

Consultation proposal by Aberdeen City Council

Report by HM Inspectors, Education Scotland, addressing educational aspects of the proposal to close Bramble Brae and Quarryhill Primary Schools and establish a new amalgamated school within the current Quarryhill building from August 2014.

Context

This report from Education Scotland is required under the terms of the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*. It has been prepared by HM Inspectors in accordance with the terms of the Act. The purpose of this report is to provide an independent and impartial consideration of the council's consultation proposal. Section 2 of this report sets out the views expressed by consultees during the initial consultation process. Section 3 sets out HM Inspectors' consideration of the educational aspects of the proposal and the views expressed by consultees. Section 4 summarises HM Inspectors' overall view of the proposal. Upon receipt of this report, the Act requires the council to consider it and then prepare its final consultation report. The council's final consultation report should include a copy of this report and must contain an explanation of how it has reviewed the initial proposal, including a summary of points raised during the consultation and the council's response to them. The council has to publish its final consultation report three weeks before it takes its final decision. As the council is proposing to close a school, it will need to follow all legislative obligations set out in the 2010 Act, including notifying Ministers within six working days of making its final decision and explaining the opportunity for representations to be made to Ministers.

1. Introduction

1.1 The report from HM Inspectors is required under the terms of the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*. It has been prepared by HM Inspectors in accordance with the terms of the Act.

1.2 HM Inspectors undertook the following activities in considering the educational aspects of the proposal:

- attendance at the public meeting held on 18 September 2013 in connection with the council's proposals;
- consideration of all relevant documentation provided by the council in relation to the proposal, specifically the educational benefits statement and related consultation documents, written and oral submissions from parents and others;
- consideration of further information on all schools affected; and
- visits to the site of Bramble Brae Primary School and Quarryhill Primary School, including discussion with relevant consultees.

1.3 HM Inspectors considered:

- the likely effects of the proposal for children and young people of the schools; any other users; children likely to become pupils within two years of the date of publication of the proposal paper; and other children and young people in the council area;
- any other likely effects of the proposal;
- how the council intends to minimise or avoid any adverse effects that may arise from the proposal; and
- benefits which the council believes will result from implementation of the proposal, and the council's reasons for coming to these beliefs.

2. Consultation process

2.1 Aberdeen City Council undertook the initial consultation on its proposals with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*. The consultation included four public meetings held in September and October 2013 and invitations to submit written responses or to complete a pro-forma. The consultation period ran from 26 August to 11 October 2013. The council received a large number of responses to its proposal. None of the responses supported the proposal. A member of staff from the council undertook a consultation exercise with children in attendance at both schools involved in the proposal. Officers of the Council also met with staff at both schools and provided opportunities to meet with Parent Council representatives.

2.2 The Parent Council and parents of children attending Bramble Brae Primary School are opposed to the proposal and want Bramble Brae Primary School to remain open as a school. They questioned the educational benefits as outlined in the proposal. They stated that the size of Bramble Brae as it stands meets the needs of their children well and did not believe moving to a larger school would enhance their children's education. They believe that Bramble Brae Primary School is the centre of their community and that the closure of the school would have a negative impact on the wider community. They felt that Bramble Brae and Quarryhill Schools serve two distinct communities. Parents expressed concern about the walking distance and conditions to the proposed site of the amalgamated school and the possible safety implications for their children in relation to the routes to school including the crossing of Provost Fraser Drive. Parents also expressed concern about possible traffic congestion around the new amalgamated school. Parents were concerned about the time it would take many parents and children to walk to the new amalgamated school in general, and in particular, in adverse weather. As all walking routes to the proposed school are uphill, concern was expressed by, and on behalf of parents, who would be pushing prams and/or be accompanied by young children. The time this would add on to the school day for children was a legitimate consideration. They believed that children may not be able to benefit from after-school activities at the new amalgamated school due to the distance in walking home. Other concerns of the practicalities involved in going to and from the new school were expressed and included, children not being able to go home for lunch,

child care issues involving grandparents and others, and the resulting difficulties of some parents being able to return to work.

2.3 The Parent Council and parents of children attending Quarryhill Primary School are not in agreement with the proposal and want Quarryhill Primary School to remain as the school is at present. They stated that they believed that the size of Quarryhill Primary School as it stands meets the needs of their children well and did not believe that being in a larger school would enhance their children's education as stated in the proposal. They felt that Bramble Brae and Quarryhill Schools served two distinct communities.

