

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by East Ayrshire Council to discontinue educational provision at Barshare Primary School, Supported Learning Centre and Early Childhood Centre and at Greenmill Primary School and Early Childhood Centre with effect from June 2018 or as soon as possible thereafter. The children attending these establishments would transfer to a new-build non-denominational primary school with effect from August 2018. It is proposed that the site of this new school is in the area of Cumnock presently occupied by Broomfield Playing Fields.

1. Introduction

1.1 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 discontinue educational provision at Barshare Primary School, Supported Learning Centre and Early Childhood Centre and at Greenmill Primary School and Early Childhood Centre with effect from June 2018 or as soon as possible thereafter. 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.

1.2 HM Inspectors considered:

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

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

- attendance at the public meeting held on 3 March 2015 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; and
- visits to the site of Barshare and Greenmill Primary Schools, including discussion with relevant consultees.

2. Consultation Process

2.1 East Ayrshire Council undertook the consultation on its proposal with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010* and the amendments in the *Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014*.

2.2 East Ayrshire Council states that this proposal takes account of the views raised by stakeholders during a previous statutory consultation involving Greenmill and Barshare Primary Schools. The proposal sits alongside two other proposals which are running concurrently.

2.3 The consultation ran from 12 February to 27 March 2015. Advertisements were placed in the local press. The council held two public meetings on 2 March 2015 at Barshare Primary School and on 3 March 2015 at Greenmill Primary School. Prior to the statutory consultation the council held meetings at schools and with some community groups.

2.4 The council received 409 written responses to the proposal. Of these, 74% disagreed with the proposal to merge the two primary schools, while 26% were in favour or did not express an opinion. Eighty-three per cent disagreed with the proposed site of the new build school while 17% were in favour or expressed no opinion. Eight-two per cent disagreed with the co-location of other establishments on the same site and 18% were in favour or expressed no opinion.

2.5 Prior to consultation period the council also sought the views of children and young people by engaging an external organisation to seek their views. Overall, children had mixed views about the council's proposal. In total, 43% of children were in favour of the merger, whilst 33% were not sure and 24% disagreed with the proposal. In terms of the co-locating with Hillside School and a new secondary, 37% of children stated that they liked the idea, with 36% not sure and a further 28% against the idea of a joint campus.

3. Educational Aspects of Proposal

3.1 The proposal to merge Barshare and Greenmill Primary Schools and the associated Learning Centre and Early Childhood Centres has the potential to provide a number of educational benefits. It would build on the existing strengths of two primary schools with their associated supported learning and early childhood centres by delivering a new, purpose-built learning environment for the children of Cumnock. Children would benefit from a larger and more diverse peer group to learn and play with. The proposal would help in the delivery of the council's commitment to providing learning environments that are designed and created for the needs of the 21st century, including the provision of modern sporting and information and communications technology (ICT) facilities.

3.2 The proposal would assist staff to better deliver the entitlements for Curriculum for Excellence. It would also help enhance opportunities for staff and other professionals to share expertise and work together. It would provide greater scope for staff to be deployed to meet the needs of children. The proposal would help support the delivery of high-quality early learning and has the potential to deliver education for those who have additional support needs in a more appropriately designed environment. In addition, the proposal would help address the under-occupancy rates at both schools and ensure best value for the council.

3.3 A significant amount of stakeholders who responded to the consultation from the Barshare area, including individual parents, the Parent Council and members of the wider community expressed views that were strongly against the proposal to merge the two schools on the proposed site. These concerns were expressed in writing and in engagements with HM Inspectors. Objections and concerns focused on the loss of school identity and potential reduction in support for pupils, due to increased numbers. In addition, stakeholders expressed reasonable concerns about travel issues and the lack of access to public transport for the Barshare community. They highlighted the issue of families who have children of different ages possibly having to make multiple journeys from Barshare to the Broomfield site in order to walk their children safely to school. They felt that the community of Barshare has the potential to be marginalised and would prefer that investment was given to improve facilities at the existing school. Staff who met with HM Inspectors from Barshare Primary School broadly shared the concerns about travel distance and the potential impact of families. However, most could see the potential of the improved learning environment and the opportunities that a new school would bring.

