

Consultation proposal by The City of Edinburgh Council

Report by Education Scotland, addressing educational aspects of the proposal to close Wellington School.

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 City of Edinburgh Council proposes to close Wellington School from August 2014. Wellington School is a special school for boys between the ages of 13 and 16 with significant social, emotional and behavioural needs. It can also offer residential and respite placements for young people.

1.2 The 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.

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

- attendance at the public meetings held on Tuesday 21 January and Thursday 23 January 2014 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 Gorgie Mills School, Wellington School and Panmure St Ann's School, including discussion with relevant consultees.

1.4 HM Inspectors considered:

- the likely effects of the proposal for children and young people of the school; any other users 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 The City of Edinburgh Council undertook the initial consultation on its proposals with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*.

Young people attending Wellington School have been involved in a consultation process with *Who Cares? Scotland*. This involved focus groups and online questionnaires. Most of the young people who responded to the consultation process disagreed with the proposal to close Wellington School. None of them could think of any advantages to the proposal and their concerns included the need to move to other residential accommodation and uncertainty in relation to where they would continue their education. Since the consultation, several young people have had meetings to discuss where they could continue their education if the proposal is accepted. A few of them are attending other educational establishments on a part-time trial basis. Young people appreciate the small classes at Wellington School and the one-to-one support from teachers and care staff. A few young people indicated that they have attended Wellington School when they would not have attended their mainstream school.

2.2 Parents and carers of young people attending Wellington school are not happy about the proposed closure. They appreciate the difference which Wellington School has made to their children, who attend the school regularly when they would not attend their mainstream school. The support provided by care staff is particularly appreciated. They acknowledge, however, that attending other schools, such as Gorgie Mills School, would give their children a better education and it would not be so easy for them to opt out of particular classes. They reported that information about the proposed closure had a very negative effect on their children, a few of whom were now refusing to attend because they feel that there is no point in doing so.

2.3 Staff at Wellington School are concerned about the likely outcomes for the young people who currently attend the school if it closes. They recognise that there are financial difficulties with continuing to offer provision on the current site, but feel that creating a small base within Gorgie Mills school could not meet the specific needs of young people requiring the highest levels of intervention and support as well as Wellington School currently does. They feel that the authority has not been accepting referrals for the school for quite some time and that this has contributed to the decline in pupil numbers. The authority has however placed seven young people in Wellington since early 2013. Relationships between staff and young people, especially those young people who are resident at the school, are seen as an

important factor in helping pupils to develop confidence and social skills. Wellington School senior managers feel that prior to the consultation, the school was at the beginning of a period of positive change with a focus on improving the quality of education. Since the announcement of the proposal, morale is low and young people are reluctant to engage in learning. Staff feel that the school should not close and that there is a need to continue to offer education, support and care there for some young people.

2.4 Young people attending Gorgie Mills School are very positive about welcoming young people from Wellington School to their own school. They understand that starting at a new school is a difficult process as they have all gone through it themselves and that it will take some time for them to settle. However, they think that it is helpful that young people attending Wellington School know many of their peers who attend Gorgie Mills School. They think that young people from Wellington School will enjoy attending Gorgie Mills School as learning is fun in lessons and they will have more opportunity to take part in team sports.

2.5 Parents of young people attending Gorgie Mills School are extremely enthusiastic about the benefits which they have found through their child being placed there and think that it provides a good quality of education. They are sure that parents of young people who currently attend Wellington School will also appreciate the family-centred approach of Gorgie Mills School. They are particularly grateful for the support they have received from the headteacher and which their children have received from the family support team. They would be keen to support parents of young people who currently attend Wellington School in any way they can.

2.6 Staff at Gorgie Mills School are positive about the proposal and about the prospect of young people from Wellington coming to their school. Teachers acknowledge that it would be appropriate to have provision for young people with more severe and complex needs within their own school rather than referring them on to a separate, distant provision. Support staff think that the proposal builds on joint work which is already taking place between Gorgie Mills School, Wellington School and Panmure St Ann's School. Senior managers welcome the possibility of additional young people attending the school and the proposed unit provision to meet the needs of young people who require a high level of support. However, some staff are under the impression that almost all young people from Wellington School would be placed in a separately run unit within their school rather than being included within Gorgie Mills classes.

2.7 Young people attending Panmure St Ann's School are very enthusiastic about the opportunities which their school offers. They feel well supported by staff in their classes, but are concerned that if more young people come to their school from Wellington School, it could put staff under strain by having to deal with higher numbers. They are also aware of the restricted nature of available space in their school and that there can be issues with space for learning and meetings. They would, however, welcome young people coming from Wellington School and are certain that they would benefit from coming to Panmure St Ann's School. Many of those who attend the school have significantly higher levels of attendance than they had at mainstream school.

2.8 Parents of young people attending Panmure St Ann's School have some concerns that introducing new pupils from Wellington School could unsettle their children. However, they realise that the school has benefited their children and would be likely to help other young people who are referred there. They feel that Panmure St Ann's School provides their children with a more appropriate education than mainstream did and that skilled staff provide them with a high level of support for their learning.

