £6.15 million, the Comhairle decided to prioritise its savings.

This was undertaken through review by councillors and consultations with local communities. At the end of last year around 500 people attended meetings throughout the islands to air their opinions on the proposed cuts; 87 consultation papers were submitted and more than 200 surveys were completed online.

One of the results of this initial consultation with constituents was that the Comhairle identified 50 cuts it is now less likely to make. These range from reductions in funding to voluntary organisations to the proposed decrease in beds bought from independent care homes.

In the last few weeks the council has communicated with communities yet again, encouraging consultation and inviting input on the remaining budget choices. All consultation responses were due to be submitted by February 1st, and a seminar held on February 4th outlined the findings to the respective committees who have until February 14th to make their final decisions.

Evident in the second consultation was the fact that a number of the more controversial cuts are those in relation to Education and Children's Services. As education expenditure makes up 40 percent of the total council budget, reason indicates that it must bear a significant share of the burden. While fears concerning additional support needs and staffing in children's services

were easily assuaged because of increased investment in the last year, local opinions on issues such as shared headships, e-learning, and the removal of itinerant teachers have been strongly voiced.

An important aspect of the intended introduction of these changes is that they are not driven solely by financial facts, but by educational improvements.

Crucial to the question of education expenditure are population problems. Demographic trends – in the Western Isles and the wider Western world – show an increasingly elderly population. In the islands in particular, this is coupled with falling school rolls. As Angus Campbell attests, it is impossible to ignore these changes: "If we don't save money by working more efficiently, where else can we take it from?" Without a reduction in education expenditure that is in line with the fall in pupil numbers, there will almost certainly be a negative knock-on effect on services for the elderly.

"Our commitment to education is hard to debate with us," Angus continues. "We spend £7 million above GAE [the education grant local authorities receive from the government]. 50 percent of our pupils are in six new state-of-the-art schools, which is the biggest capital project the authority has ever undertaken. No other services are ring-fenced in this way."

"There is always resistance to change in education, you have to prove your case that it will not affect the service," adds Angus. Catriona Stewart, Head of the Education Committee, offers an example of this in the reaction to the new schools, which at one time faced stiff opposition. "Parents who were hesitant to see closures in their own areas have seen the new schools, and are genuinely impressed with the buildings and resources," she says. "They can see the results of the vision the council had."

While communities await the final decisions, it seems clear that the proposed changes would bring the Western Isles in line with education authorities elsewhere in the country, investing in education and updating the way children learn so as to prepare them for the 21st century world of work.

of this should it decide to introduce additional Council tax charges on empty homes. Service Committees will discuss budget proposals in their remit over the next week and how best to allocate these resources in the light of consultation responses.

It was noted that changes in some areas are not cuts in service but involve a re-design of service. Calls were also repeated for the Health Board to contribute towards the costs of the inter-island air service.

Leader Angus Campbell said: "We received many detailed responses to the budget consultation which resulted in an extremely high level of participation with record numbers and highly effective engagement. Although there were differences of opinion, most people appreciated the process the Comhairle was going through.

### Additional Support Needs (ASN)

ASN resources would be reduced based on an assessment of need. This change has not proven to be overly problematic, as it is essentially the same practice as in previous years. While resources would be reduced by less than one percent, a robust audit system is used in every school to ensure that, where children have barriers to learning, these are identified and support is given. The reduction also needs to be considered in the context of significant investment over the last year in provision for children with additional needs in and outside of school.

### Reducing Staffing in Children's Services

This change would represent a reduction of one full time equivalent post in Children's Services. However, the council spend in this area has actually grown, with significant investment in fostering and adoption, extended learning, post-school transition support and early years services. Children and families social work services have been integrated with the education department through the 'Getting It Right for Every Child' framework, resulting in a multi-disciplinary, more efficient approach to working with and helping children and young people.

### Shared Headships

The policy of shared headships was introduced a number of years ago as a mechanism to support recruitment to rural schools and to enable teaching heads to concentrate on the increased demands of management. As a national issue, the policy encourages a focus on management support to staff, and quality of education with minimum disruption to classes.

