

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by Aberdeenshire Council to redistribute the primary school catchment areas in the Westhill network.

1. Introduction

1.1 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 redistribute the primary school catchment areas in the Westhill network, namely relating to Crombie, Elrick, Skene and Westhill Primary Schools, with effect from August 2016. 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.

1.2 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
- the educational benefits the council believes will result from implementation of the proposal, and the council's reasons for coming to these beliefs.

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

- attendance at the public meeting held on 10 September 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; and
- visits to the site of Crombie, Elrick, Skene and Westhill Primary Schools, including discussion with relevant consultees.

2. Consultation Process

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

2.2 The statutory consultation period ran from 14 August to 9 October 2015. The council held a public meeting at Crombie School on 10 September 2015. Prior to the formal consultation, the council held informal public engagement sessions. Copies of the proposal document were shared with parents of current pupils of all affected schools and information made available to staff, trade union representatives and wider community establishments. The council collated the views of children from each of the four schools. The council received 25 responses to an online survey about the proposal. Most responses were supportive of the proposal.

3. Educational Aspects of Proposal

3.1 The proposal has a number of potential educational benefits for current and future learners at the schools. If accepted, it could offer children across the Westhill area improved learning environments. As some schools are operating at or over capacity and others under capacity, the proposal provides an opportunity to distribute pupils more evenly across the network and to offer greater equity of access to resources, for example practical teaching spaces, dining spaces and social areas. This is particularly pressing for Elrick School as the school roll is currently capped. The proposal could better support parents to place their children in the school for which they are zoned.

3.2 Parents from Skene School who met with HM Inspectors and many families living in the Broadshade housing area would like the council to consider alternative approaches to the delineation of school catchment areas. Parents also expressed their concern that the infrastructure surrounding Skene School cannot support proposed pupil numbers, particularly in relation to transport, traffic management and safe routes to school. The council acknowledges that parents at Skene School would like the school to keep its rural qualities and stay similar to its current size. In taking forward the proposal, the council needs to work with stakeholders to address these particular concerns.

3.3 Stakeholders living in the Brimmond area will be affected by the proposal by being zoned for Westhill Primary School instead of Elrick Primary School. They are concerned about the safety of walking routes to school which this would involve. The council needs to review individual school travel plans and ensure that safe routes to school are identified and communicated to stakeholders.

3.4 Staff and almost all representative groups of parents from the four affected schools who met with HM Inspectors were in favour of the proposal. Pupils' views were more mixed. Stakeholders were concerned that the potential for more houses to be built in the Broadshade area may make demands on existing school accommodation. In taking forward the proposal the council will need to engage with stakeholders regarding the timescales of potential extensions to Crombie and Skene Primary Schools. The council has indicated that should it accept the new zones, they will take effect from August 2016. It will have to ensure that it adheres to timescales in order to avoid negative impact on children's transitions from early learning and childcare settings to primary school.

4. Summary

Overall, the proposal has a number of potential educational benefits. These include improvements to the quality of learning environments for children and the provision of more equitable opportunities and access to resources in schools across the Westhill area. In taking forward the proposal the council will need to review each school's travel plan, to ensure safe routes to school are identified and address concerns of stakeholders at Skene School, particularly in relation to infrastructure. The council will need to engage with stakeholders regarding the timescales and implications of potential extensions to Crombie and Skene Schools. The council should also take into consideration enrolment and transition arrangements for children starting school.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
October 2015**