

Consultation proposal by Shetland Islands Council

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal to discontinue education provision at Skerries School Secondary Department (Secondary 1 to Secondary 4) with effect from 4 July 2014 or as soon as possible thereafter; to continue the education of young people of Skerries School Secondary Department at Anderson High School from 18 August 2014 and to alter the catchment area for Anderson High School to include the current catchment area of Skerries School Secondary Department.

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

Shetland Islands Council proposes to discontinue education provision at Skerries School Secondary Department (Secondary 1 to Secondary 4) with effect from 4 July 2014 or as soon as possible thereafter; to continue the education of young people of Skerries School Secondary Department at Anderson High School from 18 August 2014; and to alter the catchment area for Anderson High School to include the current catchment area of Skerries School Secondary Department.

1.1 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;
- consideration of further information on all schools affected; and

- visits to the site of Anderson High School and Skerries School, including discussion with the headteacher of Anderson High School, the headteacher of Skerries School and young people, parents, chair of Parents' Council, staff and members of the community of Skerries.

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

1.3 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 Skerries School Secondary Department (Secondary 1 to Secondary 4).
- 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*.

Parents and other members of the local community strongly oppose the proposal. They feel that Skerries School Secondary Department (Secondary 1 to Secondary 4) provides high-quality learning experiences for their children. They feel that young people enjoy good choices in their curriculum, make very good progress and are successful learners. Parents expressed their satisfaction and pride in the levels of achievement in National Qualifications gained by the young people in the Secondary Department in recent years. Parents feel that a major contributory factor is the personalised approach offered by the school. They feel that the school is helping their children to develop as confident individuals. Parents have concerns about the possible impact to family life should the Secondary Department close. They are

worried that their children will leave the family at too early an age to board in the hostel in Lerwick while attending Anderson High School. Parents feel that their children living in the hostel in Lerwick will have fewer opportunities to develop appropriate skills for island life. Parents and other members of the community have concerns about the possible impact to island life should the Secondary Department close. They feel that following the closure of the Secondary Department confidence in the island's sustainability as a community will decrease and that population will fall. They are concerned over proposed transport arrangements and, particularly, about aspects of ferry journeys between Skerries and mainland Shetland. They feel that the proposed transport arrangements do not maximise time for young people to be with their families on the islands at the weekends. They are unsure of responsibilities of council staff for their children while they travel. Parents do not feel that the council has fully considered all viable alternatives to the closure of the school. They think that the proposal does not give full consideration of the benefits of remote learning. Parents feel the appointment of the new headteacher in August 2013, will extend curricular opportunities for their young people and that this should be given further consideration by the council.

2.2 About twenty per cent of the 39 consultees agree with the council's proposal. Some of these comments mention concerns about financial costs associated with the school. These comments are drawn from the wider community across Shetland Isles.

2.3 Staff at Skerries School Secondary Department (Secondary 1 to Secondary 4) are not in favour of the proposal. They feel that the school provides very good learning experiences and that young people and staff get on very well together. Staff view themselves as being very responsive to young people's subject choices and their learning needs. They see the local community as contributing positively to the education of young people in the school. Almost all in the local community offer strong support to the school. Staff have developed very strong links with the local and wider communities and these benefit children. They were unclear about the overall socio-economic impact of the closure of the Secondary Department upon the island community of the Skerries. They welcomed the appointment of the new headteacher in August 2013 and the positive changes now being planned for and taking place.

2.4 Young people are not in favour of the proposal to close the Secondary Department. They like the one-to-one support they receive and the personalised approach from staff. They expressed concern over the time they would spend travelling to and from the island at the weekend as a result of this proposal. They felt it would only give them one full day at home at weekends. Young people had experience of attending Anderson High School and living in the hostel in Lerwick.

3. Educational aspects of the proposal

3.1 Skerries School Secondary Department (Secondary 1 to Secondary 4) has a roll of two young people. The roll has fluctuated between two and seven over the last ten years and is expected to remain at around two for the next three years. The school is a single storey building comprising of rooms for nursery and primary

classes, and several rooms that offer provision for secondary class teaching, science, music, home economics and arts and craftwork as well as facilities for information and communications technology (ICT). Overall, the condition of the school is satisfactory. The primary department of Skerries School has a roll of three children and on the island at present there are a further five young children yet to start pre-school. Anderson High School has a roll of 900 young people. It is a six-year secondary school. The school's buildings are a mixture of styles and ages from 19th century to 1990s. Overall, the condition of the building is assessed as satisfactory. Halls of Residence accommodation is provided for young people attending the school from remote island communities such as Fetlar, Foula and Fair Isle. At present, among those using the hostel there are 12 young people from the islands accommodated at the hostel.