2.4 Parents and staff from both Bramble Brae and Quarryhill Primary Schools expressed concerns regarding the implications of a larger number of children being educated in the current Quarryhill building. These concerns centre on the size of the classrooms at Quarryhill, any potential increase in current class sizes, and how this would support the delivery of Curriculum for Excellence and class management particularly for the older children. Concern was expressed about the increased number of children moving in the corridor areas of the school, use of coat pegs and the increase in volume of children using the dining hall. Parents were unclear about the exact details of the necessary re-configuration of the building to accommodate the new amalgamated school. Particular concern was expressed about the re-configuration of the building which would be needed to accommodate the increased number of children in the nursery. Staff and parents at Quarryhill sought assurance that the planned developments to the outdoor area would continue.

2.5 Parents and staff from both schools do not believe that the timescale set by the council is realistic. They are concerned that there may not be sufficient time for transition arrangements to support all children in the transition to the amalgamated school. Parents and staff are also concerned about the future staffing arrangements should the proposal go ahead. There is a high deprivation level in the Bramble Brae catchment area and parents and staff have concerns that the enhanced staffing currently at Bramble Brae may not transfer to a new amalgamated school. Support staff in both schools need early reassurance about their own positions. Parents and staff from both schools are not aware of the impact of any financial savings of this proposal on the wider educational benefits to other children and young people across the authority.

2.6 Children who attend both Bramble Brae and Quarryhill Primary Schools are not in favour of the proposal. They do not want their respective schools to change. Children feel that staff know them well and they would prefer to remain in a school of a similar size. They also benefit from a range of after-school activities available at present in their respective schools. Children from both schools are very happy with the way that their schools operate at present and do not want to lose their school's ethos and identity should the proposal go ahead and they merge and become a larger school.

2.7 Children from Bramble Brae are concerned about the location of the proposed amalgamated school and the increased distance they would have to walk to and from school, and the potential increase in the length of their school day.

2.8 Overall, parents, children and staff expressed concern about the future identity of the amalgamated school, including the school uniform and the name of the school. They would like more details about the merged school.

3. Educational aspects of the proposal

3.1 The *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010* sets out clearly the duties of a council with regard to its educational benefits statement. The main educational benefit that Aberdeen City Council puts forward in this proposal is that children's education will benefit from being in a larger school. The council asserts that through the proposal, children would benefit from a broader staff expertise and range of learning and teaching approaches. It states that in a larger setting there would be a greater flexibility in the groupings of children which would have a positive impact on learning and meeting needs. At present, the educational benefits statement does not set out sufficiently convincingly how these benefits will be achieved. The current benefits are expressed only in general terms. In taking forward the proposal, the council needs to set out the specific benefits for the children that will accrue from implementation of the proposal and how these will be achieved.

3.2 The council's proposal claims that the amalgamation would provide even more opportunities for school clubs and out-of-school activities. Parents have reasonable concerns that the increased distance which some children will need to travel at the end of the school day may prevent some children from benefiting from these activities. Staff also have reasonable concerns that the suggested increase in out-of-school activities may not actually materialise due to the increased number of children using the same facilities currently operating at Quarryhill Primary School. Consultees also expressed justified concerns that, with the increased number of classes in the new amalgamated school using the same gym hall, opportunities for all children to experience two hours quality physical education each week throughout the year may be restricted. In taking forward the proposal, the council will need to address these concerns appropriately.

3.3 In terms of attainment, the council states there is a broad similarity between the two schools. Whilst in some aspects children at Quarryhill appear to perform particularly well, based on data provided by the council, the value-added performance of children at Bramble Brae is amongst the highest in the city. This value-added factor of Bramble Brae has been recognised formally across the authority. The proposal suggests that the amalgamation of the schools can lead to sharing of the current best practice in both schools, in particular value-added improvements, leading to improved outcomes for a greater number of learners. It will be important to clarify how children currently at Bramble Brae who require additional support with their learning, will benefit from the additional support needs base at Quarryhill Primary School.

3.4 Both Bramble Brae Primary School and Quarryhill Primary School are currently operating under capacity. Implementation of this proposal will help the council address this issue and enable it to deliver its duty to secure best value through the provision of adequate and efficient provision of school education as set out in the *Education (Scotland) Act 1980*. The current occupancy rate at Bramble Brae is 81% and Quarryhill 54%. In session 2012/13, of the 217 children living in the

Bramble Brae catchment area 113 attend school. For Quarryhill, of the 287 children living in the catchment area, 141 attend the school. The roll at Bramble Brae is predicted to decrease and the roll at Quarryhill to remain stable. The council rates both buildings as B (Satisfactory—performing adequately but showing minor deterioration) for condition and Quarryhill B with Bramble Brae C (Poor – showing major problems and/or not operating optimally) for suitability. The council should clarify its position that access for users with a physical disability is more suitable in the Quarryhill building. Through this proposal, the council wishes to improve facilities for all children and address any weaknesses in accommodation at Bramble Brae.

