

Consultation proposal by North Lanarkshire Council

Report by Education Scotland, addressing educational aspects of the proposal to provide a new denominational secondary school for the town of Motherwell and surrounding villages with an associated merger of Our Lady's High School and Taylor High School catchment areas to form one new catchment area; along with providing new additional support needs provision for children within Bothwellpark High School, currently located in the joint campus with Our Lady's High School, Motherwell.

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 number of schools, it will need 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 North Lanarkshire Council proposes to provide a new denominational secondary school for the town of Motherwell and surrounding villages with an associated merger of Our Lady's High School and Taylor High School catchment areas to form one new catchment area. The council also proposes to provide new additional support needs accommodation for children attending Bothwellpark High School, currently located in a joint campus with Our Lady's High School, Motherwell. On the construction and opening of the proposed new school, all pupils who under the present arrangements would have transferred to Our Lady's High School and Taylor High School would be provided with education on the new campus as would pupils who attend Bothwellpark High School. This will result in the closure of the existing schools.

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 24, 25 and 27 March 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;
- consideration of further information on all schools affected;
- visits to the sites of Our Lady's High School, Taylor High School, Bothwellpark High School and the land which is being considered as the site for the new campus, including discussion with relevant consultees;
- visits to all associated primary schools for Our Lady's High School and Taylor High School;
- meetings with pupils, parents, staff and members of the communities served by Our Lady's High School and Taylor High School and their associated primary schools and with pupils, parents and staff of Bothwellpark High School; and
- meetings with representatives of the Scottish Catholic Education Service and of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Motherwell.

1.4 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
- 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 North Lanarkshire Council undertook the initial consultation on its proposals with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*.

2.2 The formal consultation included an invitation to attend public meetings held in Our Lady's High School, Taylor High School and Bothwellpark High School on 24, 25 and 27 March 2014 respectively. The council extended the original consultation period by two weeks in response to stakeholders' requests.

North Lanarkshire Council recorded the numbers of attendees as approximately five hundred and six hundred for Our Lady's High School and Taylor High School respectively and twenty for Bothwellpark High School. The council also invited written responses. The council employed specialist external consultants to help gather the views of children and young people who will be directly affected by the proposal. However, this did not include children who will attend Bothwellpark High School or may attend the additional support needs provision in the future.

2.3 The council received in excess of four thousand formal written responses to its proposal. Respondents included children, young people, parents, school staff, members of the community served by the schools, members of Ravenscraig Limited and the Diocese of Motherwell. Almost all written responses were very strongly against the proposal. An online petition protesting against the proposal attracted almost one thousand signatures.

2.4 A very high proportion of the parents, children, young people and other stakeholders who met with HM Inspectors had strong connections with each of the schools and their communities. Almost all felt very strongly that the proposal did not take sufficient account of the heritage of their local communities. Stakeholders were critical of the consultation process. They alleged there were inaccuracies in the proposal. In its final consultation report, the council will need to set out the actions it has taken to address these. During the consultation period the council provided additional information in response to some of the concerns raised. However, some stakeholders believed that information was made available to them too late in the process.

2.5 Approximately sixty parents of Our Lady's High School and Taylor High School and their catchment primary schools, who met with HM Inspectors, were overwhelmingly against the proposal. It was their perception that the proposal was being driven by financial and economic considerations. They raised significant concerns about a number of aspects of the proposal. These included; the safety of the proposed site; size of the proposed school; transport and safe walking routes to school; and the design of the new building and its completion date. Parents felt that young people currently have access to high-quality resources and they did not want this to be lost. They held the view that Our Lady's High School and Taylor High School performed very well and they did not feel the proposal took sufficient account of the high-quality education provided by the existing schools. They, and members of the local communities, felt strongly that the removal of the schools from their current locations would be detrimental to the life and wellbeing of the communities concerned.

2.6 Almost all children and young people who currently attend Our Lady's High School, Taylor High School and the upper stages of the associated primary schools, who met with HM Inspectors, were opposed to the proposal. They had similar concerns to those of their parents. Those attending the primary schools were also concerned about the timing of the transition to the new site and the impact this may have on the continuity of their learning. Many young people currently attending Our Lady's High School and Taylor High School had attended the public meetings and had researched aspects of the proposal. They were positive about their current schools' community links and expressed concern that the proposal may have a negative impact on their local communities as well as their own experiences. In addition, many were concerned that the site's distance from their homes would limit their opportunities to participate in after-school activities.

