

Appendix 6: Minute Of Public Meetings

Public Meeting at Blackness Village Hall

Date & Time: 01/10/2024 18:30-20:00

Attendance: 58

Officers Present:

Jon Reid (Director of Education)

Deborah Davidson (Head of Education)

Kenny McNeil (Children Services Resource Manager)

Richard Teed (Senior Forward Planning Officer)

Siobhan Couttie (Forward Planning Officer) Minute taker

Groups Represented at Public Meeting

Groups Represented	Number
Parent/Carer of pupil at Blackness Primary School	16
Parent of Future Pupil	1
Blackness Primary School Parent Council	4
Grange Primary School Parent Council	1
Family Member attends Blackness	3
Resident within the Blackness Primary School area	31
Blackness Community Council	3
Blackness Hall Committee	1
Blackness/Grange PS Staff	2
Local Elected Member	2
Other	1

*some attendees counted twice if representing more than 1 group

Q1: Educational Benefits of Moving from Blackness to Grange

A parent expressed concern that educational benefits of moving pupils from Blackness to Grange have not been clearly demonstrated. Reference was made to factors like attainment and the opportunities provided by each school, questioning whether smaller class sizes at Blackness might actually offer a more supportive environment.

Response from Jon Reid:

In a larger school with more staff there are a greater number of opportunities for young people get involved in. In terms in attainment, it is difficult to directly compare Blackness and Grange Primary. Levels of attainment in Grange are exactly where they are expected. As Grange is a larger school, there are a number of pupils with additional support needs some are within the enhanced provision which can impact overall attainment levels. Grange's attainment levels are consistent with expectations, and there has been an improvement in recent years.

Q2: Class Size and Individualized Learning

A parent expressed concern that smaller class sizes at Blackness allow for more personalized attention, fostering academic growth at each child's unique pace, especially for advanced pupils. They worried that larger class sizes at Grange might inhibit this tailored approach.

Response from Jon Reid:

He responded that all teachers aim to maximize each pupil's potential, regardless of school size. He acknowledged that Blackness teachers face challenges planning for multi-grade, multi-ability classrooms, which may allow for personalized but complex teaching dynamics. At Grange, class sizes are structured to align pupils more closely by year stage level, which could streamline planning and potentially increase peer collaboration opportunities. He maintained that teachers in larger schools are still expected to tailor learning plans to accommodate advanced learners.

Q3: Shared Leadership and Equity Across Schools

A parent of a former pupil questioned why there is a disparity in benefits and resources if Blackness and Grange share the same leadership team.

Response from Deborah Davidson:

She clarified that while the leadership team is shared, each school has distinct demographics and resource needs. Grange's larger enrolment allows pupils to be grouped by age and development stage, enhancing collaborative and stage-aligned learning, which may not be feasible at Blackness due to smaller numbers and mixed-age classrooms.

Q4: Impact of Local Housing Developments on School Capacity

Residents voiced concern about Grange's capacity to handle the projected influx of pupils from nearby housing developments and suggested Blackness remain open to manage future growth.

Response from Jon Reid

He advised that if Grange's capacity approaches full enrolment due to new housing developments, planning gain funds could support necessary expansions. The council will continue to monitor local developments to ensure flexible capacity planning. Projections for enrolment increases are carefully estimated, and adjustments will be made as necessary.

Q5: Financial Justification and Cost Savings

Community members questioned whether the potential savings of approximately £200,000 annually from closing Blackness Primary justifies the significant impact it would have on pupils, families, and the wider community. They expressed concern that the projected savings are minimal in relation to the council's larger five-year budget shortfall of £56.4 million. Some attendees argued that closing Blackness might result in hidden or indirect costs, such as increased transportation expenses, potential costs to expand Grange, and the loss of community value, which they felt had not been fully considered in the council's calculations. Community members asked the council for a more transparent breakdown of costs associated with keeping Blackness open

versus closing it, particularly questioning if any of the savings would directly benefit local education or support surrounding schools in the area.

Response from Jon Reid:

While the projected savings may appear minor within the council's overall £56.4 million budget deficit, every cost-saving measure contributes to fiscal responsibility. Closing Blackness would support reallocation of resources, particularly toward other educational needs across the district. However, he stressed that the community's feedback is critical in assessing the balance between financial savings and educational impact.

Q6: Consultation Process and Transparency

Multiple attendees asked how community feedback would be recorded and accurately reflected in the decision-making process, expressing concern about transparency.

Response from Richard Teed:

Assurances were given that all community input will be documented in a comprehensive consultation report, which will include summaries and responses from the Council. The report will be publicly available, and community members will have a chance to review it and provide additional comments before a final decision is made. Jon Reid also reiterated the Council's commitment to an open and fair consultation process.

