

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by Aberdeenshire Council to amend the catchment areas of primary schools in the Mintlaw 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 amend the catchment areas of primary schools in the Mintlaw network. 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 affected 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 2 November 2016 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 sites of Mintlaw Primary School, Pitfour School, Stuartfield School, Fetterangus School, Longside School and Maud School, 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 Aberdeenshire Council's proposal relates to the need to address pressure on school rolls resulting from housing development in Stuartfield and Mintlaw. The council proposes to amend the catchment areas for Mintlaw Primary School, Pitfour School and Stuartfield School with effect from August 2017. The council's proposal document contains two options for removing Old Deer from the Stuartfield School catchment. One option is to rezone Old Deer to Maud School. The second option is to rezone Old Deer to Fetterangus School. The council's proposal document contains three further options related to rezoning Nether Aden or Nether Aden and Northwoods from the catchment area of Mintlaw Primary School to Pitfour School and Clola from Mintlaw Primary School to Longside School.

2.3 Prior to the consultation Aberdeenshire Council undertook informal engagement sessions in September 2016 to seek initial comments on the proposed changes. The council undertook the formal consultation between 5 October and 2 December 2016. A public meeting was held at Mintlaw Academy on 2 November 2016. Copies of the consultation document were sent to stakeholders and made available in Mintlaw Library, the affected schools and council offices and posted on the council's website. Questions for pupils were sent to each of the affected schools to facilitate discussion of the options set out in the proposal document. Three written responses were received by Aberdeenshire Council, including one from Mintlaw and District Community Council which proposed alternative school rezoning options to those set out in the proposal document. The two other responses raised individual concerns on the impact of the proposed changes. In addition 40 responses were collated from an online survey containing six questions on the options set out in the proposal. Collated returns to the online survey demonstrated a range of preferences including a significant proportion stating no preference against each of the options.

3. Educational Aspects of Proposal

3.1 The main educational benefit arising from the council's proposal is that amending primary school catchment areas will relieve pressure on Stuartfield School and Mintlaw Primary School rolls. If no changes were made at Stuartfield School the roll could rise to 131 by 2021. The school's current working capacity is set at 125 pupil places. Removing Old Deer from Stuartfield School's catchment would reduce the forecast roll to 112 by 2021. If no changes were made at Mintlaw Primary School the roll could rise to 221 by 2021. The school has a working capacity of 171 pupil places. Removing Northwoods from Mintlaw Primary School's catchment would reduce the forecast number of pupils to 167 by 2021 with further

reductions if Nether Aden and Clola are also removed from Mintlaw Primary School's catchment.

3.2 There is sufficient capacity at both Maud School and Fetterangus School to accommodate the estimated increased number of pupils resulting from the rezoning of Old Deer. There is sufficient capacity at Longside School to accommodate the modest increase in pupil numbers resulting from the proposed option to rezone Clola from Mintlaw Primary School to Longside School. However, if both Nether Aden and Northwoods are rezoned from Mintlaw Primary School to Pitfour School this would result in a roll of 213 at Pitfour School by 2021. The current working capacity of the school is 171 pupil places. If only Nether Aden is rezoned to Pitfour School the forecast roll of 176 would still be slightly above the school's capacity. The council's proposal document refers to the intention to undertake further work at Mintlaw Primary School and Pitfour School to determine which school would be most appropriate for additional classrooms. The proposal document states that there is sufficient space at both schools for an extension. However, the council's proposal document contains no further detail on this aspect of the proposal. The council will need to provide more detail on how this will be addressed including its timescale for establishing additional classroom space in its final proposal paper.

3.3 There is clear educational benefit to the council's proposal to alleviate pressure on the school rolls at Stuartfield School and Mintlaw Primary School. However, the council's proposal document does not detail any other educational benefits. There is no information on the standard and quality of school buildings and accommodation and no detailed information on sufficiency of existing space in the six affected schools, for example, in school dining areas. There is no information on any curricular benefits arising from the council's proposal options. The council will need to consider what further detail on educational benefits it can provide in its final report.

3.4 Parents, children and staff who spoke with HM Inspectors at all six affected schools recognised that change was needed to alleviate pressure on school rolls in Stuartfield School and Mintlaw Primary School resulting from new housing development. Overall, there was support for the proposal with a variety of views expressed on the available rezoning options. Parents at some of the schools raised a number of concerns. Several parents saw a need for better long term planning for schools in the area in relation to new housing development and expressed doubt about the council's roll forecasts. At Stuartfield School and Pitfour School, parents were concerned about the adequacy of existing accommodation including the use of ageing external temporary classroom units with no toilet facilities. At Pitfour School, parents and children were concerned about insufficient school dining space. Several parents expressed concerns about safe walking routes to school and the availability of school crossing patrols. Although one of the council's proposal options is potentially beneficial to road safety, by reducing the number of road crossings required in Mintlaw, parents were concerned about the impact of additional traffic at Pitfour School. The council will need to engage with parents on concerns raised if it decides to take forward its proposal.

3.5 The council's proposal document provides assurance that children currently attending primary schools will not be required to change schools and that their siblings will have the right to attend the same school in future. Parents welcomed this assurance but were not clear if this would include cases where the older sibling had moved to Mintlaw Academy before the younger sibling had entered primary school. The council will need to clarify this point in its final proposal paper.

4. Summary

- Aberdeenshire Council's proposal to amend primary school zones will be beneficial in alleviating roll pressure at Stuartfield School and Mintlaw Primary School. The council has not included any detail on any additional educational benefits. The council will need to consider this in its final paper.
- The council will need to provide more detail on the timescale and process for considering potential extensions to Mintlaw Primary School and Pitfour School in its final paper.
- The council will need to clarify the position regarding the right of siblings to attend the same primary school in cases where the older sibling has moved on to secondary school.
- Parents who spoke with HM Inspectors have views and local knowledge on safe walking routes to school and traffic management. The council will need to continue to engage with stakeholders on the details of implementation of its proposal options.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
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