

Consultation proposal by Shetland Islands Council

Report by Education Scotland, addressing educational aspects of the proposal to discontinue pre-school and primary education at Bressay Primary School.

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 school, it will need 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 the opportunity for representations to be made to Ministers.

1. Introduction

1.1 Shetland Islands Council proposes to discontinue pre-school and primary education at Bressay Primary School.

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 meeting held on 31 October 2013 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 site of Bell's Brae Primary School and Bressay Primary School, including discussion with relevant consultees.

1.4 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
- benefits which the council believes will result from implementation of the proposal, and the council's reasons for coming to these beliefs.

1.5 As the proposal will lead to the closure of a rural school as defined in the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*, HM Inspectors also took account of the council's consideration of:

- viable alternatives to the closure of Bressay Primary School;
- the likely effect on the local community with regard to sustainability and on the community's access to the buildings, grounds and facilities if the school were to close, and
- the likely effect of different travelling arrangements on the environment and on children and young people and other school users occasioned by the closure.

2. Consultation process

2.1 Shetland Islands Council undertook the initial consultation on its proposals with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*.

2.2 The children who currently attend Bressay Primary School realise that there are a number of significant changes for them in the proposal. They will have to travel further to school and this will involve the use of a bus and ferry in each direction to get them from the island of Bressay to Bell's Brae Primary School in Lerwick. They will no longer be taught in the same group, and their classes will be significantly larger. Most of their concerns relate to the making of new friends at Bell's Brae Primary School and the daily travel arrangements. They realise that certain things, such as waiting for school lunches, will take longer than at present because of the greater number of children in the school. They hope that they will have at least as good an opportunity to go on school trips as they enjoy these.

2.3 The parents of children who currently attend Bressay Primary School have a number of concerns in relation to the proposal. Foremost of these is the issue of greater travel time, with the concern being expressed that this could add on an extra 1½ hours to a child's school day. They are also worried that the early morning ferry is already very busy and wonder what will happen if the school transport does not get on to the scheduled ferry to deliver children in good time. Further related

concerns include procedures when a child is unwell and needs to come home and the possibility of ferries being unable to make the crossing when the children are at school in Lerwick. They feel that, subject to the proposal being given approval, the Bressay Primary School building should be 'mothballed', rather than sold, as there may be future uses for it. Some of the respondents to the consultation who are resident on Bressay are also keen that this option should be kept open. The parents are aware that any transition to a new school will need to be carefully planned for the children.

2.4 Staff currently involved with Bressay Primary School are aware that the current position in the school is not an ideal situation for children's learning and limits the provision of appropriately challenging and motivating educational experiences which meet the children's individual needs. As the current roll is four pupils, there are limited opportunities to involve children in playing team sports or other games to help them with their learning. Staff have been making links with other schools and activities in Lerwick but feel that the proposal would result in a better educational experience for children, giving them wider opportunities to share ideas, become involved in cooperative learning activities and participate in musical and sporting activities.

2.5 Children who are pupils at Bell's Brae Primary School would welcome new pupils into the school and do not think that they should worry about coming to join them. They think that they will benefit from coming to a bigger primary school and that making friends there is good preparation for going to secondary school. They are involved in a wide range of school trips and other clubs and activities and feel that children from Bressay will benefit from these as well as having the opportunity to work in groups in classes. They all know children who have come to the school from Bressay and there have not been any problems with them fitting in at Bell's Brae Primary School. Some have become class representatives on the pupil council.

2.6 Parents of children who are pupils at Bell's Brae Primary School have no doubt that children from Bressay would benefit from coming to school in Lerwick. Some of them have daily experience of dealing with travel issues from Bressay to Bell's Brae Primary School and do not find that this is problematic, noting that the Bressay ferry will do 'double runs' rather than leave anyone stranded until the next timetabled ferry. Those who made placing requests from Bressay to Bell's Brae Primary School knew very quickly that they had made the correct decision and saw their children happier, growing in confidence and developing their social skills. They have seen friendships grow between Bressay and Lerwick children, including invitations to each other's birthday parties. They also feel that transport arrangements from Bressay could be merged with the provision already being made for secondary pupils, who could act as 'buddies' for younger children on the buses.