The Comhairle's policy seeks to bring together three schools under the management of one Head Teacher, and has suggested this as a model for Bernera, Uig and Breasclate, and for Back, Tong and Tolsta. A number of concerns were raised in these communities during the consultation, including the time and distance it would take for a Head Teacher to travel between schools, and are being considered by the Comhairle during the review process.

### Discontinuing the provision of itinerant teachers in primary schools

It was two years ago that the council decided to phase out itinerant teachers in primary schools, bringing the Western Isles in line with a number of authorities elsewhere in Scotland. All primary teachers are already fully qualified to teach the entire primary curriculum, which includes Art, Music and P.E.

Suggestions made to councillors in the consultation debate have looked at options such as reducing the number of primary teachers and making up the loss with itinerant teachers; continuing to provide itinerants in addition to the primary teachers already present; or removing itinerant teachers altogether from primary education.

Despite the debate, there is no evidence to suggest that the loss of specialist teachers at primary level impacts young people when entering specialist secondary education. Primary children would continue to have access to Active Schools and Youth Music Initiative instructors; working with the voluntary sector in

this manner means a broader range of expertise can be provided more efficiently.

### E-Learning

This change centres on the re-design of the secondary curriculum as outlined by the Curriculum for Excellence. It would introduce a common timetable across a common school day in each of the four secondary schools in the Western Isles, ensuring consistency and equality.

E-learning comes into the equation in relation to the choices available to students in the four schools. The smallest school, Castlebay School with 84 secondary pupils, provides half the selection of subject choices available at the largest school, The Nicolson Institute, home to 1087 pupils. E-learning can therefore enhance the choices and opportunities available to students across the constituency through the sharing of resources and use of the latest technology. It would also increase choice at the senior level: for example in situations where a class of four pupils may not be feasible, three small classes of four pupils could be combined into one larger class through web link-ups.

Although concerns have been raised by parents concerning broadband width and IT infrastructure, the e-learning proposal has been met positively by the senior students who would benefit from the changes. Students in Barra expressed a desire to learn Spanish through a link-up with Lewis classrooms; in an area where trade with Spain is common, they can see a tangible benefit from the e-learning proposals. Further north in Lionacleit, e-learning is already underway: one student is participating in a law class based in Europe, and another is engaging with educators across the Atlantic.

As Catriona Stewart, Chair of Education and Children's Services, points out, "We've gone from one computer in the classroom, to a computer suite, to a 'class in a box'... If children are using this technology outside of school, why should it not be relevant in the classroom?" In a world where the internet permeates daily interactions, both personal and professional, the introduction of e-learning to education can only help prepare pupils further for life after they leave school.

### Introducing the asymmetric week

The introduction of an asymmetric school week works with the e-learning proposal in an effort to ensure that all schools in the authority follow a common school day. An 'asymmetric week' would leave children in school for four and a half days, with one afternoon per week set aside for teachers' 'non-teaching time.'

The asymmetric week would not alter the current teaching time: children are in school for 25 hours a week. During the free afternoon – most mainland schools choose Friday – administration duties and meetings could be undertaken, and staff training could also be delivered, allowing for a more efficient use of limited time and budgets. Such a timetable would lessen disruption of class time and reduce expenditure on supply staff when teachers are absent.

These timetable alterations would likely mean longer days or shorter breaks, and this has raised concerns that working parents may need to make child care arrangements for Friday afternoons. The Council has been considering both available options: sending children home, or keeping them in school and providing extra-curricular activities.

## CnES reduces deficit to £4.5m before cuts are made

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar held a Seminar on Monday February 4 to discuss the results of the public Budget Consultation meetings. Comhairle Leader Angus Campbell thanked the public for the high level of responses to the Consultation documents, which had greatly assisted the process.

Several areas had emerged for further discussion, the majority being education related including shared headships, itinerant teachers, the asymmetric week and distance learning; the inter-island air services were also raised.

The deficit facing the Comhairle has now been reduced to £4.5m. An additional £400k of income has been identified arising from several areas including a revised Council tax income and renewable energy projects. The Comhairle also has an opportunity to raise up to £124k on top