3.2 The council has identified educational benefits which it believes would arise as a result of its proposal. Overall, the proposal addresses issues around equality of provision for all young people in Shetland and seeks to achieve the council's aim of a more efficient, cost effective and sustainable model of delivery. The council feels that children currently at Skerries School Secondary Department would benefit from being educated in the six-year secondary Anderson High School. The council recognises that Skerries School offers a quality education to the young people attending. At Skerries School, young people gain from the personalising of learning and support. The headteacher and staff are responsive to most of the needs of learners.

3.3 The council's statement of educational benefit sets out a number of specific gains that will occur on implementation of the proposal. The council is of the view that Anderson High School offers a better quality physical learning environment. The secondary-aged young people at Skerries School would benefit from an increase in curricular opportunities, an improved access to a wide range of subject specialist teachers across all curriculum areas, access to a wider range of the teaching staff together with more promoted staff and types of specialist support staff. In addition, young people will benefit from access to greater resources across the school in respect of ICT, clubs and societies, a wider range of sports and leisure facilities and access to a more diverse group of young people on an individual, group or team basis. The proposal clearly identifies benefits to young people of a broader range of opportunities for them to achieve and develop their skills. Young people have entitlements within Curriculum for Excellence. The proposal gives insufficient consideration to the benefits to young people of attending Anderson High School in respect of their entitlements to gain the experiences and outcomes of a broad general education and a senior phase across the four aspects of learning. The proposal does not fully set out gains to young people in raising levels of achievement. Young people attending Skerries School Secondary Department all generally gain awards at SCQF level 4, the majority attain at Level 5 gaining five or more awards at this level. In taking forward the proposal, the council now needs to set out more clearly the benefits on levels of achievement, including staying on rates and positive destinations as appropriate.

3.4 The proposal sets out clearly the potential improvements to the learning environment and in the range of resources including teaching expertise that young

people may benefit from at Anderson High School should the proposal go ahead. The proposal clearly states the benefits of extensive extra-curricular activities, school trips and exchanges available to young people at Anderson High School. The new headteacher has begun a number of extra-curricular activities together with the community on Skerries. The proposal offers access to a wider range of activities that include sporting, drama and music groups. Young people at Anderson High School have opportunities for well-established school exchange programme needs. Young people may benefit from access to upgraded ICT facilities at Anderson High School. The proposal needs to consider how technology in schools could support young people's communication back to the island through video-conferencing facilities.

3.5 At Skerries School, young people receive a high degree of personalised support from staff. The ethos of the school is friendly and welcoming. The proposal highlights the benefits of the inclusive nature of the provision at Anderson High School. The safe, caring supportive and inclusive environment at Anderson High School was recognised as a key strength in the recent inspection report of February 2012. In addition, the high quality support from specialist staff for young people with particular needs was recognised also. The proposal does not fully recognise the quality of personalised support already available at Skerries School. In taking forward the proposal, the council now needs to take account of children's additional support needs such as autism spectrum disorders and dyslexia. It also needs to consider how the council plans to reduce barriers to learning that may arise from the learning environment, health and disability issues, social and emotional factors and family circumstances. The proposal also needs to consider the personal targeted support at transition for young people attending Skerries School Secondary Department.

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 took into account a number of other considerations. In its proposal, the council has given consideration to some alternatives to closing the school. Overall, however, the council should explore more thoroughly the viability of some of the alternatives. In taking forward the proposal, the council needs to ensure it has fully explored the viability of these alternatives. Three of the options in the proposal relate to provision for different forms of secondary stages. The council is clear that in these options curricular opportunities do not increase and therefore difficulties arise in implementing Curriculum for Excellence in line with national priorities whether in respect of transition to a Senior Phase or provision of a Senior Phase. The proposal also mentions the impact of equal opportunities. A fourth alternative is mentioned of remote teaching and this option has not been explored in detail.