3.5 Both Bramble Brae and Quarryhill Primary Schools have their own nursery classes, the proposed amalgamation, with both nursery classes merging also, would have a similar impact for children due to start school in two years time as those currently attending. Both schools presently have nurseries registered for 20 children in the morning and 20 in the afternoon. The proposal states that a new nursery for 40 children in the morning and 40 children in the afternoon will be created. At present there is a waiting list for both nurseries. The proposal as it is currently set out does not address the lack of capacity in nursery provision in the area.

3.6 Bramble Brae Primary School and Quarryhill Primary School benefit from productive links with Northfield Academy. At P7, most children from both Bramble Brae and Quarryhill Primary Schools transfer to Northfield Academy as the zoned school. The adoption of this proposal will therefore have no impact on transfer arrangements. Both schools also work closely with Northfield Academy and other associated primary schools in developing Curriculum for Excellence. If the council's proposal is implemented, transition arrangements and curricular liaison would be unaffected by the amalgamation.

3.7 Scottish Ministers have the right to call-in decisions to close schools. The current timeline for this proposal gives limited consideration to the possible impact of this process on the council's plans. It will be difficult for the council to ensure that the appointment of a new headteacher, the development of management, staffing, curricular and transition arrangements and the necessary re-configuration of the Quarryhill building are in place to allow a smooth transition to a new amalgamated school, can be managed within the current timescale for this proposal. In taking forward the proposal, the council needs to ensure that it provides sufficient time for effective communication with parents, staff and children to alleviate their concerns and ensure effective transitions for children from Bramble Brae Primary School and Quarryhill Primary to a new amalgamated primary school are in place.

3.8 There would be increased traffic congestion at the start and the end of the school day at the site of the new school. With an increased volume of children having to cross a busy main road, the council proposes to review travel plans to ensure safety should this proposal go ahead.

3.9 The council intends to minimise any adverse effects arising from the proposal by ensuring that an implementation strategy will be developed and communicated to parents and staff if the proposal is approved. This would include an exit strategy for

the Bramble Brae building. Established links which already exist between the two schools would also help minimise these adverse effects.

4. Summary

4.1 If the proposal is implemented it has the potential to broaden the staff expertise from both schools as it brings staff together and enable the greater sharing of current best practice. This will build upon the established links which already exist between the two schools. However, in its current form, the proposal does not set out sufficiently clearly the specific benefits that implementation of the proposal will bring to the children directly affected by it. Parents and staff have justified concerns that the basis of the educational benefits statements relies too heavily on the assertion that children's education will be enhanced from being in a larger school. In taking forward the proposal, the council needs to ensure that it sets out clearly and specifically how implementation of the proposal will meet children's needs better and improve the curriculum and the quality of children's learning experiences and the outcomes they achieve in the new amalgamated school.

4.2 The proposal has the potential to contribute to the council's efforts to secure best value within the context of addressing over-capacity in the council's school estate. As a result, the council may be able to make more efficient and equitable use of its resources to the benefit of children and young people throughout the wider council area. The council should outline any educational benefits to the wider education community of Aberdeen that will arise from achieving savings through the implementation of this proposal.

4.3 The council needs to give assurance to parents that any health and safety issues regarding the increased number of children in the new amalgamated school are identified and addressed. As stated in the proposal, any related traffic management and routes to school issues which arise if the proposal is implemented must be identified and addressed. In particular, the council should consult further with parents of children currently at Bramble Brae to ensure their concerns about the walking conditions to the new school and implications of these are alleviated.

4.4 The council has set a challenging timescale to take forward this proposal for amalgamation. In taking forward this proposal, the council needs to ensure that it provides sufficient time for further communication and consultation with parents, staff and children to alleviate their clear concerns and ensure effective transitions for all children affected by the proposal. Whatever course of action the council chooses to take, it needs to continue to consult with parents, children, and staff of both schools and the wider community to engage them fully in the implementation of its proposal.

4.5 Aberdeen City Council needs to ensure that it addresses the concerns raised during the consultation period, including those set out in this report in its final consultation report. This includes the need to clarify the proposed configuration of the present Quarryhill building and the availability and suitability of teaching spaces within the new amalgamated school.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
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