

Consultation proposal by East Ayrshire Council

Report by Education Scotland, addressing educational aspects of the proposal to create a new primary school with supported learning centre and early childhood centre arising from the merger of Barshare Primary School, Supported Learning Centre and Early Childhood Centre and Greenmill Primary School and Early Childhood Centre.

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 East Ayrshire Council proposes to discontinue education provision at Barshare Primary School, Supported Learning Centre and Early Learning Centre and at Greenmill Primary School and Early Childhood Centre from June 2016 or as soon as possible thereafter. It proposes that a new school be built for children attending those establishments transfer to a new build non-denominational primary school establishment with effect from the start of the 2016/17 academic session. There are currently three proposed sites for this amalgamated new build, all are situated on the Eastern side of the town centre.

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 25 February 2014 and 27 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;
- consideration of further representations made directly to Education Scotland on relevant educational aspects of the proposal, namely from staff at Hillside School; and
- visits to the sites of Barshare Primary School, Supported Learning Centre and Early Childhood Centre and at Greenmill Primary School and Early Childhood Centre including discussion with relevant consultees.

1.4 HM Inspectors considered:

- the likely effects of the proposal for children and young people of the schools and centres; 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.

2. Consultation process

2.1 East Ayrshire Council undertook the initial consultation on its proposals with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*. The consultation included an invitation for written submissions and a series of public meetings. In addition, an independent consultation exercise was out-sourced by the council to ensure that children and young people were consulted about the proposal.

2.2 The council received 88 written responses to the consultation. The majority of those who responded were in favour of the proposal (60%) although a significant minority (25%) were against the council's proposal. Notably, almost all of these negative responses came from parents or others associated with Greenmill Primary School and these written objections were, in the main, lengthy and detailed.

2.3 Children from both schools had mixed views about the proposal. Overall, they were in favour of a new school but with some reservations. They did welcome the possibility of a purpose-built, brand new school and looked forward to making new friends in a larger school. Children from Barshare Primary School expressed strongly the desire to retain the close links with children and young people of Hillside School and expressed concerns that these would be lost if the site of the school was to be relocated. Those at Greenmill Primary School were very fond of their school building in the heart of Cumnock. They were worried about the safety of the route that some children would have to travel if the proposal were to go ahead. They would prefer the new school to be situated nearer the existing Greenmill site.

Children from both schools hoped they would be able to help design the new school building and outdoor learning spaces.

2.4 Most parents from Barshare Primary School agreed with the proposal to merge the two schools. They felt that it was clear that the existing facilities needed upgraded and acknowledged the need for best value of council funds. However, the majority felt that the proposal, if it were to go ahead, should be sited within the existing grounds of Barshare Primary School instead of one of the other proposed locations. The site at St John's Primary School was felt to be unsuitable due to traffic concerns, while the proposed site at ground known as 'The Flushes' was felt to be unsafe due to flooding risk and its proximity to a river. There were mixed opinions on the suggestion that children should remain in situ while new building work is undertaken. A few parents expressed concerns about the safety of this approach and wanted the council to explore the possibility of decanting the children to another premises while work was undertaken. There is some opposition towards the proposed site at 'The Flushes' from the parents at Barshare Primary School who feel that the location represents a safety risk and also that children would be losing out on existing play facilities within the community.

2.5 Parents of children who currently attend Greenmill Primary School strongly oppose the proposal to site the new school on one of the three proposed sites close to Barshare Primary School. They feel that the needs of the children of Greenmill Primary School are not being fairly considered with regards to increased travel distances, proximity to Cumnock Academy and with regards to the legacy and heritage of having a school situated so near the town centre. Some respondents expressed strong concerns around ensuring safe routes to school, in particular with regard to those who live in the outlying of the catchment area. Parents and staff at Greenmill Primary School do not consider any of the proposed sites to provide an acceptable solution, despite assurances that transport would be provided for children who reside more than 1.5 miles from the school. They are particularly concerned about the routes that some children may choose to take in order to get to the new locations, namely through a wooded area from the Holmhead end of the catchment and, from the other direction, across a viaduct from the Glenramskill estate. They highlight the likely scenario of parents with both children of school and pre-school age making multiple journeys to and from the proposed new build sites. They do not feel the council has properly considered or given reassurance about safe routes to school or about the reasonableness of these routes in inclement weather. They are angry at what they perceive to be a retraction on previous assurances that Greenmill Primary School would be rebuilt separately and keep its identity. A few parents questioned whether the savings achieved from the merger would be sufficient to justify the potential perceived disadvantages to the school community. Despite these concerns, parents recognise the poor state of the current Greenmill Primary School and the need for a replacement. The issues of concern expressed by parents are not around the need for a new school building but rather whether the current proposal is the correct one.

2.6 Staff in Barshare Primary School are very much in favour of the proposal to merge the two existing schools and replace them with a purpose-built facility. They welcomed the opportunity the proposal offered to have access to more modern

facilities, including up-to-date technology infrastructure. In particular, early childhood staff expressed dissatisfaction about their current accommodation and were looking forward to working in a more suitable environment which would better meet the needs of young children. The only concerns expressed by these members of staff surrounded the desirability of maintaining the existing close links with Hillside School. For example, the daily mentoring that takes place between P7 children and those at Hillside School. For this reason, almost all staff stated that a new build on the existing Barshare Primary School site would be their preferred option.