2.7 Staff of Our Lady's High School and Taylor High School were not supportive of the proposal. They voiced similar concerns to those of parents and young people. They felt strongly that existing arrangements provided very high-quality experiences for young people and met their needs very well. They recognised that their schools were very well integrated within their communities and felt that the 'Pan Motherwell' approach being taken by the council would have a detrimental effect on the communities they serve. They were concerned about the size of the proposed school and the challenges they perceived this may pose for pastoral care and meeting the needs of all learners. Staff of primary schools associated with Our Lady's High School and Taylor High School had similar concerns to their secondary school colleagues.

2.8 All parents of children attending Bothwellpark High School and school staff who met with HM Inspectors were overwhelmingly against the proposal. They raised concerns about how the needs of young people, many of whom have complex health and medical needs, will be met. Parents believed that young people's health, wellbeing, educational and developmental needs were very well served by current arrangements. They felt that the proposal did not take account of the very high-quality of education which young people currently enjoy. Parents felt that the educational benefits for young people had not been specified well enough in the proposal paper and, as a result, they were not clear about the educational benefits for young people. They believed the site to be unsafe and felt they did not have sufficient information to allay their concerns.

2.9 Of those young people currently attending Bothwellpark High School who gave their views to HM Inspectors, some were in favour of moving to a new school, whilst others were concerned about the prospect of leaving familiar surroundings.

2.10 The Diocese of Motherwell and the Scottish Catholic Education Service were strongly against the proposal. Their concerns were shared by parents and the community. They have submitted responses to the council setting out their concerns. These include their belief that the proposal does not add value to existing arrangements for denominational education within the Diocese and that, if implemented, it will result in a significant deterioration in Catholic school provision. They were concerned that the anticipated educational benefits cited in the proposal paper did not take account of the strong performance of Our Lady's High School and Taylor High School.

3. Educational aspects of the proposal

3.1 North Lanarkshire Council considers that there are a number of educational benefits for children and young people, should this proposal go ahead. These include more choices for pupils and greater flexibility of support in keeping with the principles of Curriculum for Excellence. The council expects that an amalgamated school of around fifteen hundred pupils, along with access to modern, purpose-built accommodation and a wider range of staff skills and management support will enhance young people's learning experiences.

3.2 In the proposal, the council indicates that the merger of Our Lady's High School and Taylor High School and the provision of new additional support needs accommodation for children attending Bothwellpark High School will enable it to make annual revenue savings. The council also indicates that the occupancy rates of Our Lady's High School and Taylor High School are 60% and 79% respectively. Overall, implementation of the proposal has the potential to enable the council to make more effective and efficient use of its resources and help it meet its duty to secure best value in the delivery of its services. However, some consultees dispute the accuracy of the figures provided by the council in the proposal paper. In its final consultation report, the council needs to explain clearly how it calculated the financial and occupancy data set out within the proposal paper. Our Lady's High School is currently graded B (good) for both condition and suitability. Taylor High School is currently graded C (poor) for condition and B (good) for suitability. Implementation of the proposal will provide young people with access to a new school with sufficient capacity for a projected roll by 2017 of around 1500.

3.3 North Lanarkshire Council anticipates that young people attending Bothwellpark High School would benefit in particular from improved attainment and increased opportunities for social interaction. It states that the inclusion of a dedicated outdoor area will offer a safe social space for those pupils who require a higher level of support at interval and lunch times. However, as identified in HM Inspectors' report of 2011, Bothwellpark High School currently provides its learners with excellent experiences, and they achieve very well in a wide range of settings and activities. At all stages, many of them exceed expectations. They are able to access highly individualised support to enable them to develop meaningful skills for independent learning and living. Their current school provides very high-quality opportunities for outdoor learning, both within the school garden area and in the area immediately surrounding the school. The council needs to provide more information on how young people attending Bothwellpark High School will benefit further if the proposal goes ahead.