Q7: Community and Social Development Role of Blackness Primary

Multiple community members voiced concerns about Blackness Primary's central role in fostering a strong sense of community. They highlighted that Blackness, as a small rural school, provides unique opportunities for pupils and families to engage in community-focused activities, such as beach clean-ups, charity drives, and holiday events. These events, they argued, strengthen bonds between the school and the local residents, enhancing pupils' sense of belonging and social responsibility. Parents also emphasized that Blackness's involvement in community activities goes beyond education, embedding pupils in the life of the village and fostering values of service and collaboration. The attendees questioned how these qualities could be maintained if pupils were relocated to a larger school like Grange, where the community may feel less closely connected.

Parents and residents expressed that Blackness's strong community ties have historically been a key draw for families moving to the area. They noted that many community members feel the school is irreplaceable in its role of instilling pride, accountability, and local identity in pupils. One parent remarked that Blackness Primary operates almost like an extended family, where children feel known, safe, and supported by their peers, teachers, and community members alike. Community members warned that transferring pupils to Grange could risk losing these connections, especially for children who thrive in smaller, close-knit settings. The parents also mentioned that, as the only primary school in the village, Blackness is integral to the area's traditions and continuity, fostering friendships and bonds that often continue for life.

Response from Jon Reid

He acknowledged these concerns, stating that while larger schools can offer academic and extracurricular resources, they may not fully replicate the intimate setting of a small village school like Blackness. He encouraged residents to submit detailed written feedback on how Blackness serves as a unique community hub and reiterated that the council's final report will document these points for consideration by decision-makers. He assured the meeting that the council is not disregarding these values and would explore all avenues to mitigate any negative community impact should the proposal proceed.

Q8: Support for Neurodiverse and Special Needs Pupils

A parent expressed concerns about the ability of a larger school to provide adequate support for neurodiverse pupils, who may thrive better in smaller, more personalised environments like Blackness.

Response from Deborah Davidson:

She acknowledged that Blackness's smaller environment may offer specific benefits for pupils with additional needs. However, teachers at Grange and other schools are trained to plan and adjust for neurodiverse pupils as well as advanced learners. The council considers this a key factor in the decision-making process and aims to ensure that all pupils receive the support they need.

Q9: Effectiveness of Smaller Classes for Pupil Achievement

Research was cited by a parent suggesting that smaller classes yield better learning outcomes, questioning if Grange's larger class sizes could maintain similar results.

Response from Jon Reid:

While smaller class sizes can be beneficial for certain pupils, larger schools like Grange are equipped with additional resources, such as learning support assistants, which help address diverse academic needs. Teachers in all schools receive training to plan for various learning needs. Larger schools may also offer enhanced peer collaboration opportunities, which can positively impact achievement.

Q10: Promotion of Blackness Primary as an Asset

Attendees questioned why the council has not promoted Blackness as a distinct educational asset, suggesting that increased enrolment could be an alternative to closure.

Response from Jon Reid:

He clarified that while the council supports parental choice, many families have opted for other schools. He welcomed suggestions on how Blackness could be better promoted and assured attendees that this feedback would be considered seriously.

Q11: School Infrastructure and Resource Allocation

Community members raised questions about the specific resource allocations for Blackness under the shared leadership structure, particularly regarding staffing and budget allocation. The community were concerned the financial information in the report was incorrect, particularly referencing the assessment of teaching costs.

Response from Kenny McNeil:

He explained that resource allocations are reviewed and updated annually across schools in the council area. Budget adjustments are influenced by factors such as enrolment numbers and operating costs. He confirmed that resources specific to Blackness reflect its unique needs and that both schools benefit from the shared leadership arrangement. KM confirmed that 20% of the Head Teacher cost is allocated to Blackness which is reflected in the financial report.

Action: Grange Primary School Budget to be made available**Q12: Historical Concerns and Perceptions of Closure**

A community member shared that Blackness has faced closure threats previously, which may have deterred families from enrolling, and asked if this history has contributed to the current low enrolment.

Response from Jon Reid:

Acknowledged the historical challenges but clarified that the current consultation is a formal and open process to evaluate options based on current needs and feedback. He encouraged community members to view the consultation as an opportunity to contribute to an informed decision-making process. He acknowledged the uncertainty around the school and the decision by Councillors on this proposal will bring an end to that uncertainty.

Q13: Transparency of School Inspection Data and Comparisons

A parent asked for transparency in school inspection reports, referencing a 2023 inspection report for Grange while noting the lack of recent inspection data for Blackness.

Response from Jon Reid:

Explained that the last inspection at Blackness was conducted in 2013 under a different framework. Grange was recently evaluated under updated criteria and received positive assessments. He noted that inspection schedules are set by Education Scotland, and the council does not have direct control over when individual schools are inspected. School Quality Reports are published annually and are available to the public.