2.7 Greenmill Primary School staff expressed a number of concerns about the proposal. They recognised that a new build would provide an improved environment and resources. However, they felt that Greenmill Primary School should be re-built as a separate school and should be situated nearer its current location. There were concerns expressed about staffing arrangements in the new proposed school, including arrangements for surplus staff and the impact of increased class sizes. Many staff highlighted the unsuitable nature of the routes to school that some children would have to travel and also the loss of a school from the centre of Cumnock. Overall, staff from Greenmill Primary School did not feel that the proposal was providing the best solution to the issue and expressed the view that they would value more consultation around this.

2.8 There is opposition from other interested parties, such as community groups, towards this proposal. These largely centre around the impact that the loss of Greenmill Primary School would have on the ethos and community of central Cumnock.

3. Educational aspects of the proposal

3.1 The main educational benefit the council sets out in its proposal is to provide access to a superior design of school which is purpose-built for the delivery of 21st century education. The council rightly states that neither of the existing schools is particularly well configured to respond to the demands of a modern curriculum. In particular, the existing Greenmill Primary School is in poor condition and does not provide a suitable or accessible learning environment for children, particularly for those who may have additional learning or physical needs. A new, purpose-built campus would certainly help to ensure a motivating learning environment which would help to deliver the capacities of Curriculum for Excellence.

3.2 The council also sets out a case for a joint campus in terms of shared resources including greater access to information and communications technology (ICT) systems, sport facilities and a more flexible use of staffing resources. It promotes the benefits of a larger establishment to provide enhanced learning experiences, including sharing of teacher expertise and better joint working with other services. However, the proposal does not make sufficiently clear the actual rather than the potential improvements to the curriculum for children. The council also needs to address concerns from staff, parents and children at Barshare Primary School that existing links with Hillside School will be preserved. In addition, parents and staff from Greenmill Primary School need greater reassurance

about the potential loss of links with local community facilities, including the close proximity to Cumnock Academy.

3.3 The proposal sets out a case for securing best value from council resources. The rolls of both schools have fallen significantly since 2000 and the proposal seeks to address under-occupancy issues and securing a sustainable school estate in the longer term. It is clear that a new establishment would represent a saving in terms of revenue and management costs. In addition, the council makes it clear that refurbishing both individual schools would not represent best value for money. However, some parents from Greenmill Primary School would like more detail about the overall efficiency savings that would be achieved by the proposal given that anticipated savings are dependent on a number of factors, for example the capital cost of acquiring the site of the new school.

3.4 Given the upward trend of children attending early childhood centres and the future requirement to provide 600 hours of pre-school education as required under the *Children and Young People Act* which comes into effect in August 2014, this proposal effectively meets the needs of a growing demand for early learning and childcare places. In addition, the proposal would provide a much more suitable environment than currently for the delivery of high quality early learning.

3.5 The proposal suggests a number of potential educational benefits for children with additional support needs. While a new building would provide greatly improved facilities, the council needs to consider also the potential detrimental effect that this proposal would have on the existing links with Hillside School.

3.6 In addition to the proposal of a merger in principle, the council has also sought views on several possible sites for the proposed new build school. Each of these have been given an option appraisal score, calculated using variables including proposed educational benefits, financial implications of each site and maximising the number of young people who would directly benefit. All of the three proposed sites are in close proximity of each other, with one being in the existing grounds of Barshare Primary School. The favoured site of the options appraisal exercise is on ground at the Edgar Avenue area of Cumnock, on a piece of land commonly known as 'The Flushes'. This is an area known to be partially prone to flooding and the council recognises this in its scoring system. However, there is as yet no concrete cost of preparing the ground in order that it is fit for purpose.

3.7 The proposal does not consider any alternative sites which would negate the additional distances that children from Greenmill Primary School would have to travel, should the proposal go ahead. However, it is recognised that consideration of locations nearer to Greenmill would present a different set of issues in terms of parents and stakeholders from the current Barshare Primary School.

3.8 The proposal does not give enough detail to provide reassurance around the concerns about routes to school and further consultation needs to be undertaken with stakeholders.

3.9 The council sets out various ways in which it intends to address any possible negative impact of the proposal at the interim period before the proposed merger and at the time of transition. These include consulting staff, parents and children in elements of the design, planning joint events and involvement of visiting agencies. It also indicates procedures for dealing with staffing issues and for planning for joint working between the Parent Councils. It provides assurance that the care and welfare of children will be of top priority. However, concerns remain at this initial stage in terms of the proposed site and its consequences for children primarily residing in the current Greenmill catchment and these need to be further explored before such transition plans can be reasonably put into place.

4. Summary

4.1 The council provides a strong case for a shared campus for Barshare Primary School, Greenmill Primary School and their associated supported learning and early childhood centres. The proposal would address the building needs of both schools and of Greenmill Primary School in particular whose current building is no longer fit for purpose. This option would provide best value financially. It would benefit the children and young people of the two schools who would have access to more modern and improved facilities.

4.2 While the principle of a merger and the creation of a new school is broadly welcomed, there are two main areas of opposition to this proposal. These centre around the location of the proposed new site and the concerns about the impact of joint working practices with Hillside School.

4.3 Given the significant opposition to the location of the proposed sites for the new build school from staff and parents at Greenmill Primary School, the council needs to ensure that it provides sufficient time for effective communication with parents, staff and children to alleviate their concerns. East Ayrshire Council now needs to provide further consideration regarding the proposed location and provide assurance around issues of safe travel to school, particularly in relation to the children who reside in the outlying areas of the current Greenmill catchment area.

4.4 Furthermore, East Ayrshire Council needs to consider and respond to concerns from the parents, staff and children at Barshare Primary School and Hillside School about the impact on shared working practices should the proposal go ahead but not at the current site of Barshare Primary School.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
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