

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by Aberdeenshire Council to build a new Hillside School; create a catchment area for the new school and at the same time amend the catchment areas of the other primary schools in the Portlethen area.

1. Introduction

This report from Education Scotland has been prepared by HM Inspectors in accordance with the terms of the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010* and the amendments contained in the *Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014*. The purpose of the report is to provide an independent and impartial consideration of Aberdeenshire Council's proposal to build a new Hillside School; create a catchment area for the new school and at the same time amend the catchment areas of the other primary schools in the Portlethen area. Section 2 of the report sets out brief details of the consultation process. Section 3 of the report sets out HM Inspectors' consideration of the educational aspects of the proposal, including significant 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, in finalising the proposal, it has reviewed the initial proposal, including a summary of points raised during the consultation process and the council's response to them. The council has to publish its final consultation report three weeks before it takes its final decision. Where a council is proposing to close a school, it needs 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 to consultees the opportunity they have to make representations to Ministers.

1.1 HM Inspectors considered:

- the likely effects of the proposal for children and young people of the four primary schools affected by the proposal; 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
- the educational benefits the council believes will result from implementation of the proposal, and the council's reasons for coming to these beliefs.

1.2 In preparing this report, HM Inspectors undertook the following activities:

- attendance at the public meeting held on 28 January 2015 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;
- visit to the proposed site of the new Hillside School; and
- visits to the sites of Banchory–Devenick, Portlethen, Fishermoss and Newtonhill Primary Schools, including discussion with relevant consultees.

2. Consultation Process

2.1 Aberdeenshire Council undertook the consultation on its proposals with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010* and the amendments in the *Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014*.

2.2 Aberdeenshire Council formally consulted stakeholders between 5 January and 27 February 2015. The council also engaged with local community councils. Prior to the formal consultation, the council had undertaken a pre-consultation exercise involving a number of stakeholders. The results of this exercise helped to inform the formal consultation proposal. Headteachers of the schools affected had consulted with their respective staff, pupils and Parent Councils. A public meeting to discuss the proposal was held on 28 January 2015 in Portlethen Academy. The council received a total of 265 responses to the on-line survey about the proposal. In addition it received four email responses, two of which pertained to this proposal. There were no other written responses to the consultation proposal. Almost all who responded agreed that there should be a new school at Hillside. The majority of those who responded agreed with the proposed catchment area for the new school, with around a third of those who responded having no preference or being unsure.

3. Educational Aspects of Proposal

3.1 Aberdeenshire Council's proposal to build a new primary school in the Hillside area of Portlethen; to create a catchment area for the new school and at the same time amend the catchment areas of the other primary schools, has the potential to be of clear educational benefit to the children and young people in the area. It also has the potential to bring considerable benefit to the community through, for example, access to the enhanced community and sports facilities and resources, including the early learning and childcare provision the council proposes to develop within the new school.

3.2 The proposal will help to relieve the pressure on the already stretched facilities and resources within Portlethen Primary School, where the school is currently operating above its maximum main school capacity. With the school's roll predicted to rise further over the next few years, a new primary school in the area is much needed. The building of the new school has the potential to provide a high-quality learning environment to support the delivery of a modern curricular experience. The provision of learning spaces fully equipped with modern information

and communications technology should support an improved educational experience for all children. The new Hillside School will be built with the capacity to be further extended in the future should the need arise. The provision of a new primary school in the Hillside area will reduce the distance and time some children need to get to school and has the potential to provide improved opportunities for safe walking routes to enable a greater number of children to walk to school and thereby support their health and wellbeing. It will further help to provide more space for learning and play for children in other schools across the area. It will be important for the council to continue to engage with staff, parents, children and the community in developing and planning the design and layout of the new school.

3.3 The proposal to amend the catchment areas for the other primary schools is also of clear educational benefit since it helps to address some anomalies within the current catchment areas; supports a shorter commute to school for a greater number of children; and helps to balance out pupil numbers more evenly across the other primary school establishments in line with their respective existing capacity. With regard to the proposed preferred catchment areas for the other four schools affected, most respondents agreed with or had no preference or were unsure about the preferred catchment areas for Portlethen and Fishermoss Primary Schools. Almost all respondents agreed with or had no preference or were unsure about the preferred option for Banchory-Devenick and Newtonhill Primary Schools.

3.4 While there was general agreement about the proposed catchment area amendments from the majority of those who responded to the consultation and those who met with HM Inspectors, there were a small number of staff and parents who were not fully convinced by some of the proposed changes. Some parents were unclear about whether the council would continue to provide transport and privileged pick-up points for children who would be zoned for a different school than they attend currently. A few parents expressed a concern that some of the proposed catchment areas meant that routes to school were not safe for some children allied to the lack of a sufficient number of crossing patrol attendants. If the proposal goes ahead the council should provide more information about safe routes to schools and arrangements for traffic management.

3.5 In considering the educational benefits of the proposal, HM Inspectors met with representative groups of parents, staff and children in the schools directly affected by the proposals. All those, who met with HM Inspectors, were positive about the proposal to build a new primary school at Hillside. They expressed some frustration about the delays in getting to this point. They were particularly pleased about the additional provision for early learning and childcare although their view was that this would still not fully meet the demand within the Portlethen network. The council is undertaking a study to determine the extent of early learning and childcare provision the area requires. Parents, staff and children were pleased that the proposal enabled them and any of their siblings to continue their education at their current school should they wish to do so. Several parents and staff considered that the planned timescale for the new build was not realistic and they were concerned that the council did not provide any information regarding planned contingencies

should the deadline of August 2016 not be met for the opening of the new school. If the council decides to proceed with the proposal, given the tight timescales, it will need to reassure parents and staff about planned contingencies should the building not be completed by August 2016.

3.6 A few responses raised concerns about the quality and structure of the online survey and the associated maps which they felt made it difficult to express a clear opinion. As a result of this and the fact that the proposal paper did not provide a blank questionnaire response for stakeholders to complete, some stakeholders felt that they had not been suitably consulted. Partly in response to these concerns, the council uploaded improved maps into the survey two days into the consultation period.

3.7 Parents, staff and pupils at Banchory-Devenick Primary School were concerned about the impact of the new school on the long-term viability of their own school and were keen to ensure that the roll was maintained at a level where it could continue to have three classes.

4. Summary

4.1 Aberdeenshire Council's proposal to build a new purpose-built primary school in the Hillside area of Portlethen by August 2016, creating an appropriate catchment area for the new school in addition to amending the existing catchment areas of the other primary schools, has the potential to be of significant educational benefit to the children served by schools in the Portlethen network. These benefits will derive largely from the enhanced facilities provided at the new school and the corresponding additional capacity which will help to relieve the pressure on the other schools in the network. The proposal also has the potential to have a positive impact on the local community through the enhanced facilities and resources, including provision for sports and early learning and childcare. The proposal to build a new school has the clear support of parents, staff and children. The proposal to amend the catchment areas of the other schools in the network to the preferred options identified, enjoys the support of the majority of stakeholders.

4.2 During the consultation, some consultees raised a number of concerns in relation to the proposals. These included issues around safe routes to school, school transport, the provision of crossing patrol attendants, the widening and upgrading of roads and the provision of adequate facilities for turning school buses given the change in catchment areas. A few parents were also concerned about the tightness of the timescale in relation to the new build and the possible negative consequences for children, staff and parents if the anticipated date for opening the new school is not met.

4.3 In taking forward the proposal, the council will need to continue to work with all stakeholders and the local community in addressing the concerns identified and in the planning and design of the new school to ensure that the potential educational benefits to be borne by the proposal are realised for all children in the Portlethen network.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
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