

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by Dumfries and Galloway Council to close Kirkbean Primary School and realign its catchment area with New Abbey 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 Kirkbean Primary School and realign its catchment area with New Abbey 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 meeting held on 30 August 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 Kirkbean and New Abbey Primary Schools, 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 Kirkbean Primary School, the likely effect on the local community and the likely impact of any different travelling arrangements resulting 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 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 children in both schools and were distributed at the public meetings. The council made appropriate arrangements to gather the views of children attending both schools. Public meetings held on 30 August 2017 were attended by 27 members of the public and two elected members at Kirkbean Primary School and nine members of the public and one elected member at New Abbey Primary School. Several parents were unhappy with the timing of the public meetings which they felt limited the possibility of attendance by interested parties who had work commitments. Overall, stakeholders were strongly opposed to the proposal. There were 75 written and online responses relating to the proposal, all of which were in opposition. A petition signed by over 500 interested parties opposing the closure of Kirkbean Primary School was also submitted. The council carried out an assessment to consider the impact of closing a rural school.

3. Educational Aspects of Proposal

3.1 Kirkbean Primary School is an accessible rural school with a current role of 11 pupils. This represents 15.5 per cent of the building's capacity. The building is currently rated by the council as condition B (satisfactory), and suitability C (poor). New Abbey Primary School, with a capacity of 72, is rated by the council as condition B (satisfactory), and suitability C (poor). The council has stated its intent to refurbish the New Abbey Primary School building.

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 to provide specific

evidence of how its proposal will impact positively on the children of both Kirkbean and New Abbey Primary Schools.

3.3 Almost all children, parents, staff and stakeholders 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 need to address these concerns in its final consultation report.

3.4 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 Kirkbean Primary School.

3.5 During the consultation, stakeholders alleged inaccuracies and omissions in the proposal, including in relation to financial data. The council will need to ensure that it takes the necessary steps to investigate these matters. 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.

3.6 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.

3.7 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. A number of alternative proposals were considered; these include the continuation of partnership working between the two schools.

3.8 Kirkbean Primary School has been in partnership with New Abbey Primary School, with a shared headteacher since 2014 and the council asserts that this arrangement results in educational benefits, including opportunities for joint professional development for staff and a wider peer group for children. It is not clear to HM Inspectors, from the proposal paper what further benefits will be realised as a result of the closure of Kirkbean Primary School.

3.9 Stakeholders would like to have been more involved in the process of identifying alternatives. They expressed concern about the negative impact on the village should the proposal go ahead. In taking forward the proposal, the council needs to revisit the alternatives with the community.

3.10 The council looked at travel arrangements and the possible impact on the environment. It indicates in its proposal document that the transport arrangements associated with the schools' current partnership arrangements result in increased pressure on costs, resources and carbon emissions. It is not clear from the proposal document how closure of Kirkbean Primary School will reduce this pressure. In its final report, the council needs to provide an accurate assessment of the impact on children, families and the environment of proposed travel arrangements.

4. Summary

Overall, HM Inspectors do not believe that the council has demonstrated sufficient and clear educational benefits. In taking forward this proposal, the council needs to identify clearly the educational benefits for the children of both schools. It needs to engage more thoroughly with parents and members of the community particularly around alternatives to the proposal. 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 the impact of travel on children, families 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 the closure of Kirkbean Primary School will deliver. 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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