

Consultation proposal by Shetland Islands Council

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal to discontinue education provision at Olnafirth Primary School from 4 July 2014, or as soon as possible thereafter, for pupils of Olnafirth Primary school to continue their education at Brae High School Primary Department from 18 August 2014, or as soon as possible thereafter and to alter the catchment of Brae High School Primary Department to include the current catchment area of Olnafirth 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.

Introduction

1.1 Shetland Islands Council proposes to:

- discontinue education provision at Olnafirth Primary School from 4 July 2014, or as soon as possible thereafter;
- continue the education for pupils of Olnafirth Primary school at Brae High School Primary Department from 18 August 2014, or as soon as possible thereafter; and
- to alter the catchment of Brae High School Primary Department to include the current catchment area of Olnafirth 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:

- 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 Olnafirth Primary school and Brae High School Primary Department, including discussion with representative groups of parents, staff and children.

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 Olnafirth 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 Parents of children at Olnafirth Primary School and many members of the local community strongly oppose the proposal. They feel that Olnafirth Primary School provides very high quality learning experiences for their children as evidenced through success in national competitions and achieving national awards. They feel there are no educational benefits for their children in the proposal. Parents feel very strongly that there are factual inaccuracies in the proposal paper and in particular dispute the capacity figures for Olnafirth Primary School and the accuracy

of the savings which would be accrued. They raised particular concerns about health and safety regarding congestion at Brae High School with additional buses and cars arriving. Parents feel their children's educational experience would be lessened through missing out on after-school clubs, which they are currently able to access, as they would need to use school transport to get home at the end of the school day. They feel the children would lose the close 'family' relationship which exists in Olnafirth Primary School through moving to a larger school. Parents and other members of the community have concerns about the possible impact to the community of Voe should the school close. They do not feel that the council has considered alternatives to the closure of the school and discussed any such alternatives with stakeholders.

2.3 Overall, parents who presently live in the Olnafirth catchment area and whose children attend Brae High School Primary Department are in favour of the proposal. They see educational benefits in the proposal through their children working with similar aged children. Parents whose children attend Brae High School Primary Department are in favour of the proposal. They feel the small numbers of children involved would not affect their school.

2.4 Staff at Olnafirth Primary School are not in favour of the proposal. They feel that the school provides very good learning experiences and a safe environment to walk or cycle to school. Parents and other members of the community provide strong support to the school. Staff have developed very strong links with local schools and businesses. They are concerned about the impact on the local community if the school closes. Staff and parents felt that should the school close there were better, alternative options in schools more similar to Olnafirth Primary to continue education. Staff expressed concern that they were prevented from expressing their professional opinion at public meetings. All staff felt that there were potential educational benefits for children who were sole children in a year group moving to a larger school.

2.5 Almost all children at Olnafirth Primary School are opposed to the proposal and expressed similar views to those put forward by their parents. They are concerned that staff at the new school would not know them as individuals, that they would not be able to walk or cycle to school and that they would miss out on after-school activities. They are concerned about the impact in the local area should the school close. A few children felt it would be good to have opportunities to make new friends.

2.6 Children at Brae High School Primary Department are in favour of the proposal and would welcome the children from Olnafirth Primary School.

3. Educational aspects of the proposal

3.1 The council has correctly identified educational benefits which it believes would arise as a result of its proposal. At present, some children attend nursery class at Brae High School Nursery Department, move to Olnafirth Primary School at P1 and then return to Brae High School at the end of P7. The council's assertion that children may benefit through the reduction in the number of these transitions as a result of its proposal is reasonable. Children would potentially benefit from having

better access to a larger peer group. A larger cohort of children could provide greater opportunities for social interaction and enhance learning activities by allowing more group and team activities.

