



MINUTES

Avoch Primary School Parent Council

Attenuation Tank Discussion

27th January 20210 | 7.00PM

In Attendance

WGC Ltd – Dougal Murray (*Managing Director*), Rhona Donnelly (*Senior Quantity Surveyor*), Mark MacLennan (*Contract Manager*)

Highland Council – Derek Martin (*Area Care & Learning Manager*), Robert Campbell (*Estate Strategy Manager*), Lorna Sim (*Head Teacher APS*)

APC - Ruth Edmonds (*Chair*), Ingrid Robertson, Claire Weaver (*Treasurer*), Fiona Whyte, Kirsty Cameron (taking minutes only)

Councillors – Councillor Gordon Adam and Councillor Craig Fraser

Avoch & Killen Community Council – Helen Baillot

Introduction

Ruth Edmonds (RE) opened the meeting and explained that this meeting was called by the Parent Council (APC) on behalf of parents / carers at Avoch Primary School (APS) in relation to issues resulting from the development at the former Memorial Field site, specifically the damage to the infant grass area caused by the installation of an attenuation tank. It was noted that APC understood that the Head Teacher (Lorna Sim) and Highland Council Estates had been working hard to resolve this matter. The APC has communicated with the Lorna Sim (LS - Head Teacher) fully and throughout. Parent Councils have a remit that includes the wellbeing of the children while at school and after receiving complaints and enquiries from parents/carers about this problem, the APC agreed to take on the issue with the aim of reaching a positive outcome. RE expressed concern that to date, the issues have not been resolved and the tank area is not finished to an acceptable standard.

Chronology and Review of Evidence

A chronology of events was produced by APC and distributed in advance of the meeting (this will be appended to the Minute and will not be fully described again here). This evidenced chronology was reviewed by Ingrid Robertson (IR). The first image shows how the area looked before the tank installation. This was one of the only level areas in the playground and showed a grassy surface that was regularly used for play and outdoor learning. This has been particularly critical recently as the children need additional space to keep bubbles separate in the playground as well as for outdoor lessons and PE (in light of Covid19 legislation and guidance). Unfortunately, there have only been three weeks since the tank installation where this area has been usable (and then only as a rough play surface).

The attenuation tank was required to address flooding issues that were raised as a direct result of the planning application at the Memorial Field site. The tank was constructed on school grounds and further images show that it was built very close to the ground surface. The possibility that it lies too close to the surface was raised.

The children were delighted to be involved in the publicity provided by WGC during the build. However, after this positive PR there followed a long correspondence between WGC, the school and the HC Estates Team noting various problems, including the unusable surface finish of the tank area. It was noted that the tank installation was completed by August 2019 but the area remained fenced and unsurfaced for a further approx. 11 months. In January 2020, WGC confirmed that this would be remedied by removing the stones, preparing the surface and reurfing. The school and construction site were closed from mid-March at first Lockdown. The area was eventually raked and seeded with a narrow six-week window in advance of the school reopening in August. This was despite calls by the school for seeding to be done in May to provide enough time for grass to re-establish before the children returned. The return date to site for WGC was dictated by THC. It became clear then that the site was not fit for purpose; a further image shows a very stony area with little established grass. The surface and surrounding area are noted as being constantly waterlogged and spongy and APC have both a legal entitlement and a moral obligation to the children to get this remedied.

There are further associated issues that, although not the main subject of this discussion, are also relevant and have been raised continually by parent/carers and the wider community with APC. These include damage to the bus pull-in / lay-by (some of which has already been rectified), the ongoing significant run-off from the construction site and possible damage or blocking of the drainage system. One image shows the magnitude of the issue that we are facing in regard to the waterlogged and flooded pitch which has been unusable for much of the school year. The pitch flooding at this point was also exacerbated by the heavy rainfall. Finally, there have been issues with poor communication by WGC with the school.

Discussion

Discussion was opened up and additional information and/or clarification was sought on the points raised by IR in her overview of the chronology.

Rhona Donnelly (RD) confirmed that the tank gathers surface water from the school grounds and holds it to alleviate the pressure from this area on the Avoch wastewater treatment works. The tank provides a reservoir and is designed to stop a mass of water going into the drains when there is heavy rainfall. All the school drains were rerouted into the new tank at the time of installation. The tank was required by Scottish Water in light of the additional pressure that would arise from the completed development. RD confirmed that the surface of the immediate tank area would not drain into this system.

Dougal Murray (DM) stressed that WGC are only the contractor on the site and not the developer (who are Cairn Housing). This means that WGC only build to the design provided and are not responsible for the specification of the tank or its location. The location was chosen in agreement with Cairn, Scottish Water and Highland Council and it is likely that this was the only suitable location. The tank was designed, constructed and approved before WGC came on site. It was installed by WGC subcontractor RJ MacLeod. The cost was borne by Cairn Housing at c.£82k. In regard to the delay to reinstate the surface over the tank, DM noted that the council had not permitted the work to restart once construction opened up again. Construction work was permitted to restart nationally, though HC sites remained closed until later. Permission was granted to carry out the work in July 2020.

