

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by Aberdeenshire Council to redistribute the primary school catchment areas in the town of Stonehaven with effect from August 2018.

1. Introduction

1.1 This report from Education Scotland has been prepared by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education (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 for all three primary schools within the Stonehaven network with effect from August 2018. 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 affected; 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:

- 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;

- visits to the site of Arduthie, Dunnottar and Mill O'Forest Primary Schools, including discussion with relevant consultees; and
- examination of some of the walking routes to the schools named in the consultation.

2. Consultation Process

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

2.2 The consultation took place between 28 June and 29 September 2017 which represented a time period greater than the required 30 term time days. A public meeting to discuss the consultation was held in Arduthie Primary School on 6 September 2017. The proposal built upon an earlier informal consultation where the council gathered stakeholder's views of possible options. Notices about the proposal were placed in the local press and on the council's website. All parents and carers and early years' providers were lettered about the proposal and posters were sent to all schools. Pupil engagement sessions were undertaken in all schools and the proposal was re-issued to all parents in the last few weeks of the consultation period as a reminder. There were 91 responses to the consultation online where consultees were presented with the three different proposals. The proposals included firstly altering and realigning all catchment areas, redistributing the rural elements currently zoned for Dunnottar Primary School to include a rural area for each school; secondly, retaining the rural catchment areas at Dunnottar Primary School and altering and realigning all catchment areas slightly; and thirdly retaining the status quo. Thirty per cent of responses favoured proposal one; 28% favoured proposal two and 15% favoured proposal three with 27% having no particular preference. Additional responses were received from Dunnottar Primary School Parent Council and pupil councils. Statistics provided by the council suggest that proposal one or two would allow it to better manage current and potential capacity at the three primary schools in the Stonehaven town area.

2.3 Stakeholders were positive about the approach taken by the council to gather and listen to their views over time and to use these to shape the existing proposal document. They considered that there had been very good opportunities to engage with the consultation and that the council had worked well with schools to gather the views of children as part of the process. They had, however, expressed frustration at the poor quality and lack of clarity provided in the maps that accompanied the consultation document.

3. Educational Aspects of Proposal

3.1 Aberdeenshire Council recognise that existing and future pressures on schools operating close to or beyond maximum capacity imposes restrictions on the quality of learning experience that can be planned and facilitated by staff as part of the curriculum. The proposal seeks to partly address the inequalities in order to provide greater access to a similar level of resources and opportunities, as far as is practically possible across all schools in the Stonehaven town area. It has, over

time, the potential to address some of the capacity issues and protect additional spaces for learning in schools where space is at a premium. It has the potential to further support staff in ensuring children's entitlements to education as expressed in the national expectations of Curriculum for Excellence.

3.2 Most stakeholders who responded to the consultation online and made comment welcomed the proposal to keep children from the rural area in the one school and that this should be Dunnottar Primary School continuing established practice. They were positive about the intention to partly relieve pressure on the facilities at Dunnottar and viewed proposal two as making most sense. They welcomed the 'sibling guarantee' which would allow siblings of pupils currently at school to join other family members regardless of the impact of the re-zoning exercise. A few felt that the proposals were not bold enough and still left Arduthie Primary School undersubscribed. A small number wanted to see the rural area split across the larger schools of Mill O'Forest and Arduthie in order to significantly relieve pressure on Dunnottar. Similarly, a small number expressed concerns about the poor quality access for buses and other vehicles at both Arduthie and Mill O'Forest and felt that to allocate rural areas to these schools would only exacerbate existing difficulties and potentially compromise children's safety.

3.3 Almost all parents, staff and young people who met with inspectors recognise the need to alter the catchment areas and accepted that retaining the status quo as expressed in proposal three was not a realistic option. Parents who met with inspectors favoured proposal two which retained all rural areas in the Dunnottar Primary School catchment. They considered that this proposal would help address some of the pressures on the Dunnottar Primary School roll from the new housing developments while also offering the least disruption for families.

3.4 Staff who met with inspectors were divided in their view. Those favouring proposal one considered that this proposal offered a more equal distribution across all three primary schools affected and took most advantage of the spare capacity in both Arduthie and Mill O'Forest Primary Schools. They accepted that this proposal, should it be adopted, would create some difficulties in regard to access for school buses involved in transporting children to schools from the outlying areas. A few staff further considered that proposal two would not meaningfully address the large number of placing requests which were currently submitted on an annual basis for all schools across the network. Those favouring proposal two recognised the benefit of ensuring that all pupils coming from rural areas would continue to be educated in the same school and that Dunnottar Primary School provided the best and most safe access for school buses involved in transporting children to and from school. They also highlighted that this proposal took best advantage of the close proximity of the new housing developments to both Mill O'Forest and Arduthie Primary Schools respectively. A few staff expressed concern about a safe walking route to Mill O'Forest Primary School for children from the Broomhill Croft housing development. The shortest route involved walking through the very busy Spurryhillock Industrial Estate, which was accessed by heavy vehicles and suffered from unsafe and dangerous parking, restricting safe walking space.

3.5 Children who met with inspectors were overall undecided about their preferred proposal. Children from Dunnottar Primary School however expressed some

concerns about the impact of a rise in the school roll on the already pressurised and limited space available both inside and outside their existing school buildings. All stakeholders recognised that regardless of the proposal which was finally accepted, pressure would remain on the facilities at Dunnottar Primary School.

4. Summary

4.1 Aberdeenshire Council's proposal to amend the catchment areas for all three primary schools within the Stonehaven network with effect from August 2018 is of educational benefit but only if the council decide to proceed with either proposal one or two. There are no educational benefits from proceeding with option three, the status quo. Conversely there is likely to be detriment to pupils' educational experience should they not progress with either proposal one or two. Progressing with either proposal one or two will realign school capacities due to continued house building within the town and safeguard pupil rolls for all schools within the Stonehaven network. The re-zoning of the towns three schools will help to re-balance pupil numbers across the three town schools given the current pressures on the roll at Dunnottar Primary School from the new house building and its current functioning at over capacity. The proposal demonstrates the intention to manage the educational implications of the new housing developments in the Stonehaven area and to make best use of existing capacity in the primary schools in the area. Proposal two presents the best scenario within the options presented, for safe travel and drop off for those children travelling by bus to school.

4.2 A few members of staff expressed concerns about the safe walking route from the Broomhill Croft housing development to Mill O'Forest Primary School which would mean children walking through the Spurryhillock Industrial Estate. Should the council decide to progress with proposal two it will need to ensure safe walking routes for all stakeholders and their children particularly those from the Broomhill Croft housing development.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
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