

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by Dumfries and Galloway Council to close Garlieston Primary School and realign its catchment area with Whithorn Primary School from July 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 (as amended) (the 2010 Act)*. The purpose of the report is to provide an independent and impartial consideration of Dumfries and Galloway Council's proposal to close Garlieston Primary School from July 2018 and realign its catchment area with its partnership school, Whithorn Primary School, from July 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. It should also 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 school; any other users of the school's facilities; 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 meetings held on 6 September 2017 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 Whithorn Primary School, including discussion with relevant consultees.

1.4 As the proposal would lead to the closure of a rural school, HM Inspectors also took account of the council's consideration of any reasonable alternatives to closure of Garlieston Primary School, the likely effect on the local community and the likely impact of any different travelling arrangements arising from the proposed closure.

2. Consultation Process

2.1 Dumfries and Galloway Council undertook the consultation on its proposal with reference to the *Act 2010*.

2.2 The council informed Education Scotland on 9 October 2017 of its intention to pause the statutory consultation process. However, HM Inspectors have completed this report in order to fulfil their duties under the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*.

2.3 The consultation ran from 23 August 2017 until 3 October 2017. The council announced the consultation in the local press and information, including the proposal paper, was placed on the council website and in several council buildings. Copies of the paper were provided to parents of both schools and were distributed at the public meetings. Two public meetings were held on 6 September 2017, one in Garlieston Primary School attended by 25 stakeholders and one in Whithorn Primary School attended by eight stakeholders. Parents were unhappy that the timing of the public meetings was within office hours. The council made appropriate arrangements to consult with children and staff. During the consultation period, the council received 31 representations from parents and community members. Most of the responses strongly opposed the proposed closure of Garlieston Primary School. A few supported the proposal and the remainder did not express a clear overall view. The council carried out an assessment to consider the impact of closing a rural school.

3. Educational Aspects of Proposal

3.1 Garlieston Primary School is a remote rural school with a role of 15 pupils. This represents 20 per cent of the building's capacity. The roll has fluctuated over a number of years and for some time the school has been significantly under capacity. The building is currently rated by the council as condition B (satisfactory), and suitability B. Whithorn Primary School, with a capacity of 158, is rated by the council as condition B, and suitability B.

3.2 The council has provided an educational benefits statement asserting the key benefits of the proposal for children. However, HM Inspectors do not find the council's assertions compelling and believe that the proposal presented by the council for consultation does not demonstrate clear educational benefits. The council should develop its educational benefits statement further to provide specific

evidence of how the proposal will impact positively on the children of both Garlieston and Whithorn Primary Schools.

3.3 All parents, pupils and other stakeholders of Garlieston Primary School who met with HM Inspectors do not support the proposal. They have a number of concerns about the consultation process and the quality of information contained in the proposal document, including the educational benefits statement. HM Inspectors believe that the council will have to address these concerns in its final consultation report.

3.4 Staff from both schools who met with HM Inspectors have mixed views about the proposal.

3.5 The financial information included by the council in the proposal paper lacks clarity. HM Inspectors are of the view that it does not adequately support the case for the closure of Garlieston Primary School.

3.6 During the consultation period, the council was notified of a number of alleged inaccuracies in the proposal. The council will need to ensure that it takes the necessary steps to investigate these alleged inaccuracies. In its final report, the council will need to set out the actions it has taken to address any alleged inaccuracies or omissions notified to it.

3.7 As the proposal would lead to the closure of a rural school, HM Inspectors also took account of the council's consideration of the factors to which it should have special regard.

3.8 The council has assessed the effects of its proposal. It has not identified any significant impacts resulting from closure. HM Inspectors do not believe the council has provided clear evidence to support this view.

3.9 The proposal indicates that the two schools currently benefit from a shared headship arrangement which has been in place since 2014. The proposal does not make clear what further significant educational benefit will result from closing Garlieston Primary School and moving the children to Whithorn Primary School.

3.10 The council have undertaken this consultation proposal on the basis of diminishing pupil numbers at Garlieston Primary School. Whilst this is currently the case, with a school roll of 15, the proposal indicates that the future school roll is projected to rise.

3.11 Stakeholders report that they were not fully involved in pre-consultation for this proposal and that Garlieston Parent Council was informed by council officers in early 2017 that the school would not be considered for closure.

3.12 The proposal has the potential to have a negative impact on the community. Other community facilities have closed in recent years, including nearby Sorbie Primary School. The council needs to consider further the impact on local residents of all ages who believe that their school is an integral part of their community.

3.13 The proposal indicates that there would be vehicle use for travelling to Whithorn Primary School and therefore a negative environmental impact. The proposal does not outline clear costs for school transport. In taking forward the proposal, the council needs to provide clearer and more detailed financial information.

4. Summary

Overall, HM Inspectors do not believe that the council has demonstrated sufficient and clear educational benefits. In taking forward the proposal, the council needs to set out the specific benefits for the children from both schools that will accrue from implementation of the proposal and how these will be achieved. Most stakeholders who responded to the consultation oppose the proposal. In taking forward the proposal, the council will need to clearly outline educational benefits of alternative options to closure. Working closely with the local community, the council needs to revisit factors which may impact on the children and the local community should the proposal proceed. This includes community use of the school and the impact of travel on the children and the environment. Consultees notified the council of a number of inaccuracies and omissions in the proposal. HM Inspectors believe these materially affect their ability to fully understand the benefits which the council asserts will result from the closure of Garlieston Primary School. In its final consultation report, the council will need to set out the actions it has taken to address these alleged inaccuracies or omissions.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
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