

## **Consultation proposal by Dumfries and Galloway Council**

### **Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal to close Sorbie Primary 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 Dumfries and Galloway Council proposes to close Sorbie Primary School.

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 meeting held on Wednesday 19 February 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; and
- visits to the site of Garlieston Primary School and Sorbie Primary Schools, 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; 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
- benefits which the council believes will result from implementation of the proposal, and the council's reasons for coming to these beliefs.

1.5 As the proposal will lead to the closure of a rural school as defined in the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*, HM Inspectors also took account of the council's consideration of:

- viable alternatives to the closure of Sorbie Primary School;
- the likely effect on the local community with regard to sustainability and on the community's access to the buildings, grounds and facilities if the school were to close, and
- the likely effect of different travelling arrangements on the environment and on children and young people and other school users occasioned by the closure.

## 2. Consultation process

2.1 Dumfries and Galloway Council undertook the initial consultation on its proposals with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*.

2.2 Children who attend Garlieston Primary School currently include children who formerly attended Sorbie Primary School. A few have already formally transferred from Sorbie to Garlieston. There are no children currently attending Sorbie Primary School and it has been 'mothballed' since 2013. All children interviewed expressed positive views of the proposal. The Sorbie children felt they had better opportunities in Garlieston Primary School to make friends in general and with peers, including peers of the same gender. Sorbie children in the previous years had spent two days each week in Garlieston Primary School accessing visiting expressive arts specialists and joining with relevant classes for literacy and numeracy work. The older children felt the proposal allowed them better opportunities to develop a peer group that would be supportive when moving into secondary school. As they had been attending Garlieston Primary School since 2013, they felt they were receiving a better education due to increased opportunities. A few of the children who lived in Sorbie were concerned about the uncertainty over what the impact would be in the future for their village of closing the school and selling off the building when they understood that there were already plans to close the village hall.

2.3 Parents and carers of children who had been attending Sorbie Primary School and those of children who had always attended Garlieston Primary School support the proposal. They all feel the children are gaining socially from being part of a bigger and wider-ranging group. Learning opportunities are more consistent and collegiate. Parents of children from Sorbie understood that the decline in pupil roll over time in Sorbie Primary School had led to an inevitability that closure would happen at some point. A few would have preferred the council to try to keep Sorbie open as their local school until it was closed in a planned and decisive way. They would have liked to commemorate the school's achievements over time with a positive conclusion and then move on. These parents felt they had been left with a very difficult choice either choosing to keep their children at Sorbie Primary School or moving them elsewhere. All parents felt it helped secure the long-term future of Garlieston Primary School for their children and future families in both communities. However, parents shared the children's concerns regarding the future of the village given the proposed closure of the village hall and Sorbie Primary School.

2.4 Staff firmly support the proposal. The staff team in Garlieston Primary School contains some staff who worked between Garlieston Primary School and Sorbie Primary School. Staff were unanimous that the children were benefitting from having more children to work and develop relationships with. Staff who knew the children in Sorbie felt they seemed happier now that they were settled into Garlieston Primary School. They felt the children were now enjoying a wider range of educational opportunities and a more stable learning environment. Staff also felt they were benefitting professionally from working regularly with a larger group of colleagues.

### **3. Educational aspects of the proposal**

3.1 Given that all children attending Sorbie Primary School relocated to other local schools of their choice in 2013 and that almost all chose to relocate to Garlieston Primary School, there has been a significant period of time elapsed in which to test Dumfries and Galloway Council's proposal for the future of Sorbie Primary School.

3.2 Sorbie children had been spending a considerable amount of time in Garlieston Primary School each week prior to 2013 and were already well aware of the journey, building and staff. Settling into their new learning environment will not now be an issue.

3.3 The proposition put forward by Dumfries and Galloway Council that children will benefit from learning in more age appropriate groups, be more able to participate in group and team activities and have more opportunities to develop their social skills is confirmed by the children themselves. They have access to a wider range of experiences and this will continue should the proposal be approved. All children will be eligible for free transport to Garlieston Primary School from Sorbie and this does not impact significantly on the length of their day or on teaching time in school. Severe weather impacts on all children to some extent and not just Sorbie children as there are a number of children who attend Garlieston as their catchment school who live in outlying areas.

3.4 Securing the long-term viability of Garlieston Primary School provides more certainty about stable local education into the future for families and their children. The arrangements for nursery provision are not affected by the proposal so transition from nursery into primary will continue as before. Future entrants into Garlieston Primary School from Sorbie will have the same transition experiences as before. Arrangements for transition to Douglas Ewart High School in Newton Stewart are also unaffected.

3.6 The proposal will lead to the closure of a rural school as defined in the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*. The council has not considered the requirements of the Act with specific relevance to rural school closures within its proposal. The council needs to ensure its final consultation report covers the issues of viable alternatives to closure, impact on the community and consideration of the environmental effects of the travelling arrangements proposed. There is concern in Sorbie regarding the intended future use of the school building and site. There is also uncertainty over the status and future of the village hall. Dumfries and Galloway Council needs to provide further reassurance to the Sorbie community regarding on-going and future access to community resources in the village.

#### **4. Summary**

Dumfries and Galloway Council makes a strong case for the closure of Sorbie Primary School. The proposal substantiates the *de facto* position which has been successful and effective. In the time since Sorbie Primary School was 'mothballed', the proposed benefits for children have begun to be realised in practice. These include access for the children to a wider group of children and peers as well as a broader range of learning opportunities. The proposal appears to have almost unanimous support across both communities as it will secure sustainable local rural education for the future. The council now needs to take account in its final consultation report of the requirements within the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010* relating specifically to proposing the closure of a rural school. For the villagers of Sorbie, Dumfries and Galloway Council now needs to provide further assurance regarding the future use of the school building including how this relates to the proposed closure of the Sorbie village hall and the impact this will have on the local community.

**HM Inspectors  
Education Scotland  
March 2014**