Action: Publish Attainment tables for both Grange and Blackness Primary Schools**Q14: Walkability and Safe Routes to School**

A resident highlighted that the council's report states Blackness lacks safe walking routes, but many families have safely walked to school for years.

Response from Jon Reid

He acknowledged this feedback

Q15: Local Housing Market Impact Due to School Closure

A resident suggested that the potential closure of Blackness Primary could negatively impact local property values, as families may be deterred from moving to an area without a local school.

Response Jon Reid:

He assured the meeting that this concern would be reflected in the final consultation report. He invited community members to submit further comments on how the school's closure could affect the community's future.

Close

Jon Reid Closed the meeting by expressing gratitude for the community's engagement and encouraging attendees to submit any additional comments. He emphasized the council's commitment to transparency and the value of community input in shaping the final decision.

Grange Primary School Budget

Objective Subjective Report Cost Centre - 200022 Grange Primary School

Main Structure (2023/2024) Breakdown by Sub Group

<u>2022/2023</u>		<----- From Period 1 to 12 ----->				
<u>Actual</u>		<u>Initial Budget</u>	<u>Revised Current Budget</u>	<u>Budget for Period</u>	<u>Actuals for Period</u>	<u>Variance (£)</u>
152,494.46	100 - SJC Employees	169,490		166,280	175,264.12	8,984
			166,280			
856,167.12	102 - Teachers	926,340		1,054,890	1,003,506.77	(51,383)
			1,054,890			
5,023.47	115 - Indirect Employee Expenses	5,090		5,070	5,684.07	614
			5,070			
1,013,685.05	10 - Employee Expenses	1,100,920	1,226,240	1,226,240	1,184,454.96	(41,785)
18,901.95	200 - Repairs and Maintenance	10,510	10,460	10,460	61,013.70	50,554
110.25	201 - Maintenance of Grounds	120	120	120	128.25	8
1,661.51	203 - Grnds Maint Internal Recharges	0	0	0	1,262.28	1,262
49,075.36	211 - Energy Costs	49,310	51,790	51,790	51,791.07	1
35,259.00	214 - Rates	36,310	44,070	44,070	44,073.75	4
4,758.35	216 - Water Services	3,700	3,700	3,700	6,439.01	2,739
41,574.79	220 - Cleaning & Domestic Supplies	40,580	51,900	51,900	51,898.95	(1)
16,397.43	222 - Property Insurance	0	16,670	16,670	16,032.64	(637)
167,738.64	20 - Property Expenses	140,530	178,710	178,710	232,639.65	53,930
4,082.61	400 - Equip, Furniture and Materials	4,290	3,320	3,320	4,292.74	973
84.33	405 - Services	0	0	0	81.29	81
92,480.03	408 - Catering	76,880		113,700	113,706.11	6
			113,700			
0.00	411 - Printing, Staty & Gen Off Exps	50	60	60	55.00	(5)
0.00	413 - Communications & Computing	50	0	0	0.00	0
15,401.05	420 - Schools Per Capita	7,850	8,910	8,910	9,949.34	1,039
112,048.02	40 - Supplies & Services	89,120	125,990	125,990	128,084.48	2,094
243,367.73	667 - Capital Charges to Services	0	325,120	325,120	325,119.18	(1)
243,367.73	68 - Capital Costs	0	325,120	325,120	325,119.18	(1)
1,536,839.44	Gross Expenditure	1,330,570	1,856,060	1,856,060	1,870,298.27	14,238
(7,617.20)	708 - Customer and Client Receipts	(6,010)	(9,760)	(9,760)	(8,736.18)	1,024
0.00	710 - Rents Received	(820)	(820)	(820)	0.00	820
(7,617.20)	70 - Income	(6,830)	(10,580)	(10,580)	(8,736.18)	1,844
1,529,222.24	Net Expenditure	1,323,740	1,845,480	1,845,480	1,861,562.09	16,082

Grange Primary School Budget

Online Public Meeting

Microsoft Teams

Date & Time: 10/10/2024 18:30-19:30

Attendance: 10

Officers Present:

Jon Reid (Director of Education)

Deborah Davidson (Head of Education)

Kenny McNeil (Children Services Resource Manager)

Richard Teed (Senior Forward Planning Officer)

Siobhan Coultie (Forward Planning Officer) Minute taker

Q1: Evidence for Educational Benefits of Transition to Grange Primary

A question was asked about the evidence supporting the Council's claim that the transition to Grange would provide "considerable educational benefits." She referenced existing research showing mixed results on class and school size benefits and noted positive outcomes associated with composite classes.

