

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by East Ayrshire Council to merge Auchinleck Academy and Cumnock Academy and Supported Learning Centre into a new building located within the area of Broomfield playing fields with effect from August 2019 or as soon as possible thereafter; and to co-locate a newly merged primary school, early childhood centre and supported learning centre resulting from the amalgamation of Greenmill Primary School and Early Childhood Centre and Barshare Primary School, Supported Learning Centre and Early Childhood Centre and a new build Hillside School on the Broomfield site.

1. Introduction

This report from Education Scotland has been prepared by HM Inspectors in accordance with the terms of the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010* and the amendments contained in the *Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014*. The purpose of the report is to provide an independent and impartial consideration of East Ayrshire Council's proposal to merge Auchinleck Academy and Cumnock Academy and Supported Learning Centre into a new building located within the area of Broomfield playing fields with effect from August 2019 or as soon as possible thereafter; and to co-locate a newly merged primary school, early childhood centre and supported learning centre resulting from the amalgamation of Greenmill Primary School and Early Childhood Centre and Barshare Primary School, Supported Learning Centre and Early Childhood Centre and a new build Hillside School on the Broomfield site. 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 and must 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.

1.1 HM Inspectors considered:

- the likely effects of the proposal for children and young people of the schools and centres affected, 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

- the educational benefits the council believes will result from implementation of the proposal, and the council's reasons for coming to these beliefs.

1.2 In preparing this report, HM Inspectors undertook the following activities:

- attendance at the public meeting held on 4 March 2015 at Cumnock Academy 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 sites of, Auchinleck Academy, Cumnock Academy, Greenmill Primary School, Hillside School, Barshare Primary School, Auchinleck Primary School, Catrine Primary School, Drongan Primary School, Mauchline Primary School, Muirkirk Primary School, Ochiltree Primary School, Sorn Primary School, New Cumnock Primary School, Netherthird Primary School and Family Centre and Logan Primary School and Early Childhood Centre including discussion with relevant consultees.

2. Consultation Process

2.1 East Ayrshire Council undertook the consultation on its proposal(s) with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010* and the amendments in the *Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014*. The proposal sits alongside two other proposals which are running concurrently.

2.2 The statutory consultation period started on 12 February 2015 and ended on 27 March 2015. A copy of the consultation document was published on the council's website. The council advertised the consultation in local press. Public meetings were held in Cumnock Academy on 4 March 2015 and in Auchinleck Academy on 5 March 2015. Prior to the statutory consultation the council held meetings with some local community groups and sought the views of children and young people in some of the schools affected.

2.3 East Ayrshire Council received 203 submissions in response to the consultation. Forty-nine per cent of responses were opposed to the merger with 33% in favour and 18% expressing no overall view. A majority of 58% were opposed to the proposed site at Broomfield with 24% in favour and 18% expressing no view. Twenty-five per cent agreed with the proposed co-location with Barshare, Greenmill and Hillside schools, 25% stated no view and 50% disagreed. In addition the council received a petition signed by 693 people opposing the site chosen by the council.

2.4 The council sought the views of children and young people affected by the proposal, including by engaging an external organisation to work with groups of children and young people to seek their views in the two secondary schools and at Barshare Primary, Greenmill Primary and Hillside Schools. In Cumnock Academy and Supported Learning Centre and Auchinleck Academy a total of 1,243 questionnaires were completed and returned. Overall, there was a mixed

response to the proposal with 24% supporting the proposal, 38.5% were opposed and 37.5% were unsure. Forty-seven per cent of children and young people who responded were opposed to siting the proposed campus at Broomfield with 38% unsure and 15% in favour. In the two primary schools 194 questionnaires were completed. Of the children who responded, 36.5% expressed support for the new campus, 35.5% were unsure and 28% were opposed. Forty-five per cent of children were opposed to the Broomfield site being chosen as the proposed location with 25% in favour and 30% unsure.

2.5 During the consultation P6 and P7 children in all of the affected primary schools received formal letters from East Ayrshire Council providing information on the consultation process and notification of a series of meetings scheduled in each primary school.