3.4 Stakeholders, who responded to the consultation in writing and who met with HM Inspectors, expressed a range of 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 by, for example, allocating additional funding for any necessary adaptations to walking routes. In taking forward its proposal the council will need to continue to work with members of the school communities on the details of its transport and road safety plans.

3.5 The Parent Council of Greenmill Primary School recognised the need for an improved learning environment for children who attend Greenhill Primary School. They were broadly in favour of the merger with Barshare Primary. However, they

raised concerns about the size and scale of the proposed new campus. Most staff from Greenmill Primary School, who met with HM Inspectors, were not in favour of the proposal, stating that their preferred option would be for Greenmill Primary School to remain separate from the other schools. Most children who met with HM Inspectors were positive about the prospect of a merger with their neighbouring primary school. They were looking forward to making new friends and enjoying better facilities, both indoors and outside.

3.6 A small but significant number of stakeholders who met with HM Inspectors were in favour of the merger, including senior staff from both schools. Children who met with HM Inspectors were also broadly in favour of the proposals. They recognised the need for improved buildings for Greenmill and Barshare Primary Schools, including improved access to shared facilities. The prospect of strengthening community relations across Cumnock was cited as a potential benefit, should the proposal go ahead.

3.7 Most stakeholders, who met with HM Inspectors or responded in writing, expressed reservations about co-locating a secondary school with the associated primaries, supported learning centre and early childhood centres. These revolved around the size and scale of the proposed new campus and concerns regarding managing transitions, security and the management of shared areas. The council have acknowledged concerns raised by stakeholders about pupil behaviour. Should the proposal go ahead the council will need to ensure that the senior management teams of the respective establishments work together effectively to set high standards of behaviour. In addition it should continue to work with stakeholders to address any concerns about the potential conduct of pupils. Almost all stakeholders are in favour of the proposal to co-locate Hillside School with the proposed new primary school in order to maintain and extend positive partnership working.

3.8 The council's proposal has a number of potential benefits that will arise from the co-location of other schools on the same site. These include better working links with Hillside School which would build on the already positive practices established and enable them to be further developed. In addition, the proposed co-location has the potential benefit for primary-age children to access subject specialist teaching and benefit from the use of specialist science equipment and larger sporting facilities that are shared with the secondary school. By providing education on a shared campus, the proposal has the potential to deliver improved transitions in learning between different stages of education. All operational issues will need to be carefully discussed, planned and managed in order for the proposal to maximise the educational benefits.

3.9 There is strong opposition from the community around the proposed site of the potential new campus. Those who responded to the consultation and met with HM Inspectors expressed their concerns about the loss of community recreational space. Children and parents are seeking further reassurance that there would be scope to use facilities out of school hours. The council now needs to provide further detail on how sporting and leisure facilities would be accessed for recreational purposes.

4. Summary

4.1 The council's proposal has the potential to deliver a number of educational benefits, including better quality learning environments to help deliver Curriculum for Excellence; state of the art facilities for areas such as ICT, science and physical education; and increased opportunities for sharing best practice amongst staff. Children would have access to a larger and more diverse peer group. The pooling of staffing resources would allow for staff to be better deployed to meet the needs of particular groups of children. Pupils from both schools would benefit from the opportunity to maintain and develop further the strong links that have been already developed between Hillside School and Barshare Primary School.

4.2 Should the proposal go ahead to co-locate the proposed new primary school within a shared campus, including Hillside School and the proposed merger of Auchinleck and Cumnock Academies, the potential exists to develop better links at transition points, to share resources and expertise and to have improved planned opportunities for pupils to work together. In its final consultation report the council should seek to address concerns relating to the size and scale of the proposal, including the management of any shared areas. The council will also need to address the reasonable concerns raised by stakeholders relating to traffic management and travel arrangements.

4.3 Despite significant opposition, there are those who responded to the consultation who see the clear benefits of the proposal. Should the proposal go ahead, the council needs to provide assurances of how it will further engage with staff and the school communities of Barshare and Greenmill Primaries and ensure that they are fully involved and informed as more detailed plans emerge.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
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