Response from Deborah Davidson:

Deborah explained that the Council's position is informed by a combination of data from across Falkirk schools and specific insights from teachers and staff. Key factors include differentiation challenges within very small schools and variations in pupil engagement, particularly for those with additional support needs. The Council also tracks comparative performance data across small and large schools, including indicators such as attainment, which is measured for primary years 1, 4, and 7. She noted that while Blackness performs well, Grange's broader curriculum and larger staff could offer wider learning and social experiences that might better prepare students for the transition to secondary education.

Action: Publish Attainment tables for both Grange and Blackness Primary Schools

Q2: Lack of Consideration for Alternative Options to Closure

A concerned resident asked why the Council had not considered alternative uses for Blackness, such as marketing it to families seeking a smaller school environment that might better support children struggling in larger settings.

Response from Jon Reid:

Jon explained that, by policy, the Council doesn't actively promote or advertise any specific school for placements. While parents may place requests for their children to attend any school, including Blackness, it would be challenging for Blackness to expand solely through such requests, especially given the limitations of class capacity and placement legislation.

Response from Deborah Davidson

Added that the Council's guidelines ensure that schools maintain sufficient resources and space without adding excess capacity that requires additional teachers or physical

changes for placing requests, neither of which would be feasible for Blackness under current regulations.

Q3: Balancing the Report to Highlight Benefits of Blackness Primary

Concern was expressed that the report overly emphasized Grange's benefits without a comparable breakdown of benefits for Blackness Primary, suggesting that this imbalance gave the impression of a predetermined outcome. He noted high attendance and satisfactory attainment levels as strengths of Blackness.

Response from Jon Reid:

He acknowledged the feedback, agreeing that more focus on Blackness's unique advantages, including its community and academic achievements, would offer a more balanced view. He explained that since the proposal is to close Blackness, the report naturally focuses on Grange's benefits. However, Jon committed to ensuring that Blackness's strengths would be clearly represented in the final report.

Action: Expanded representation of Blackness Primary's advantages in the final report

Q3: Capacity and Overcrowding Concerns at Grange Primary

There was apprehension about Grange's occupancy potentially reaching or exceeding capacity if Blackness students transition there. It was pointed out that community feedback suggests Grange already feels near capacity and asked how future growth will be managed.

Response from Jon Reid:

Jon shared that Grange's current occupancy is 86%, with primary schools in Falkirk able to operate effectively at up to 95%. Projected enrolments suggest occupancy will decrease by 2029, but new housing in the area may influence future numbers. JR reassured that Planning Gain funds are available from developers specifically to support infrastructure expansions if Grange requires it.

Response from Richard Teed:

Added that current adjustments, such as the division of a large teaching space and acoustic upgrades, have been made to enhance the school environment without compromising the quality of student experiences.

Concern was raised that Grange's expansions seemed reactive rather than proactive. RT clarified that the split classroom was previously a large, team-teaching space and that Planning Gain funds provide flexibility for future expansions if student numbers warrant them.

Q4: Community Sustainability and Impact on Blackness Village

A member of the community questioned the Council's claim that the closure of Blackness Primary would not impact village sustainability, questioning the basis for this conclusion given existing studies showing that rural school closures often harm community viability. It was also asked if the Council had considered long-term effects on local demographics and community cohesion.

Response from Kenny McNeill:

He explained that Blackness's classification as an "accessible rural" area, close to both Linlithgow and Bo'ness, influenced the Council's perspective. The informal consultation during the 2022 mothballing discussions and the current consultation helped gather local views, suggesting that residents are not wholly dependent on the school for community cohesion. He acknowledged the local attachment to Blackness Primary and assured that the Council would engage with the Hall Committee to ensure the community hall remains a viable resource for the village. He reiterated that the Council is carefully considering how best to balance educational resources across the entire Council area.

Q5: Loss of Active Travel Options for Blackness Pupils

A member of the community pointed out the importance of active travel for child health and raised concerns about the report's lack of focus on how transitioning to Grange might impact children's ability to walk or cycle to school, particularly as many Blackness families already practice active commuting. It was inquired whether public health experts had been consulted on this aspect.

Response from Kenny McNeill:

Acknowledged the Council's commitment to active travel as part of its health and well-being agenda. It was clarified that the Council had assessed local roads around Blackness and deemed many of them unsuitable for unsupervised walking due to safety risks, which is why the Council provides free transportation to school for many children in the area. He commended the families who walk or cycle when conditions permit and agreed that the Council should continue evaluating safe travel options, including potential active travel routes to Grange, though he noted that the distance to Grange may limit feasibility.

Action: Explore whether active commuting options to Grange could feasibly be enhanced**Meeting Closed**

Jon Reid closed the meeting, thanking attendees for their input and encouraging further feedback via Participate Plus.