2.7 Staff of Bell's Brae Primary School welcome the proposal. They are confident that implementing the proposal would be beneficial for children currently attending Bressay Primary School as well as those who are pupils at Bell's Brae Primary School. They think that those who would come from Bressay will benefit from a bigger peer group to socialise and compete with, wider opportunities and other benefits such as clubs and after-school provision. Children who have come from Bressay previously have coped very well. Support is there for anyone who needs it,

but they think that children receive a more comprehensive and rounded education by coming to a larger school.

2.8 Senior managers at Bell's Brae Primary School agree that children coming from Bressay will benefit from development of their social skills and resilience and the range of opportunities and experiences that the school can offer them. They also note that travelling to school by public transport can also be an important social part of children's day which they sometimes prefer to travelling with their parents.

3. Educational aspects of the proposal

3.1 The council considers that there are four main educational benefits to the pupils currently attending Bressay Primary School, should they attend Bell's Brae Primary School in Lerwick as outlined in its proposal.

3.2 The first reasonable benefit which will result from the implementation of the proposal is that children currently attending Bressay Primary School would have better opportunities for learning together, for group work, for team games, for active learning and for social interaction with others of similar ages. At present there are four children attending Bressay Primary School at stages from P1 to P7. This makes learning together an essential aspect of what is done in lessons and much of their education takes place in this group in a project-based approach. However, the opportunity for children to work with a range of others is extremely limited, even if the adults leading the lessons participate as members of the group. There would be many more opportunities, even within a single class, for children to work with a range of other learners if they attended Bell's Brae Primary School. Children who currently attend this school speak very enthusiastically about the range of opportunities they get to learn together in different groups and to become involved in active learning opportunities. Similarly, children attending Bressay Primary School have extremely limited opportunity for social interaction with others of similar ages when they are at school. This would be significantly enhanced by attending a school such as Bell's Brae Primary School which has two classes at each stage and a current roll of 295 children. There are relatively few opportunities for the small number of children at Bressay Primary School to become involved with team games, despite the facilities which are available at the school, including an onsite all-weather court. By contrast, there are many opportunities to get involved in team sports at Bell's Brae Primary School, including successful netball, football and hockey teams. There are also opportunities for a variety of informal team games to be played at break times around the school.

3.3 The second benefit which will result from the implementation of the proposal is that children currently attending Bressay Primary School would have access to a wider range of teaching staff with a range of experiences. Bressay Primary School currently has access to a full-time teacher, a part-time acting headteacher, a part-time classroom assistant and visiting specialists in music, art and physical education. There is no instrumental tuition provided. There are no children in the nursery class and so staffing is not provided for this. Bell's Brae Primary School has a headteacher, three depute headteachers, 14.5 full-time equivalent teachers, 1.6 full-time equivalent auxiliaries and visiting specialists in music, art and physical education who are based in the school for at least three days per week. Children

can also access music instruction in piano, cello, woodwind and fiddle from P5 onwards. Additionally, there is a nursery department and a specialist department for children with severe and complex additional support needs. There are, therefore, many more members of staff in Bell's Brae Primary School than in Bressay Primary School and they use their wider range of talents and experiences within their classes, and also to run clubs and after school activities such as the various sports teams.

3.4 The third benefit which will result from the implementation of the proposal is that children currently attending Bressay Primary School would then attend a school which has more opportunities for staff to work collaboratively and collegiately to secure ongoing improvements in attainment and achievement. As outlined above, there is a single class teacher in Bressay Primary school, with occasional support from an acting headteacher and visiting specialists. This provides the teacher with limited opportunities to work collaboratively and collegiately, although links have been made with other provisions in Lerwick. In contrast there are many opportunities for teachers to work collaboratively and collegiately within Bell's Brae Primary School. Each teacher has at least one 'stage partner' with a class at the same level, with whom they can discuss their plans. They can also work with other teachers on interdisciplinary learning approaches and discuss how best to meet needs in the class with additional support needs staff.