2.9 Staff from Panmure St Ann's School feel that the school is able to meet the needs of some pupils from Wellington School. However, they also feel that there is a need to continue to offer a range of provision across the city and Wellington School should be retained. Some members of staff feel that each of the existing establishments has a place in offering support to match the range of needs of young people. Staff are also concerned about the lack of space and especially the lack of outdoor space at break times and for physical activity. They have concerns about how additional pupils will impact on their ability to provide high levels of support to young people within their groups. They are reluctant to introduce restraint approaches as a form of managing challenging behaviour. However, staff are clear that young people from Wellington School will be well supported and welcomed to the school. Senior managers in Panmure St Ann's school also welcome the prospect of Wellington pupils attending, whilst sharing similar concerns to that of staff in relation to facilities and space.

3. Educational aspects of the proposal

3.1 The City of Edinburgh Council have initiated this proposal because of a declining roll at Wellington School. Numbers have decreased from 46 in 2009/10 to 11 in 2013/14. This is largely because of increasing capacity for meeting behaviour needs within secondary schools and improved provision within the council for children and young people who are looked after, or are at risk of becoming looked after.

3.2 Young people have a comparatively restricted curriculum at Wellington School compared to other special schools. Young people attending Gorgie Mills School and Panmure St Ann's School have access to greater curricular choice and a wider range of achievement and accreditation than those who attend Wellington School. This is accepted by staff at Wellington School as well as by parents and carers. As such, the move is of overall educational benefit to those young people directly affected by it.

3.3 According to data provided by the council, young people who attend Wellington School do not attain as well or as broadly as those who attend other special schools such as Gorgie Mills or Panmure St Ann's Schools. Similarly, these schools have demonstrated continuous improvement in attainment and achievement over the past three years where Wellington School has not. The council makes a reasonable case that young people will get a better education by attending either of these special schools.

3.4 The council also notes a range of financial aspects which have contributed to the rationale for closure. For example, the current education cost per learner at Wellington School is 200% greater than that at Gorgie Mills and Panmure St Ann's Schools, and the care cost is 25% greater. Similarly, the cost of a residential placement at Wellington School is 50% greater than the average purchased placement. There are also high costs to transport non-residents to the school and long journey times for these young people. Implementation of the proposal will support the council in its duty to secure best value.

3.5 The council indicates that developments in mainstream schools to support social and emotional needs will be further enhanced, as appropriate, to facilitate an increased availability of a range of support, including better integrated approaches incorporating family and community support. However, discussions relating to these developments are at an early stage.

3.6 The council will continue to offer provision for young people who require more intensive support. It proposes to increase the capacity of Gorgie Mills School from 60 to 72 places, whilst an additional class of up to six young people will be created within the current school accommodation. The proposal notes that this will require a 'small scale modification', but does not highlight that this will involve structural alterations to the building, including the subdivision and re-flooring of an area which is currently two stories in height, creating an extra room on the first floor. Other areas of the school are currently unoccupied and could serve as alternative accommodation for the specialist facility.

3.7 The council realises that any relocation from Wellington School to a new, specialist facility in Gorgie Mills School will be difficult for young people. It intends to mitigate these effects by ensuring that some of the staff who have been working with them at Wellington School will transfer with them to Gorgie Mills School. However, a number of these staff have already left Wellington School for permanent posts elsewhere.

3.8 Young people attending Wellington School have already been adversely affected by the proposal. In order to ensure that enough time is available for transition, future needs meetings have been held for these young people in advance of the proposal being approved. Very few young people now attend Wellington School on a regular basis.

4. Summary

4.1 The City of Edinburgh Council proposal to close Wellington School from August 2014 is of overall educational benefit to the young people directly affected by it. Implementation of the proposal will also help the council secure its duty to deliver best value. However, the council needs to consider extending the proposed date of closure to ensure it can put in place appropriate transitional arrangements for young people with such significant needs. Scottish Ministers have the right to call-in decisions to close schools. The current timeline for this proposal does not give sufficient consideration to the possible impact of this process on the council's plans and on the young people concerned. If the council cannot advise young people and parents definitively until a late stage in the school year of the school they will be

expected to attend in the following school session, it could be very detrimental to the young people's education. The current timescale for the proposal makes it difficult to avoid this. In taking forward the proposal, the council needs to ensure that it provides sufficient time for effective communication with parents, staff and young people to alleviate some of their concerns and ensure appropriately planned, effective transitions for young people.

4.2 In taking forward the proposal the council needs to ensure that all stakeholders are clear about the consultation process. A number of young people, parents and staff from each of the schools involved in the proposal are under the impression that the proposed closure has already been agreed and will therefore take place. This has been underlined by the series of transition planning meetings for young people at Wellington School which have been taking place before the consultation process is complete or a decision reached on whether or not the proposal should go ahead.

4.3 The council needs to reassure parents and carers of young people currently attending Wellington School that their concerns are being taken seriously and will be acted upon. Parents and carers are extremely worried about the outcomes for their children as a result of the proposal and they have reported direct effects on the young people who are worried about the move.

4.4 Given the proposed date for the closure of the school in August 2014, the council needs to investigate the feasibility of the relevant building work being completed by this date, subject to the proposal being accepted. This aspect was not made clear in the proposal, nor was it highlighted in the public consultation meetings. The council proposes to subdivide existing accommodation horizontally, creating two rooms from a single two-storey room. The proposal refers to this as a small scale modification to enhance the accommodation. The council also needs to investigate the feasibility of using other available parts of Gorgie Mills School accommodation for the new specialist facility.

4.5 The council plans to provide enhanced support to mainstream schools to increase the capacity of these schools to meet a wider range of needs. However, the discussions about how best to do this are currently at an early stage.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
February 2014**