3. Educational Aspects of Proposal

3.1 The council's proposal has potential educational benefits. Facilities at the new school will replace ageing buildings. Children and young people will benefit from better equipped, purpose designed, modern learning facilities with improved information and communications technology (ICT). The new building has the potential to offer greater opportunities for young people to experience flexibility within the curriculum and better personalisation and choice. Young people at the senior phase have the potential to benefit from a greater choice of subjects and enhanced vocational learning options. The proposal has the potential to improve partnership working with other sectors and organisations including Ayrshire College. The proposed wider staff team has the potential to improve course planning and facilitate better sharing of practice. The proposed new building will reduce building maintenance and other costs which could result in better use of resources to support learners across East Ayrshire and help the council achieve best value.

3.2 The proposed co-location with Supported Learning Centres could improve access for children and young people to mainstream resources at both primary and secondary levels. This could result in a more inclusive learning community. This aspect of the proposal has potential benefits for all children and young people in the Supported Learning Centres and for the other children and young people on the campus.

3.3 There are clear educational benefits in co-locating the new building on the same site as Hillside School, including potential opportunities for young people in mainstream settings to develop leadership through acting as mentors and buddies for children at Hillside School. In addition, children and young people who attend Hillside School will benefit from the proposal through better integration into the life of a wider community and improved access to specialist resources.

3.4 Co-locating the new school on the same campus as the early childhood centres and primary schools has potential educational benefits. These include supporting transitions in learning across different stages of education and providing children and young people attending the schools with opportunities to access improved sports, ICT and library facilities. Secondary pupils would be able to act as

mentors and develop leadership skills. Opportunities for shared curricular planning have the potential to improve implementation of Curriculum for Excellence.

3.5 There are potential educational benefits of college provision on the new campus, including new and expanded range of resources, facilities and staff expertise and improved vocational learning opportunities, skills development and partnerships with businesses. This will support young people's learning and skills development opportunities and post-school transition.

3.6 Headteachers and members of senior management teams in all establishments, who met with HM Inspectors, supported the proposal and were enthusiastic about the opportunities the proposed new campus would offer to improve educational provision. The majority of parents and children who met with HM inspectors also supported the proposal. Staff and young people who spoke with HM inspectors had a range of views with some supporting the proposal, some undecided and some opposing to the proposal. Parents, staff, children and young people who spoke with HM inspectors could see potential benefits to new purpose built facilities and a campus approach.

3.7 The proposal to site the proposed new campus at Broomfield Playing Fields generated significant levels of concern about the loss of a valued local amenity, attractive green space and sports fields. Children, young people and adults valued the running track as a community resource and were concerned about the impact on local sports clubs. A high proportion of stakeholders would prefer to see the campus built on another site. However, East Ayrshire Council has stated in its proposal that Broomfield is the only suitable area of council owned land available. The council has engaged with community groups during the consultation and has attempted to provide reassurance that the running track will be replaced in another location, yet to be determined. The council has also consulted with Cumnock Rugby Football Club (CRFC) which is faced with the loss of rugby pitches on the site. Whilst concerned about levels and costs of access to the new sports facilities at the proposed campus, members of the CRFC see potential benefits to the development of partnership working with the proposed campus schools. This could extend existing work with local schools and assist with the development of the sport locally. If unable to identify a suitable alternative site for the proposed new campus, East Ayrshire Council will need to continue to engage with stakeholders to provide reassurance that it will mitigate negative effects of the development at Broomfield by replacing the running track at a suitable alternative location. The council will need to continue to work with local sports clubs to ensure that they have reasonable access to the sports facilities within the proposed new campus.

3.8 Stakeholders raised other issues about the suitability of the site, including its proximity to a sewage treatment plant and that an area of the proposed site is on a flood plain. The council will need to continue to engage with stakeholders to provide reassurance that the site is suitable for the new building if it decides to implement its proposal.

3.9 Stakeholders at Auchinleck were concerned about the lack of detail on the physical education and sports facilities at the new campus and that this aspect of the proposal might not result in improvement in young people's learning. The sports

facilities at Auchinleck are already of a good standard, including a swimming pool and all weather pitches which the council proposes to retain for wider community and primary school use. The council does not propose to build a new swimming pool on the new campus since a pool operated through Visions Leisure Centre is adjacent to the site. However, details of access to this facility for the campus schools have yet to be developed and agreed. In taking its proposal forward the council will need to work with stakeholders and involve them fully in planning for physical education and sports facilities.