3.7 The proposal considers the likely effects on the local community and commits the Council's Development Directorate and Children's Services to engage with the community to assess how the existing use of the school could be further developed to meet community needs. The council believes that there will be no detrimental effect on the sustainability of the island community of Skerries, and plans to carry out further assessment to identify the likely effects on the community of the proposal.

3.8 The proposal considers the likely effect caused by different travel arrangements that may be required as a result of the proposal. For young people living on the Out Skerries, travel is proposed by ferry to mainland Shetland and taxi from ferry terminal to Halls of Residence in Lerwick. The proposal notes that they would have to travel to Lerwick on a Sunday and return home on a Friday. The proposal needs to further consider ways to maximise young people's time on the island at weekends to benefit family life. The council has not clarified to parents the responsibilities of staff on the ferry towards their children in terms of safety and duty of care. In addition the proposal considers the effects of severe weather conditions based on one year. The proposal needs to consider the number of Fridays and Sundays that the Skerries ferry was cancelled over longer periods of time to give parents, young people and the community a clearer picture of the likely effect of severe weather conditions or ferry breakdowns. The journey time from the ferry terminal on Skerries to Lerwick is over two hours and on other occasions the journey may take longer. The proposal does not fully identify the costs, journey times and likely effects of travelling by taxi from Lerwick then ferry from Vidlin or Laxo or by plane from Tingwall to the Out Skerries.

3.9 The proposal considers other issues linked to the closure of the Skerries School Secondary Department. The council proposes to set up a Transition Support Group. Anderson High School offers transition arrangements, additional to that usually available, for young people with additional support needs. The council needs to clarify how as part of an effective transition, young people will gain their entitlements to support in line with best practice for Curriculum for Excellence. This group needs to give consideration to ensuring that health and well-being of the young people including their social, emotional and mental well-being is effectively addressed in the move to the new school environment at the Anderson High School and to the Halls of Residence. Further issues are yet to be reviewed.

4. Summary

4.1 The proposal from Shetland Islands Council to close Skerries School Secondary Department (Secondary 1 to Secondary 4) and transfer children to Anderson High School with effect from August 2014, offers some educational benefits to the young people directly affected by the proposal and more widely across Shetland Islands Council. The council has set out a reasonable case for the likely educational benefits to be gained by transferring the young people to a larger school. The secondary-aged young people at Skerries School would benefit from an increase in curricular opportunities, an improved access to a wide range of subject specialist teachers across all curriculum areas, access to a wider range of the teaching staff together with more promoted staff and types of specialist support staff. In addition, the council expect young people will benefit from access to greater resources across the school in respect of ICT, clubs and societies, wide range of sports and leisure and access to a wider and more diverse group of young people on an individual group or team basis.

4.2 The council has presented clear arguments for the benefits likely to accrue to the wider educational community in the council from savings resulting from the proposed closure. This proposal would contribute to the council's duties to secure

best value and contribute in part to an aim linked to equality of opportunity across the islands.

4.3 The parents of the two young people currently at Skerries School Secondary Department (Secondary 1 to Secondary 4) are not in favour of the proposal to close the Secondary Department. They do not accept the argument that education in a larger school is necessarily better for their children. They view the personalised support available to their children as a key benefit of a small island school. This view is shared by the young people themselves and by many members of the community of the Out Skerries. Parents and members of the island community do not feel that the council has considered the full impact of the closure of the school on family life and the long term future of the community of the closure of a remote rural school like Skerries School Secondary Department (Secondary 1 to Secondary 4). In a number of areas the council's proposal paper does not set out sufficiently clearly the arrangements for supporting children at Skerries School Secondary Department (Secondary 1 to Secondary 4) to make a positive transition to Anderson High School. Given the strength of the opposition to the proposal, the council needs to ensure that the necessary arrangements are planned and implemented in good time for children to be effectively supported in their learning, support needs and well-being during the time of transition.

4.4 In taking forward its proposal, the council needs to address the concerns of parents, young people and the community, fully explore the viability of alternatives, communicate with parents, staff and young people to alleviate some of their concerns and to ensure effective supported transitions within the entitlements of Curriculum for Excellence for young people from Skerries School Secondary Department (Secondary 1 to Secondary 4) to Anderson High School and continue to consult with parents, young people, and staff of Skerries School and the wider community of Out Skerries to engage them fully in the implementation of its proposal.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
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