3.5 The fourth benefit which will result from the implementation of the proposal is that the council may be able to make more efficient and equitable use of its resources to benefit children and young people throughout its area. Whether the current Bressay Primary School was to be mothballed or sold, there are significant resources within the building which could be redistributed across the remaining educational estate. This includes its library stock, basic classroom resources and 19 computers, each of which uses a current operating system.

3.6 As the proposal will lead to the closure of a rural school as defined in the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*, HM Inspectors also took account of the council's consideration of the factors to which it needed to take special regard. The council has fully investigated the viability of alternatives to the closure of the school, including the retention of Bressay Primary School. However, the roll has fallen dramatically over the past few years and shows no sign of increasing. Most parents on Bressay with children of primary school age opt to put in a placing request to either Bell's Brae Primary School or Sound Primary School in Lerwick. There have been 19 placing requests from parents of children who could attend Bressay Primary School in the last five years, including six in the current session. These have mostly been due to the wish to have their children educated in a larger school with a peer group. There have been no placing requests into Bressay Primary School in this period. Other options such as shared management with another school have been explored but these are no more efficient than the current model. Additionally, Bell's Brae Primary School has the capacity to include the remaining Bressay Primary School children next session without needing to increase its staffing as a result.

3.7 The council has looked at the likely effect on the local community with regard to sustainability, and on the community's access to the buildings, grounds and

facilities if Bressay Primary School were to close. The school buildings are not currently used by the local community as there is a well-used community hall nearby and also a local football pitch, so there are no community groups which would be inconvenienced by the proposed school closure. There is, however, a number of local people currently employed in the school on part-time placements and they would be offered redeployment and transfer opportunities elsewhere by the council. The council is willing to explore options for the school building subsequent to closure, including use as a base for remote working, letting to businesses or selling it.

3.8 The council has explored the travel implications for pupils attending Bressay Primary School if they were transferred to Bell's Brae Primary School. Transport would be provided for all children entitled to attend the new school, as the distance would be more than two miles. The group of children would include those currently attending on placing request as well as those attending for the first time. The council plans to provide two 8-seater vehicles at an annual cost of £40,280. There is also separate transport provided by the council for young people attending secondary school in Lerwick.

4. Summary

4.1 Almost all stakeholders agree that the children who currently attend Bressay Primary School would benefit educationally from the implementation of this proposal. They will have a peer group with whom they can make friends, they will have the option of learning in a variety of different groups, they will benefit from teachers who have a range of backgrounds and interests, they will have access to a wider range of musical experiences and they would be able to take part in a wide range of team sports. Their teachers would also be working collaboratively and collegiately with each other to enhance and improve their learning experiences.

4.2 Children who currently attend Bressay Primary School have some concerns about how easy it will be to make friends at the new school. However, children and parents at Bell's Brae Primary School, including those who have made placing requests from Bressay, are clear that this should not be a problem and that they will be made to feel very welcome when they arrive.

4.3 A major concern from the proposal for children who currently attend Bressay Primary School and their parents is the transport provision from Bressay to Bell's Brae Primary School. Whilst the council has indicated that two 8-seater vehicles will be provided for children going to Bell's Brae Primary School, this is being considered separately from the transport provision for young people being transported to secondary school, and it may be helpful to look at this jointly. There are also perceptions that this travel will add a significant amount of time on to a child's school day. The council needs to discuss these issues fully with parents and take their views into consideration when finalising transport arrangements.

4.4 Parents of children who currently attend Bressay Primary School realise that transition to the new school will need to be carefully planned. The council has indicated that it will set up a Transition Support Group to plan this and focus on any issues of concern for either parents or children.

4.5 Overall, the educational benefits outlined by the council demonstrate that the proposal is in the best interests of the children who currently attend Bressay Primary School and should broaden and enhance their learning experiences.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
November 2013**