



Rebecca Ridgway takes her daughter Molly across the loch on the journey to Kinlochbervie Primary, which this summer will have no new intake for the first time

Wanted: adventurous family to help safeguard Highland school

Lindsay McIntosh

It should be an easy sell to parents concerned about big classes, pollution and crime in cities: a place at an idyllic village school where teachers can give children one-to-one attention and PE lessons involve kayaking on the nearby loch.

Yet Kinlochbervie Primary School, which nestles among dramatic cliffs at the north-west tip of Scotland, has seen its pupil numbers decline over the years and, this summer, there will be no new intake for the first time. With five children leaving for the high school next door, the roll will drop to 19, one below the number required for the two full-time teachers it has at present.

Local parents are desperate for a new family to move in before August to prevent them losing a teacher under national regulations. Otherwise, all the pupils, aged 6-11, will be taught in the same class.

"We only need one pupil," the head teacher, Jill Bruce, 53, said. "It does make sense having at least two classes. It's far from ideal, having such a big stretch of ages and stages in one class."

"We are sure there are families elsewhere who would love their children to have these advantages — the safe environment, the freedom. When you are in a city, you are always wondering where the children are and worrying, but here they are in a safe community where everyone knows everyone."

She accepts that with the budget cut-sit must make, Highland Council is unlikely to go against the guidelines and give her another teacher, although she will get a part-time staff member. "Maybe a few years ago they might have



Jill Bruce, head teacher, worries for the long-term future of her primary school

looked at it," she said, sadly. When she took charge more than 20 years ago, there were three teachers and 57 pupils. She admits she worries for the future.

Once, Kinlochbervie was a thriving fishing port but, as the industry has dwindled, so has the population and it is now about 480. About half the 24 pupils are from fishing families. Others are the children of the local policeman, teachers, oil workers and tradesmen.

However, with technology, residents point out, anyone could work from home in the Sutherland village as easily as they could in Central London. The remote setting — three hours from the nearest city, Inverness — means that few pass through, but residents believe that if parents only knew about it they would be keen to move there.

For Molly and Hughie, aged 10 and



8, the school run is on the motor boat with their mother, Rebecca Ridgway, who runs an adventure sports business from a croft on Ardmore peninsula across the loch. If the wind is too strong, they hike along a cliffside path.

Ms Ridgway, daughter of the adventurer John Ridgway, attended the primary school herself, and always wanted to return to the area if she could make a living. She set up Ridgway Adventure about 12 years ago.

"I always liked the idea of having my family here because it was such a great place to grow up, building dens and gathering sea urchins from the shore," she said. "The school is just big enough. It's such a great location, such a great education for Molly and Hughie. I am sure they have all the opportunities kids have in bigger classes, and more.

With one more child, all the children would really benefit."

She heard about the staffing quandary during a pre-Christmas parent-teacher council meeting. "We were quite stunned, but thought someone else would move in," she said. "But as time goes on, we've realised that no one else will just come in."

"I think people like the idea of moving here but the reality is quite a wrench and it's not the best time for people to say, 'I think I'll take a year out.'"

The parents refuse to blame the council for implementing national regulations, but are frustrated that, for the want of one pupil, they are to lose a teacher. "I understand completely that they can't have teachers left, right and centre, but for the sake of one child... It just seems to be that all the time there are cuts."

The children are clearly thriving. On the cliff walk home, Molly delightedly told *The Times* about her extra-curricular activities — science club, shinty, football, Highland dancing — and about her enthusiasm for her teacher, Graham Gaw.

Mr Gaw, 32, has spent his probationary year at the school but will return to Edinburgh in July as no permanent job is now available.

"We have four year groups in our class and it's challenging but the rewards are massive," he said. "I love it. I can't wait until next term when we have this wonderful world outside the door and we can take the children outside. I have much greater freedom here. When I speak to other probationers they seem to be doing paperwork more and more often."