3.4 In the proposal North Lanarkshire Council indicates that it believes that the merged school will provide young people with a broader range of learning experiences and a wider range of academic and vocational courses. However, young people who currently attend Our Lady's High School receive a very high-quality education with positive features, including many opportunities to access vocational courses with strong performance in national examinations, and an impressive range of out-of-class activities. These were recognised in HM Inspectors' report on the school published in March 2013. Similarly, young people who attend Taylor High School achieve very well across a range of subject areas, develop skills

for life across a wide range of subject areas and have many opportunities to access vocational courses. Again this was recognised in HM Inspectors' report on the school published in March 2011. The council needs to set out clearly how it will build on these strengths and how implementation of the proposal will bring further benefit to the young people who currently attend Our Lady's High School and Taylor High School.

3.5 The provision of purpose-built accommodation, including features such as high-quality technology for learning has the potential to bring significant benefits to the quality of learning and teaching. However, the published reports of HM Inspectors recognised that learning and teaching in Our Lady's High School, Bothwellpark High School and Taylor High School was characterised by important strengths and that many high-quality features were available in the existing school buildings. The design of the proposed new building is not yet available. The council now needs to set out clearly how young people who attend Our Lady's High School, Bothwellpark High School and Taylor High School will benefit further from the new accommodation.

3.6 North Lanarkshire Council states that a larger staff group will support an enhanced range of extra-curricular activities. Currently, Our Lady's High School and Taylor High School offer a wide range of out-of-class activities and citizenship and leadership are strong features of both schools. Parents and young people are concerned about how they will access after-school activities, given the location of the proposed new build. Further consideration needs to be given to how the proposal would facilitate young people's access to out-of-school-hours clubs and activities.

3.7 Our Lady's High School and Taylor High School are currently both used for out-of-school-hours clubs run by the schools and for very well-established evening community groups and activities. The proposal does not give sufficient consideration to the impact of closing the schools on their local communities.

3.8 North Lanarkshire Council indicates that the planning and delivery of the curriculum will be strengthened, including its approaches to assessment and moderation and the shared evaluation of learning experiences. With a larger group of teaching staff, there is potential benefit from staff working together to share curriculum planning, assessment and moderation. However, the proposal does not make it clear what actual improvements would be made to the curriculum.

3.9 North Lanarkshire Council expects that a larger combined management team would be able to set direction for the new school, ensure pastoral care of young people and deliver high levels of attainment and achievement, and monitor and evaluate the work of classes and departments. At present, the existing schools have high-quality leadership in place, provide very effective pastoral care and have well-established arrangements in place to continuously improve the quality of learning and teaching. It is not clear how this will improve should the proposal go ahead.

3.10 The council has stated its commitment to managing the transition to the new campus by using school improvement planning and carrying out action planning with specific targets and clear timescales. It rightly acknowledges that it is important to avoid a 'fresh start' approach and to build on the very high-quality approaches to transition planning which are in place in the existing schools.

3.11 During the consultation, a significant number of stakeholders raised a number of reasonable concerns. These related to the safety of the proposed site, the size of the proposed school, the distance of the site from many of their homes, uncertainties about transport and safe walking routes, uncertainties about the design and of the new building and the completion date and the potential loss of existing high quality resources which young people currently access. During the consultation process, the council provided additional information on some of these issues. However, it will need to address these concerns fully in its final consultation report.

4 Summary

4.1 North Lanarkshire Council's proposal to merge Our Lady's High School and Taylor High School and provide new additional support needs provision for children within Bothwellpark High School has the potential to deliver some overall educational benefits. These relate mainly to the provision of purpose-built accommodation and facilities. It will also help the council meet its duty to secure best value in the delivery of its services. However, young people at Bothwellpark High School, Our Lady's High School and Taylor High School currently have a high-quality experience. In its final consultation report, the council needs to set out more clearly and specifically how implementation of the proposal will build on these existing strengths and help improve the quality of young people's educational experiences further to enable them to achieve better outcomes.

4.2 There is significant opposition to the proposal by stakeholders, including the Diocese of Motherwell and the Scottish Catholic Education Service. In taking forward the proposal, the council will need to ensure it communicates clearly and effectively with stakeholders and addresses their concerns. It should also address any alleged inaccuracies some stakeholders believe are contained with the proposal.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
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