

Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by East Ayrshire Council to explore options to address condition and suitability at St Sophia's Primary School, Galston.

March 2019

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](#) ("the 2010 Act"). The purpose of the report is to provide an independent and impartial consideration of East Ayrshire Council proposal to explore options to address condition and suitability at St Sophia's Primary School, Galston. 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 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 statutory 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 21 January 2019 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 St Sophia's Primary School, St Andrew's Primary School, St Joseph's Academy and Loudoun Academy, 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](#).

2.2 The council consulted on three options to address the condition and suitability of St Sophia's Primary School: refurbishment of the existing building (Option 1); closure of the school and incorporation into St Andrew's Primary School within the St Joseph's Campus (Option 2); co-location within a specifically refurbished and extended building at the Loudoun Academy Campus (Option 3). The consultation ran from 14 January 2019 until 1 March 2019, including a period of 30 school days. An advertisement was placed in the local press the week prior to the

commencement of the consultation, with information being made available on the council website and on its social media outlets. Interested parties were encouraged to respond to the consultation either electronically or in writing to the Head of Education. Three hundred and seventy-two written responses were received relating to the consultation. Of these, 312 (84%) supported Option 1, 39 (10%) supported Option 2 and 21 (6%) supported Option 3.

2.3 Public meetings were held at St Sophia's Primary School on 21 January 2019, St Andrew's Primary School within the St Joseph's Campus on 28 January 2019 and Loudoun Academy on 6 February 2019. At the first public meeting, 82 members of the public attended. Of the 73 who voted, 72 (99%) expressed a preference for Option 1 and one (1%) expressed a preference for Option 3. At the second public meeting, 37 members of the public attended. Of the 31 who voted, 29 (94%) expressed a preference for Option 1 and two (6%) expressed a preference for Option 3. At the third public meeting, 20 members of the public attended. Of the 19 who voted, 18 (95%) expressed a preference for Option 1 and one (5%) expressed a preference for Option 2.

3. Educational aspects of proposal

3.1 The council has specified educational benefits for children attending St Sophia's Primary School relating to each of the three options outlined in the proposal paper.

3.2 In relation to Option 1, the council has identified educational benefits including continuity of partnerships with the local community, of provision for additional support needs, including nurture, and of access to STEM projects provided through joint work with Kilmarnock Engineering and Science Society. However, the council acknowledges that the refurbishment would have a limited impact on the learning and teaching environment. Despite financial limitations, there are clear educational benefits to refurbishment of the school on its current site, including its existing links to the local community, the option for children to walk safely to school and the extensive school grounds with grassed areas and the potential for outdoor learning activities. If taking this option forward, the council should provide further detail about how significant the refurbishment to the school will be.

3.3 For Option 2, the council sees a strong educational benefit in creating a vibrant new learning community by joining together two denominational primary schools. It feels that a broader range of curricular and pastoral activities will be available for children, along with greater opportunities for personalisation and choice. It also thinks that the more modern school design will allow learning areas to be used more flexibly and enhance play based learning, as well as transitions from nursery. There are potential educational benefits for children in a more modern learning environment, which is better suited to contemporary learning and teaching approaches. They should also benefit from access to specialised facilities which are available in St Joseph's Campus, including science and technical education. Children could also benefit from increased opportunities for play based learning. However, these potential benefits need to be balanced against increased travel time for all children, removal of the option to walk to school and the loss of the school's unique identity and ethos. Young children from the St Sophia's Primary School catchment area are unlikely to attend the St Andrew's Primary School nursery and then benefit from transition from there into the primary school. If taking this option forward, the council should provide further detail about how the issues relating to travel will be addressed and will need to work closely with the Diocese of Galloway to deal with the loss of the school's identity and ethos.

3.4 The council feels that Option 3 has educational benefits in providing bespoke learning spaces, created to meet the needs of pupils and specified by staff, children, parents and other stakeholders. The council believes that these newly-designed layouts should give increased flexibility, enabling cooperation, collaboration, interdisciplinary and play-based learning. It thinks that increased access to the business partnerships developed at Loudoun Academy would raise

awareness of the world of work for children at St Sophia's Primary School and enhance opportunities for business engagement with the school. The proposed plan extends the current music block in the school including the assembly hall, which would remain a shared facility, and continue to be used by the secondary school for assemblies, physical education and exams. There are potential educational benefits for children, including more modern learning environments and access to specialised facilities which are available in Loudoun Academy. However, the potential benefits need to be balanced against other factors, including a significant reduction in outdoor space for learning and play, and a longer route to school, which includes crossing the main A71 Kilmarnock to Edinburgh road. There are likely to be difficulties in relocating the music department in the main Loudoun Academy building due to lack of available space, and there are potential issues with continuing to use the assembly hall for national examinations when it is attached to a busy and active primary school. Loudoun Academy is also part of a different, non-denominational school cluster from St Sophia's Primary School, which would continue to work with the St Joseph's Academy cluster despite its new location. If taking this option forward, the council should provide further detail about how the issues relating to safe routes to school and loss of outdoor learning options will be addressed, and work closely with Loudoun Academy and other stakeholders to plan the relocation of the music department and the construction works for the new primary school building.