3.2 Olnafirth Primary School is operating at 10% occupancy and is therefore underutilised. Although this figure is being challenged by stakeholders in Olnafirth Primary School, the school is operating well below its capacity. Brae High School Primary Department is operating at 63% occupancy and could take all Olnafirth children with no additional staffing costs. Olnafirth Primary School consists of one main building and a hut. It has two good sized classrooms and a large general purpose hall, toilets and kitchen facilities. The building is rated as being in satisfactory condition for Scottish Government Condition and Suitability Core Fact. (B rating). There are some inaccuracies in the proposal which states there is a lack of disabled access to the school hut that houses the Art and Music classrooms and the school office, and that the school has no library. The council accepts there are inaccuracies in the proposal relating to school provision and resources. Brae High School Primary Department is a well-resourced and spacious building which consists of seven good sized classrooms and a number of communal and specialist areas. In terms of the Scottish Government Condition Core Fact, the building has been assessed as Condition B (Satisfactory). In terms of the Scottish Government Suitability Core Fact, the building has been assessed as Condition A (Good). The council feels that children currently attending Olnafirth Primary School would benefit from being educated in Brae High School Primary Department which offers a better quality physical learning environment, with modern, spacious classrooms and dedicated social spaces. While Brae High School Primary Department offers more modern accommodation, the accommodation at Olnafirth Primary School is suitable to meet the needs of a 21st century curriculum.

3.3 Children currently attending Olnafirth Primary School would be required to travel to Brae High School Primary Department. The council estimates that no child currently attending Olnafirth Primary School would have a journey time greater than 35 minutes. The council needs to clarify the supervision arrangements on buses, particularly for those children from the Mulla, Voe area, who will be travelling with secondary aged children. The travel arrangements appears to exclude children from the Voe area from after-school activities. The council needs to identify what steps it will take to provide access to after-school activities. There are legitimate health and safety concerns at Brae High School at drop off and pick up times. The council now needs to provide children and their parents with clearer information on how it will ensure children's health and safety.

3.4 The council's proposal would enable efficiencies accruing from the closure to contribute to the overall benefit of children and young people elsewhere in the council's area. The council has detailed information about the likely savings, taking into account additional transport.

3.5 The proposal will lead to the closure of a rural school as defined in the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*. The only viable alternative considered by the council was to maintain provision of primary education at Olnafirth Primary School. The council considers there would be no educational detriment to the pupils currently attending Olnafirth Primary School should they attend Brae High School

Primary Department. However, they have not fully explained the educational benefits. In finalising their report, the council now needs to fully explain their reasons for not pursuing any alternative options and discussing these with stakeholders.

3.6 The council believes there would be limited impact on the local community should the school close. Voe has a community hall which is well-used by the local community. The only access to the play park in Voe and to the field used for the annual Voe Show is via the school grounds. The council needs to clarify how the local community will access these, should the school close. The school provides a number of part-time employment opportunities for people in the community and it is likely that these posts would be lost as a result of this proposal. The council has identified several possible alternative uses for the school building should it close.

3.7 The existing capacity of the bus taking young people from Voe is insufficient to accommodate the additional projected 16 children from the Olnafirth catchment area. The four children from Mulla, Voe will be accommodated on the existing secondary bus. As a result the council will provide an additional two eight seater buses. Travel arrangements resulting from this proposal, including any supervision on buses and arrangements made for children at the end of the school day, need to be clarified by the council.

4. Summary

4.1 The proposal from Shetland Islands Council to close Olnafirth Primary School and transfer children to Brae High School Primary Department with effect from July 2014 offers some potential benefits to the children directly affected by the proposal and more widely across Shetland Islands Council. Children could have better opportunities for learning together and for social interaction with others of similar ages. They would have more regular access to specialist classes and staff. Although staff at Olnafirth Primary School make good provision to ensure that children are well supported in moving from nursery into P1 and from P7 into S1, transition arrangements have the potential to be improved further with this proposal. The proposal has the potential to contribute to the council's efforts in securing best value within the context of over-capacity in the council's school estate. As a result, the council may be able to make more efficient and equitable use of its resources to the benefit of children and young people throughout its area. In taking forward its proposal the council needs to explain more clearly what educational benefits will accrue from the proposal.

4.2 Parents are justifiably concerned about the travel and transport arrangements for children in the Olnafirth catchment area. In taking forward the proposal, the council needs to provide children and their parents with clearer information on how it will ensure children's health and safety. Staff and parents from Olnafirth Primary School expressed concerns as to the accuracy of school capacity, the description of the building and school resources. They also expressed concern as to the accuracy of the projected savings. In taking forward the proposal, the council needs to ensure it clarifies the accuracy of these. The council needs to provide stakeholders with further information on the likely social effects of the proposed closure on the

community. In finalising its proposal, the council needs to ensure that it has fully explored and explained the reasons for not pursuing any alternative options.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
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