RE noted that there was a delay between the installation (August 2019) and the start of lockdown and asked if there was a reason that the work wasn't done earlier, as soon as the tank was installed.

Mark MacLennan (MM) agreed that access was only opened up in early July 2020 with a minimal window for establishment before school reopened. At that time, materials such as turf were hard to access quickly and it was agreed with HC to re-seed the area instead. MM noted that contrary to the APC chronology, the tank was installed during the school holidays October 2019, with only the initial drainage works carried out in the summer. MM noted that the area was handed back to HC in October 2019 with an agreement that the ground would be reinstated to its previous condition; this was accepted. MM confirmed that he was satisfied that the depth of topsoil met the

specification for the tank installation and for reinstatement (at 500mm min cover to tank including stone layers). The area was hand raked for stones before being seeded.

Robert Campbell (RC) of HC was asked for confirmation on this point. He agreed that the Clerk of Works was happy with it at the time but that images did seem to show more stones than would normally be acceptable. RC agreed that another stone pick and re-turfing would improve the situation. WGC were not asked to check if grass had taken before the area was opened up. The area was required for allowing sufficient social distancing / play areas for the children upon return to school with covid restrictions/regulations in August.

IR noted that there was a lot of correspondence regarding the reinstatement following the tank installation and a considerable period between the completion and the start of lockdown when the work could have been carried out. The work was scoped to replace the ground like-for-like, as a flat, grassy surface. The re-turfing became seeding and the final landscaping has not been done to the standard that WGC are known for. IR noted that we need to a level surface for play and learning in this area and we need the surface ground water to be able to be absorbed here. In addition, there has been flooding behind the school building in areas that have never flooded before. This further restricted the useable area of playground which is particularly challenging for such a large school.

RE agreed that the surface as it was left was never fit for use, even if the HC Clerk of Works accepted it at the time.

Claire Weaver (CW) commented that if the tank is clad in impermeable plastic, has been the cause of the saturation in the immediate area which is an entirely new problem in what was previously the best piece of grass in the playground?

DM says that this is correct; the plastic membrane won't allow immediate drainage and that he will check that the depth of soil covering is sufficient as this would aid drainage of water at the immediate tank site. (N.B. subsequent checks of drawings indicate geotextile membrane which is porous to allow water through but retain any solids entering the tank.)

RD confirmed that the tank is working across the rest of the immediate school grounds and that all the drains were replaced and are in full working order. A CCTV survey was given to HC at the time. With regard to other run-off issues and the pitch flooding, this may be exacerbated because the two 30k litre tanks on the main site had not yet gone live and once these are connected this should help alleviate some of the additional run-off and waterlogging on the pitch. RD confirmed that no work was done on the pitch drainage such as pre-construction pitch drainage maintenance) as this was outwith the remit of WGC which was limited to drains around the school itself.

RC said that HC would have sole responsibility for the pitch drainage and will check the date of the last survey or work carried out.

It is accepted by all that the seed needed longer to establish but that the area had to be opened up when school reopened and the area was needed to allow for children to social distance as per guidance and regulations in place at school opening.

Proposed Solutions

DM said he was happy to instruct the works to check the situation, including the depth of soil, and to remedy it. He offered re-seeding with raking and stone removal plus top up soil as required. He accepted that there was a series of mishaps, which included the Covid19 lockdown and associated difficulties, in addition to an exceptionally wet season towards the end of 2020 (and before the main attenuation tanks on the construction site were connected). He agreed that the run-off from the site was unfortunate and that the procedures they had in place were not enough to cope with the rainfall and that exceptionally heavy rainfall was also experienced. He commented that the lack of communication was regrettable, particularly as the site lies so close to the school and the bus stops. He reiterated that as the builder, they worked to a set specification and whilst they can put right things that aren't right, they are not in a position to redesign.

RC agreed that the level of soil depth should be checked and the surface looked at and sorted by raking, levelling and grassing as necessary. He said he would ask the Maintenance Officer to look into this and thanked DM for the commitment to remedy this.

RE asked if we could we agree to turf the area, as was originally specified, rather than seed it again.

DM said he would check the specification that was agreed with the HC for reinstatement and noted that turf is not always the best solution as it can be more fragile than seeds and can often fail entirely. Turf is a loose layer placed on top of the soil and is not safe to use until it bonds properly. It also requires lots of looking after. He said he would also ask the landscapers if there is a difference in timescales for each option.

RC thought that the turf was originally specified, agreed between HC and WGC, though he said he would check this. He agreed he would share the agreed specification with the APC. He agreed that turf can also be a risk though and that time to establish is key.

