

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by East Ayrshire Council that education provision at the current location of St Sophia's Primary School should be discontinued with effect from June 2016, or as soon as possible thereafter. The children attending St Sophia's Primary School should transfer to and be co-located with Galston Early Childhood Centre and Galston Primary School on their current site with effect from August 2016 or as soon as possible thereafter.

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 education provision at the current location of St Sophia's Primary School with effect from June 2016, or as soon as possible thereafter. The children attending St Sophia's Primary School should transfer to and be co-located with Galston Early Childhood Centre and Galston Primary School on their current site with effect from August 2016 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 school; 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 24 February 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;
- visits to the sites of St Sophia's Primary School, Galston Early Childhood Centre and Galston Primary School including discussion with relevant consultees; and
- a discussion with a representative of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Galloway.

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*. East Ayrshire Council formally consulted stakeholders between 12 February 2015 and 27 March 2015. A public meeting was held on 24 February 2015 in St Sophia's Primary School. The council received 49 written responses by the close of the formal consultation period. Of the 49 responses, 28 stakeholders were in favour of the proposal, 13 were against and eight were undecided. The responses included written submissions from the Diocese of Galloway and community groups. Pupils in both schools were given the opportunity to contribute their views during the formal consultation period.

2.2 East Ayrshire Council's proposal document section 39 states that should this proposal be accepted and implemented, a new school will be created and located on a co-located campus with Galston Primary School and Galston Early Childhood Centre. Some stakeholders are strongly opposed to the council's intention to use the funding which is available to build an extension to the existing dining and gymnasium accommodation and not a new school as described in the proposal document.

3. Educational Aspects of Proposal

3.1 East Ayrshire Council's proposal to discontinue education provision at the current location of St Sophia's Primary School and transfer pupils to a co-located campus on the current Galston Primary School and Galston Early Childhood Centre will support the council's vision to deliver Curriculum for Excellence in buildings which are suitable for that purpose. East Ayrshire Council sets out clearly the need to improve occupancy rates in its schools. St Sophia's Primary School is operating at 40.8% which is well below the average occupancy target of 85% set by the

council. Extensive public engagement with stakeholders also suggests there is support for rationalising the school estates to provide buildings which are fit for purpose and can be used by the community. Galston Primary School currently has a roll of 307 and a planned capacity of 467. The primary school and Galston Early Childhood Centre were opened in 2008 providing modern purpose-built accommodation. Given the current roll and projected roll there is capacity to accommodate the pupils from St Sophia's Primary School in available open-plan teaching areas. The council during its pre-consultation period noted that concerns were being raised about pressures within the current campus on specialist spaces such as the gymnasium and dining hall. The delivery of two hours high-quality physical education can only be accommodated if two classes use the gymnasium and adjoining dining space at the same time. At lunchtimes some children eat at tables set up in the gymnasium and if weather permits they also access a secure outside picnic area. Should the proposal go ahead there is likely to be further pressure on these areas and the loss of other specialist rooms within the existing building. For example, the nurture room, information and communications technology suite, a classroom and office spaces used by visiting professionals and agencies, which may be adapted to become administrative areas. In its final consultation report, the council needs to set out how it will address the reasonable concerns stakeholders have to provide children with a positive dining experience and ensure children receive a minimum of two hours high-quality physical education each week.

3.2 East Ayrshire Council already has experience of co-locating schools, including denominational and non-denominational co-located schools and is well placed to use this experience to bring about a smooth transition should the proposal be accepted. Open and transparent engagement with parents, children, staff, the community and the church will be an essential element of bringing about a successful co-location on a single site. The council in its proposal intends to involve key stakeholders in the design of new facilities and at important stages to identify and resolve any emerging issues. Should the proposal be accepted it will be important to explore with stakeholders other solutions to alleviate the pressure on existing specialist accommodation.

3.3 East Ayrshire Council rightly suggests there are educational benefits for the pupils of St Sophia's Primary School. Moving from the current location which has been rated as a building which has major defects, to a modern building with access to a range of facilities has the potential to better support the delivery of Curriculum for Excellence. By being part of a wider community children will have increased opportunities to play and learn with their peers. Staff will have more opportunities to take forward shared priorities and work more closely with colleagues in the Galston Early Childhood Centre at points of transition. Staff will be able to focus more closely on achieving continuity and progression in children's learning across the early level of Curriculum for Excellence. The children of St Sophia's Primary School and Galston Primary School will have greater opportunities to build on existing friendships, learn together, and take part in joint activities at appropriate times in the school day. Positive staff and community links already exist between the two schools and the Galston Early Childhood Centre and these will continue to develop should the proposal go ahead. The proposal sets out an intention to improve the Galston campus facilities. Currently problems with drainage and sewage limit

children's and community members' access to the sports fields reducing the availability to these educational facilities. It will be important to also include community groups and the churches in the development of these facilities, including any upgrading of outdoor sports and play spaces.

3.4 HM Inspectors met with school and early childhood centre staff, representative groups of pupils and parents from all establishments affected by the proposal, a group of parishioners and a representative from the Diocese of Galloway. Most of those who met with HM Inspectors expressed some opposition to the proposal and a few were strongly opposed to the proposal. The children who met with HM Inspectors were generally positive about the proposal. Parents from both schools and the Galston Early Childhood Centre who met with HM Inspectors understood and accepted that East Ayrshire Council needed to make the best use of its resources and that all children should learn in an environment that was fit for purpose and supported the delivery of a high-quality learning experience. The parents and parishioners from St Sophia's Primary School and parents from Galston Primary School and Galston Early Childhood Centre who met with HM Inspectors expressed a number of concerns. These included criticism of the lack of transparency regarding what was being proposed and that the offer of a new school was changed to an extension of the existing accommodation. Parents from both schools were worried about children's health and safety related to an unresolved sewage and drainage issue near the entrance to the school. Those from Galston Primary School and Galston Early Childhood Centre raised concerns about the variation in class sizes between the two schools. They felt this was unfair that some children would be in much larger classes and that this might lead to tensions between parents and children. They did not think it necessary to have two separate schools. Staff who met with HM Inspectors expressed a range of views about the proposal. They recognised the educational benefits of all children experiencing a high-quality learning environment. Staff and some parents from St Sophia's Primary School were concerned about the potential loss of identity as a distinctive community of faith. In taking the proposal forward, it will be important for the council to take account of stakeholders' concerns.

3.5 The Diocese of Galloway has submitted a written response to the council stating that it is broadly supportive of the proposal. The Diocese acknowledges that in a small number of exceptional circumstances, the provision of a Catholic school co-located on a campus with a non-denominational school may be the only viable context for the provision of Catholic education in the local area. However, the Diocese raises some concerns about the accommodation in its written response. In taking forward its proposal the council will need to engage with the Diocese to address these concerns.

4. Summary

The proposal has a number of positive educational benefits for children who may attend the campus in the future. These include learning in modern facilities and the potential to add to children's curriculum experience through more flexible opportunities to work alongside their peers and being part of a wider community. There will be increased opportunities for staff to work together, to further develop the curriculum, to improve progression and achieve greater consistency in children's learning across the early level of Curriculum for Excellence. It will also assist the council to make efficient and effective use of its resources by addressing under-occupancy issues. In its final consultation report, the council needs to clarify its reasons for proposing an extension to the existing accommodation and to engage with stakeholders about the final design of the buildings within the campus. The council needs to resolve the issues raised regarding problems associated with drainage and sewage.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
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