3.10 A significant number of stakeholders who responded to the consultation and met with HM Inspectors raised concerns in relation to road safety, traffic management, traffic congestion, school transport and safe walking routes to school. East Ayrshire Council has responded reasonably to concerns raised. The council's current policy is to provide school transport to better levels than statutory entitlements set out in national guidance. The council acknowledges concerns raised about the safe walking routes, including the safety of pupils walking from Auchinleck to Cumnock alongside a busy road on which it has identified several traffic hazards. Funding has been set aside to make improvements and address road safety issues. The council proposes that bus and car traffic to the site will be managed by establishing parking, pick-up and drop-off facilities at the site of the existing Cumnock Academy following its demolition. Access from the former Cumnock Academy site to the new campus would be by a new covered pedestrian footbridge across the Lugar Water between the two sites. A few stakeholders want to ensure that transport arrangements and vehicular access for children and young people with additional support needs were appropriate to their needs. In taking forward its proposal the council will need to continue to work with stakeholders on the details of its transport and road safety plans.

3.11 A large proportion of stakeholders expressed some concerns about the large size of the campus and its suitability in a relatively small rural town. They were concerned about the complex management arrangements which might need to be put in place. Some concerns were expressed that the current very good staff knowledge of individual children and young people could be reduced in such a large facility and that staff might be less aware of the social and emotional well-being of individual children and young people in the new campus. Stakeholders were also concerned about the loss of identity in the school communities in both Auchinleck Academy and Cumnock Academy. They were concerned that it might prove difficult to establish an appropriate sense of identity in the new campus given its size and scale. Staff at both secondary schools expressed some concerns over arrangements for sharing space in the new building, including access to specialist areas. Staff were also anxious about the process for establishing new staffing structures at the campus. In taking forward its proposal the council will need to work with stakeholders on its detailed plans for the design and operational management of the campus to ensure concerns are appropriately addressed.

3.12 Concerns about the distinct identity of the two communities of Auchinleck and Cumnock were raised by a high proportion of stakeholders. Some felt that bringing two communities together would be challenging and may result in instances of misbehaviour. The council has sought to reassure stakeholders on this matter. Many of those who spoke with HM inspectors were confident that any issues of this

nature could be resolved. Young people at Auchinleck Academy and Cumnock Academy already learn together in some Advanced Higher subjects. The council will need to ensure that it works closely with children, young people and parents to establish a new sense of school community if it decides to implement its proposal.

3.13 The council identifies a number of benefits for the new merged primary school on the campus. Many stakeholders were concerned that children attending other associated primaries of the new build secondary school may not benefit from the same joint activities to support progression in their learning as the move from primary to secondary school. They were concerned that children making the transition from other associated primary schools might not be so well prepared to take a full part in secondary education as their peers in the new campus. The council will need to consider this if it decides to implement its proposal and ensure that plans to enhance learning within the broad general education phase of Curriculum for Excellence benefit all schools associated with the new secondary school as far as possible.

3.14 Stakeholders were keen to ensure that maintenance of existing school buildings continues until the completion of the new campus. They were also concerned about the maintenance of buildings not included in the merger proposal. The council had considered the position of Logan Primary School and Early Childhood Centre and Netherthird Primary School and Family Centre but had decided not to include these schools in its merger proposals. The council's proposal states that capital budget has been identified for Netherthird Primary School and that it will benefit from further refurbishment. The council will need to clarify its plans for Logan Primary School.

4. Summary

East Ayrshire Council's proposal has potential to provide significant educational benefits. The new campus and merged schools will provide the opportunity for young people to learn in purpose-designed, high-quality facilities. The proposal will provide potential to considerably enhance aspects of the curriculum, particularly opportunities to extend subject choice at senior phase and to enhance vocational education opportunities through closer working with Ayrshire College and other partner organisations. Children in the merged primary schools will benefit from access to improved resources and learning opportunities. The council has responded reasonably to many of the issues and concerns raised and has committed to continue to engage with stakeholders as it formulates more details, including its plans for transport and safe walking routes. However, issues raised by parents, children, young people and staff including questions regarding the overall leadership and operational management arrangements for the campus will require further detailed discussion. The council will need to ensure that it makes appropriate arrangements to continue to engage stakeholders fully in working together on the details of its proposal if implemented. There are significant concerns about the proposed site of the campus.

The council has not identified an alternative site. If it decides to implement its proposals it will need to work closely with stakeholders and mitigate any negative impacts on local sports provision. The council will need to clarify its plans for Logan Primary School in its final consultation report.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
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