3.5 Children, parents and staff at St Sophia's Primary School who spoke to HM Inspectors are clear that their preference is to remain on their current site and to have the building refurbished, as per Option 1. They realise that this is likely to include being decanted to another building or temporary accommodation whilst the refurbishment takes place, but see this inconvenience as being preferable to either of the other two options. They appreciate the history, ethos and community links of the school in its current location, along with the safe walking routes available. Children who spoke to HM Inspectors feel safe and supported in their current location and have concerns that this might not be the case if they became part of a larger school campus further away. Parents and staff who spoke to HM Inspectors emphasised that the school is seen as a centre of best practice within the authority and has well-developed support approaches for children with additional support needs. Staff who spoke to HM Inspectors underlined the importance of the links with the local community, including ready access to local volunteers for fundraising activities and classroom support for children's reading and spelling. They feel that the school has a clear vision, an effective team and caters well for children's needs. They would not like this to be compromised in any way.

3.6 Children, parents and staff at St Andrew's Primary School who spoke to HM Inspectors have justifiable concerns about the amount of space available for St Sophia's Primary School to be amalgamated with them in the same building, as per Option 2. St Andrew's Primary School P7 classes are already situated in a different part of the St Joseph's Campus from the rest of their school due to pressures of space, and so further space would need to be found to accommodate the 90 extra children from St Sophia's Primary School. Staff from St Joseph's Academy who spoke to HM Inspectors explained that, while some classroom space is currently available, there is a recruitment campaign underway to help to broaden curricular options which may have the effect of reducing further the number of available classrooms. Children from St Andrew's Primary School who spoke to HM Inspectors would be keen to welcome new children and feel that they would benefit from the specialist facilities available on the campus. Parents who spoke to HM Inspectors have justifiable concerns about the potential impact of this option on the current strong links between school, church and community for St Sophia's Primary School. They are also concerned that, if this option is chosen, some parents in Galston may opt for a local non-denominational primary school rather than sending their children in a bus to Kilmarnock to attend St Andrew's, and that this may have an overall negative impact on Catholic education within the area. Staff who spoke to HM Inspectors have concerns that already there is very little flexible learning space

available in the school and that this would be further compromised by including children from St Sophia's Primary School.

3.7 Young people, parents and staff at Loudoun Academy who spoke to HM Inspectors have justifiable concerns about the amount of space available in the school to be able to relocate the music department and to include St Sophia's Primary School on site, as per Option 3. Young people who spoke to HM Inspectors are perplexed that a school which is part of a different cluster would be placed on their campus, segregated by a fence. They have justifiable concerns that the assembly hall would be less available for scheduled activities such as physical education, charity events, careers fairs, blood donation, assemblies and national examinations. Parents who spoke to HM Inspectors have justifiable concerns that successful additions to the inclusion provision at Loudoun Academy, including a communication centre and an inclusion hub, have reduced the capacity of the school to be able to relocate the music department or to host an additional primary school. They also have concerns about the state of the general fabric of Loudoun Academy and feel that this should be addressed before consideration is given to the addition of St Sophia's Primary School on site. Staff who spoke to HM Inspectors have justifiable concerns about the lack of available space in the school for this option and the significant reduction in the amount of outdoor space which will be available to St Sophia's Primary School children if they move to Loudoun Academy, impacting negatively on opportunities for outdoor learning. They also had justifiable concerns about the safety of young children walking to and from the school and crossing a very busy road.

3.8 The Diocese of Galloway is strongly in favour of Option 1. It is aware that this option is the overwhelming preference of parents and is happy to support them in this. It has reasonable concerns that the school would lose its distinctive identity if either of the other options was chosen. It notes that in Option 2 the school would cease to exist as a separate entity, ending Catholic education in the Irvine Valley area. It also has concerns that Option 3 would require significant reconfiguration of part of Loudoun Academy and that there are few details available regarding the refurbishment or what will be possible with the available budget.

4. Summary

There are potential educational benefits for children in each of the alternatives outlined in the council's proposal, as well as drawbacks. Option 1 is seen as the most appropriate approach by almost all of those who responded to the consultation, attended the public meetings or spoke to HM Inspectors. Overall, despite the limitations of what can be achieved with the available funding, and the upheaval caused by a decant to allow the improvements to take place, it allows St Sophia's Primary School to remain at the heart of its geographical and spiritual community, retaining its identity and ethos and enabling local children to continue to walk to school in relative safety. Option 2 should lead to children from St Sophia's Primary School having access to a more modern learning environment and specialist facilities in St Joseph's Campus, although the school would cease to exist as a separate educational establishment and there would be increased travel time for all children. Option 3 would allow St Sophia's Primary School to continue as a separate establishment, with access to specialist facilities in Loudoun Academy and a bespoke learning environment. However, there are issues relating to loss of outdoor learning opportunities, safe routes to school and whether or not the Loudoun Academy music department can be appropriately relocated within the main building to create the necessary space to house St Sophia's Primary School.

In taking its preferred option forward, the council needs to continue to engage with all stakeholders and to address their concerns. In taking its proposal forward, an effective communication strategy and an action plan will be essential for the council to keep all stakeholders informed and engaged. The council should include details of these in its final report.

HM Inspectors
March 2019