Derek Martin (DM-HC) stressed that our shared interest was that learning could continue as best it could in difficult circumstances. He was content with the proposed plan to look at and remedy the tank area as a resolution to the situation. He raised the important point that construction on the new nursery will start in a few weeks and this will bring additional pressure to the school and will mean more disruption in the tank area. The timing of any remedial works would need to be planned carefully to ensure that it can be carried out with two sets of contractors on site, whilst keeping the area safe for staff and pupils. A rapid resolution may not be the best idea and it would have to be coordinated with Morgan Sindall. There would be no point doing the remedial work immediately if it will then be damaged again by the nursery construction. DM-HC appreciated that WGC worked hard to resolve the problems during the heavy rainfall and subsequent flooding at the school and other affected areas in the village.

RE asked if our councillors wanted to comment on this. At our last APC meeting, we had agreed with the councillors that it would be appropriate to explore a contribution from the developer for the wider issues the school has experienced a result of the construction works.

Gordon Adam (GA) said that this was an unfortunate combination of circumstances and it would be difficult to apportion 'blame'. He believed that the resolution proposed for the tank area problems was reasonable and a good result for the meeting.

RE agreed that we have a good resolution proposed for with the tank area now and thanked everyone for agreeing this. RE also asked whether we could seek advice from WGC more generally about the pitch area. It would be helpful if we could use their expertise to guide us to a solution there as the pitch is in a very poor condition.

DM noted that the pitch was talked about at the start of the project as the problems have been known about for a long time, but the options considered were too expensive to be justified. If the groundwater sits just below the surface (as believed) then the solution would be bringing in thousands of tonnes of material to the site to raise the level of the ground higher - and that the cost and disruption alone would be prohibitive. For example, this was carried out for the landscaping and pitches when Inshes Primary was built and the pitches took three years before they could be used. DM said that their project partners, RJ MacLeod and Cairn Housing, both have Funding Schemes that could be applied for in regard to the wider issues.

RD noted that the funding options were raised at an earlier project meeting with Highland Housing Alliance, RJ MacLeod and Cairn Housing. RC confirmed that he met with LS following this and mentioned the possible funding options but that it hadn't been followed up yet.

IR thanked DM for agreeing to the tank remedial work and asked if there is anything that WGC may be able to offer as in-kind support. This could be something like aerating the pitch to make the area useable. DM agreed that he would be happy to consider aeration or something similar, but it would need to be a separate meeting and we should table an idea and put it to him for consideration.

DM-HC reiterated that any work on the HC Estates has to follow due process and that APC cannot directly instruct work, though he would be supportive of this general idea to improve the pitch area. IR confirms that we are aware of the protocol, having already been through it in the past year.

GA asked if it would be useful for APC to have a written indication of what projects may be appropriate for the funds suggested by WGC. He was not previously aware of these grant schemes and we could ask them to clarify how best we can succeed in an application. An idea of how other schools may have been successful would also help.

DM agreed and confirmed that, as the RJ MacLeod fund is private money, it can support more projects and he believed that an application from APC would be supported. DM would be able to guide us in the right direction in this regard. DM agreed to support an application to RJ MacLeod as necessary.

RE thanked everyone for their contribution to the discussion, to clarifying the processes and to reaching a solution.

Next Steps & actions

Next step	Associated actions	Responsible / Involved (Lead/s in bold)	Deadline
1. Agree (new) specification of remedial works	a. Share previously agreed specification for reinstatement of tank area.	RC	19 th Feb.
	b. Site meeting to check tank area including levelling and topsoil depth.	RC, DM, APC, LS	12 th Mar.
	c. Agree whether turf or topsoil would work best.	RC, DM, APC, LS	12 th Mar.
	d. Co-ordinate with Morgan Sindall in regard to nursery construction and associated disruption and agree timing of remedial works.	RC, LS	19 th Mar.
2. Complete remedial works to tank area as per agreed (new) specification	a. Complete remedial works to tank area.	DM	<i>Tbc as per agreement reached in 1d.</i>
	b. Conduct site inspection once remedial works complete.	RC, LS, APC, DM, RC	<i>Tbc - once remedial works complete.</i>
3. Guidance on options for improving pitch area and approach to	a. Arrange meeting to discuss options & in kind support.	APC, DM	12 th Mar (ideally visit to pitch to coincide with tank area site visit).

WGC for direct in-kind support in this.			
	b. Follow up on options & in kind support.	APC	<i>Tbc – as appropriate.</i>
4. Further information on and applications to funding suggested by WGC.	a. Further information on funding options from WGC; what projects might be appropriate; how best to succeed in an application & examples of other successful schools.	APC, DM, GA	19 th Feb
	b. Develop and submit applications as appropriate.	APC, LS	<i>Tbc - depending on options agreed.</i>