Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by Dumfries and Galloway Council to close St Peter’s RC Primary School (Dalbeattie) and offer children places within their catchment primary schools based on their home address, or within another RC Primary School.

1. Introduction

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 Dumfries and Galloway Council’s proposal to close St Peter’s RC Primary School (Dalbeattie) and offer children places within their catchment primary schools based on their home address, or within another RC Primary School. If the proposal goes ahead, the council hopes that it will come into effect from July 2016. 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.

1.1 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

- the educational benefits the council believes will result from implementation of the proposal, and the council’s reasons for coming to these beliefs.
1.2 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;

- consideration of further information on all schools affected;

- visits to the sites of St Peter's RC Primary School (Dalbeattie); Dalbeattie Primary School; Palnackie Primary School and St Andrew's RC Primary School (Dumfries) including discussion with relevant consultees; and

- discussion with a representative of the Diocese of Galloway.

2. Consultation Process

2.1 Dumfries and Galloway 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 consultation started on 27 April 2015 and was scheduled to run until 10 June 2015. The council amended the proposal document on 1 May 2015 and consequently extended the consultation by one week until 17 June 2015. The council sent letters to individual families affected by the proposal and placed notices in local newspapers. It posted the consultation document on its website and made copies available at various locations across the region. The council took appropriate steps to consult with children. A public meeting held on 13 May 2015 was attended by 17 stakeholders. The council received eight written responses to its consultation. Most of these were against the proposal. The council engaged with stakeholders at an early stage to ensure that they were aware that the reducing school roll may result in it consulting on closure.

3. Educational Aspects of Proposal

3.1 The proposal has strong educational benefits for children currently attending the school. It will increase the time available for learning and teaching and help build their resilience through being part of a larger school community and experiencing a wider range of teaching styles. It will also help promote their social and emotional development by providing greater challenge as well as the opportunity to be part of a wider, age-appropriate peer group. Should the proposal go ahead, the council will give parents and children a range of schools to choose from. Each of the alternatives has suitable arrangements in place to meet the requirements of any child who may have identified additional support needs.
3.2 St Peter’s RC Primary School provides denominational education within the town of Dalbeattie. The school roll has been falling steadily over a number of years. The current school roll is five. Most of the children attending the school have transferred from other local schools. The proposal will help the council to make effective and efficient use of its resources by addressing capacity issues within its school estate.

3.3 Children currently attending the school are at P2, P3 and P4 stages. They are taught in a single class group. Specialist learning support teachers visit the school weekly to provide individually targeted support to any child who has identified additional support needs. The school’s self-evaluation indicates that it finds it challenging to sustain innovation. The council rightly states that the size of the current school roll is limiting children’s opportunities. It has made arrangements for the children to have access to specialist teachers of art, music and physical education in another primary school which is 3.5 miles away. This results in learning and teaching time being taken up travelling between the schools. Should the proposal go ahead, children will be able to access teaching in all curricular areas in one location.

3.4 The council has worked in partnership with the Diocese of Galloway and the Scottish Catholic Education Service to put appropriate arrangements in place for the strategic planning of Catholic education in the region. As a result, families who are members of the Catholic Church within the Dalbeattie area will be able to access support from the council’s Network of Catholic Schools, regardless of which school they attend.

3.5 A majority of stakeholders who responded to the consultation and met with HM Inspectors were not in favour of the proposal. Parents/carers felt that St Peter’s RC Primary School was meeting their needs and their children’s needs well. They felt welcome in the school and valued the opportunities that the very small school roll provided for individual attention for their children. A majority of the children enjoyed attending St Peter’s RC Primary School and spoke positively about their learning. They expressed understandable reservations about moving to a different school if the council decides to close St Peter’s RC Primary School. Staff had high levels of commitment to the school. They knew individual children and families well and believed that the small school roll and the school’s quiet ethos suited the current group of children well. Should the proposal go ahead, the council will need to ensure sufficient time for it to work with families to manage children’s transitions, including enhanced transition for those who may require them.

3.6 The Diocese of Galloway is in agreement with the proposal. It commends Dumfries and Galloway Council’s approach to the provision of Catholic education and acknowledges that the council has involved it in a process of pre-consultation. It notes the council’s offer to provide transport to any child who is a member of the Catholic Church from St Peter’s RC Primary School who wishes to attend another denominational school. It is of the view that there is insufficient demand for a Roman Catholic school in the Dalbeattie area. The Diocese is satisfied that the council has suitable arrangements in place for the Religious Education of children who are members of the Catholic Church who will no longer attend a denominational school, should the proposal be implemented.
4. Summary

The proposal has clear educational benefits for children currently attending St Peter’s RC Primary School. It will increase the time available for learning and teaching, help to build their resilience and promote their social and emotional development. The proposal will also help Dumfries and Galloway Council to secure best value by addressing capacity issues in its school estate. The council will need to ensure that appropriately individualised transition plans are put in place, including enhanced plans for those children with identified additional support needs.

HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
June 2015