

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by West Dunbartonshire Council to place the management of Linnvale Early Learning and Childcare Centre under the headteacher of Linnvale Primary School and for the new arrangements to come into force in August 2015.

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 the proposal by West Dunbartonshire Council to place the management of Linnvale Early Learning and Childcare Centre under the headteacher of Linnvale Primary School and for the new arrangements to come into force in August 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 children and young people of the early learning and childcare centre; 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
- 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; and
- visits to the sites of Linnvale Early Learning and Childcare Centre, and Linnvale Primary School, including discussion with relevant consultees.

2. Consultation Process

West Dunbartonshire Council undertook the consultation on its proposals with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010* and the amendments in the *Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014*. West Dunbartonshire Council's proposal is to place the management of Linnvale Early Learning and Childcare Centre under the headteacher of Linnvale Primary School and for the new arrangements to come into force in August 2015. The consultation process ran from 12 January 2015 until 27 February 2015. During this period, the council held one public meeting on 27 January 2015. At the meeting, there were mixed reactions to the proposal. The council received 35 written responses to the proposal. Almost all who attended and who responded to the council's on-line survey were opposed to the proposal. Parents did not feel that using digital technology was the best way to consult as they could not easily access. The council held meetings with staff from the establishments affected by the proposal.

3. Educational Aspects of Proposal

3.1 West Dunbartonshire Council's proposal to place the management of Linnvale Early Learning and Childcare Centre under the headteacher of Linnvale Primary School from August 2015 has some educational benefit. The proposal would increase access to a teacher for children in the centre. It would enable children to access school facilities on a more regular basis and allow staff more scope to work closer together at an earlier stage, than is currently offered, in developing children's learning and curricular experiences, particularly across the early level of Curriculum for Excellence.

3.2 Implementation of the proposal has the potential to offer greater stability in terms of the management arrangements and avoid having several changes of manager as has happened in recent years. On account of the planned reduction in staffing numbers, a few of the early learning and childcare officers will be redeployed outwith the centre. The council will need to take steps to ensure that this does not have an adverse impact on children's experiences and development. Implementation of the proposal will mean that some children may have to travel to other early years setting in the area if they did not maintain or secure a place at the centre. No changes are planned for the general use of the building and/or its facilities. As such, no others users will be affected.

3.3 The council plans to implement the proposal from August 2015. All stakeholders who met with HM Inspectors have justified concerns over this

timescale. Should the council implement the proposal from August 2015, stakeholders have limited time to put in place alternative arrangements, depending on individual circumstances. Places will not be allocated until May via a council admissions panel. All stakeholders have reasonable concerns that this timescale is very late in terms of making informed decisions. In its final consultation report, the council needs to address concerns regarding the proposed timescale and make clear the transition arrangements for children, parents and staff which would not have a detrimental impact for children's learning and development.

3.4 Primary school staff, children and parents were positive and saw the benefits of the proposal. All parents, who met with HM Inspectors, felt the proposal would ensure that their children had better access to the school from an earlier age. The main concerns from those staff and parents, who met with HM Inspectors, were around the reduction in the number of places at Linnvale Early Learning and Childcare Centre and the potential impact on the school roll. Parents would like further information about day-to-day management arrangements and the actual number of early years places to be available. All parents who met with HM Inspectors and whose children currently attend the primary school felt the proposal would be an advantage in establishing early links for themselves and their children's learning. All primary-aged children who met with HM Inspectors were very enthusiastic about the proposal.

3.5 Those staff and parents from Linnvale Early Learning and Childcare Centre, who met with HM Inspectors, were all strongly opposed to the proposal. Stakeholders who spoke with HM Inspectors have reasonable concerns over the need to have more information on the day-to-day management arrangements, numbers available for children and allocation of places should there be insufficient places for those children who currently attend and would be eligible for another year. These parents also considered that information was difficult to understand and that the proposal offered no benefits for themselves or their children. They also would like more information on the potential impact of the proposal, for example on staffing and family learning. Parents were worried that the reduction in the number of places being made available would result in longer walks or bus journeys for children to access other early years provision if they did not retain or access a place in Linnvale Early Learning and Childcare Centre. Parents were anxious about having children at several establishments and difficulties this would cause due to the proposed reduction in numbers and available places for siblings. They stated they would move all their children to one establishment where they could all be accommodated. Parents would prefer the status quo. However, they did feel that they could accept the centre moving under the management of the headteacher at the primary school, providing nothing else changed in terms of staffing and number of places for young children. Early learning and childcare staff were unclear about their own deployment. Staff and parents do not agree that recruitment and retention of centre managers is an issue. Staff had concerns over reduction of staff due to proposed changes to numbers of children. In its final consultation report, the council will need to take account of these concerns.

3.6 Stakeholders, who met with HM Inspectors, identified alleged inaccuracies and omissions in the proposal in relation to number of children who currently attend Linnvale Early Learning and Childcare Centre and also the financial information

noted in the proposal document. They reported that information on children's numbers was not accurate in the proposal documentation. They commented that the financial information was not accurate as the proposal did not contain all staffing costs and potential savings. The council will need to ensure that it takes the necessary steps to investigate these alleged inaccuracies or omissions. In its final consultation report, the council will need to set out the actions it has taken to address any alleged inaccuracies and omissions notified to it.

4. Summary

Overall, West Dunbartonshire Council's proposal to place the management of Linnvale Early Learning and Childcare Centre under the headteacher of Linnvale Primary School is of some educational benefit in terms of continuity and progression for children's learning. The proposal has the support of stakeholders from the primary school but not those from Linnvale Early Learning and Childcare Centre. The proposal may help to address retention and recruitment issues at head of centre level at Linnvale Early Learning and Childcare Centre. If implemented, the proposal has the potential to increase children's weekly access to a teacher and school facilities. In addition, there could be more productive partnerships for children and staff from the under-fives provision and from the early primary stages in enhancing learning. In taking forward the proposal, the council should provide reassurance to stakeholders over the arrangements to allocate places to children who currently attend the centre if numbers have to be reduced. Currently there are more children attending than there would be places available. The council also needs to work with staff to support any redeployment and to clarify day-to-day management arrangements. It should provide more information to stakeholders on how the council will handle transitions. The timescale for the proposal requires to be reviewed to minimise any disruption during the transition arrangements for children, families and staff. The council also needs to address alleged inaccuracies with regard to projected pupil numbers and financial information contained in the proposal.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
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