

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by South Lanarkshire Council to increase the qualification for free mainstream secondary school transport to pupils residing more than three miles from their school.

1. Introduction

1.1 This report from Education Scotland has been prepared by HM Inspectors in accordance with the terms of the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010* and the amendments contained in the *Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014*. The purpose of the report is to provide an independent and impartial consideration of South Lanarkshire Council's proposal to increase the qualification for free mainstream secondary school transport to pupils residing more than three miles from their school. If approved, the council would intend to implement the proposal with effect from 29 September 2015. 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 a copy of 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 legislative 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 young people attending secondary schools across South Lanarkshire; any other users; and children likely to become pupils within two years of the date of publication of the proposal paper;
- 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:

- 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;
- discussion with a representative of the Diocese of Motherwell; and
- visits to the site of Braidwood, Crosshouse, Parkview, St Athanasius, St Charles', St Elizabeth's, St Vincent's and Townhill Primary Schools and Cathkin High School, Holy Cross High School, Lanark Grammar School and St Andrew's and St Brides High School, including discussions with relevant consultees.

2. Consultation Process

2.1 South Lanarkshire Council undertook the consultation on its proposal with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010* and the amendments in the *Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014*.

2.2 The formal consultation on the council's proposal ran from 16 March 2015 to 13 May 2015. Notices about the proposal were placed in the local press and on the council's website. The proposal document was made available at schools, libraries and various leisure centres across the South Lanarkshire Council area. As part of the consultation arrangements, four public meetings were held on 21, 22, 28 and 29 April 2015.

2.3 The council received 1804 responses to the consultation through an online survey. Almost all the responses opposed the proposal. In addition, the council received petitions and letters containing the names of over 6000 individuals who opposed the proposal. Further representations made directly to Education Scotland all strongly opposed the proposal. During the consultation period the council responded to queries about those affected by the proposal. It provided an indication of addresses which come under the terms of the proposal to those who attended the public meetings.

2.4 Almost all children at P6 and P7 who met with HM Inspectors, and their parents, felt that they had not been properly informed or consulted during the consultation process.

3. Educational Aspects of Proposal

3.1 The proposal has the potential to allow the council to make savings of around £650,000 each year thus avoiding the need for this level of savings in other areas of educational provision, including learning and teaching and resources. As a result, this proposal offers potential educational benefits to children and young people across the whole council area.

3.2 Children, young people, parents and other members of local communities who responded to the consultation and who met with HM Inspectors were overwhelmingly opposed to the proposal.

3.3 Many parents, children and young people felt that they have not had sufficient information made available to them during the consultation process. Some parents and young people were either unaware of or unsure if they would be affected directly by the proposal. Although the council provide more information to those who attended public meetings, many are still unsure if they will be affected by the proposal. The council should ensure that all affected children and young people and their families are provided with information as soon as possible.

3.4 Many children, young people and parents who responded to the council survey or who met with HM Inspectors were concerned that they do not yet have information regarding the identification of safe walking routes to school. As a result, there is considerable speculation about which routes may be regarded as safe or unsafe. Children at P6 and P7 who met with HM Inspectors expressed a number of fears and concerns. These children and those at secondary schools raised concerns, including fears of misbehaviour, in certain areas where groups of pupils from different schools would converge on their way to and from school. The council now needs to identify where walking routes to school are regarded as unsafe and to communicate what alternative arrangements will be made.

3.5 Staff who met with HM Inspectors indicated concerns over how the proposal had the capacity to disproportionately disadvantage those children from lower income families. Some expressed concerns over possible increases to latecoming and absence and how this would impact on the attainment of those pupils.

3.6 Many parents, young people and staff expressed concerns over the possible increase in traffic congestion around schools should many more parents drive their children to school. In its proposal, the council recognises this potential issue and acknowledges the need for it to continue to monitor the situation.

3.7 The Diocese of Motherwell is strongly opposed to the proposal. It seeks assurances from the council that consideration will be given to mitigating the effects of the proposal for the most disadvantaged children and young people. It also seeks further information about how the council will identify safe routes to school for all children, including in the dark and winter months.

3.8 The council intends to implement the proposal with effect from 29 September 2015. Should the proposal go ahead, young people and their families will not know of the outcome of the proposal until during or after the school summer holiday period. This leaves little time for parents and children, particularly those moving from primary school into S1, to make suitable transport or walking arrangements or to budget for any additional expenditure which they may incur. The council now needs to give careful consideration to its proposed timescale for implementation.

3.9 During the consultation period the council was notified of an alleged inaccuracy or omission in the proposal. In paragraph 1.8 of its proposal document, the word 'Forum' was missed out of the name *West of Scotland Road Safety Forum Guidelines*. As a result, a few parents felt that they were not easily able to access these guidelines. The council will need to ensure that it takes the necessary steps to investigate this alleged inaccuracy or omission.

4. Summary

The proposal to increase the qualification for entitlement to free mainstream secondary school transport to pupils residing more than three miles from their school has some potential educational benefits. Financial savings made in this area may reduce the need for savings in other areas, including resources for learning and teaching. There is, however, almost universal opposition to the proposal from school pupils, their parents and the wider communities across the council area. In taking this proposal forward, the council needs to address the significant and reasonable concerns of the many stakeholders who responded to the survey, wrote directly to Education Scotland or met with HM Inspectors. The council should, as a matter of urgency, ensure that all those affected by the proposal, or who will become affected by it in the next two years, are properly informed. It needs to address the concerns of young people and their families about the identification of safe walking routes and any issues of congestion around schools. The council should also review the proposed timescale for implementing its proposal should it go ahead. In its final consultation report, the council will need to set out the actions it has taken to address the alleged inaccuracy or omission notified to it.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
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