

## **Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by Dumfries and Galloway Council to close Ae Primary School and realign its catchment area with Amisfield Primary School from July 2018.**

### **1. Introduction**

1.1 This report from Education Scotland has been prepared by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education (HM Inspectors) in accordance with the terms of the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 (as amended) (the 2010 Act)*. The purpose of the report is to provide an independent and impartial consideration of Dumfries and Galloway Council's proposal to close Ae Primary School and realign its catchment area with Amisfield Primary School from July 2018. 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. It should also 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 school; any other users of the school's facilities; 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:

- attendance at the public meeting held on 28 August 2017 in connection with the council's proposals;
- 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 site of Ae Primary School and Amisfield Primary School, including discussion with relevant consultees.

1.4 As the proposal would lead to the closure of a rural school, HM Inspectors also took account of the council's consideration of any reasonable alternatives to closure of Ae Primary School, the likely effect on the local community and the likely effect of any different travelling arrangements of the proposed closure.

## **2. Consultation Process**

2.1 Dumfries and Galloway Council undertook the consultation on its proposal with reference to the *Act 2010*.

2.2 The council informed Education Scotland on 9 October 2017 of its intention to pause the statutory consultation process. However, HM Inspectors have completed this report in order to fulfil their duties under the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*.

2.3 The consultation ran from 23 August 2017 until 3 October 2017. The council announced the consultation in the local press and information, including the proposal paper, was placed on the council website and in several council buildings. Copies of the paper were provided to parents of children in both schools and were distributed at the public meetings. Two public meetings were held on 28 August 2017, one in Ae Primary School and one in Amisfield Primary School. Twenty eight members of the public attended the meeting in Ae Primary School and 15 attended the meeting in Amisfield Primary School. Six people attended both meetings. The council agreed to attend a meeting organised by the Ae Primary School Parent Council. Approximately 80 people attended this meeting. The council made appropriate arrangements to consult with children and staff. During the consultation period, the council received 142 representations from parents and community members and a petition against the closure of Ae Primary School was signed by 386 people. Almost all of the respondees opposed the proposal. The council carried out an assessment to consider the impact of closing a rural school.

## **3. Educational Aspects of Proposal**

3.1 Ae Primary School is an accessible rural school with a role of eleven pupils. This represents 22 per cent of the building's capacity. The role has fluctuated over a number of years and for some time the school has been significantly under capacity. The building is currently rated by the council as condition B (satisfactory), and suitability B. Amisfield Primary School, with a capacity of 75, is rated by the council as condition B, and suitability B.

3.2 The council has provided an educational benefits statement asserting the key benefits of the proposal for children. However, HM Inspectors do not find the council's assertions compelling and believe that the proposal presented by the council for consultation does not demonstrate clear educational benefits. The council should develop its educational benefits statement further to provide specific

evidence of how the proposal will impact positively on the children of both Ae and Amisfield Primary Schools.

3.3 Almost all parents, pupils, staff and other stakeholders of Ae Primary School who met with HM Inspectors do not support the proposal. They have a number of concerns about the consultation process and the quality of information contained in the proposal document, including the educational benefits statement. HM Inspectors believe that the council will need to address these concerns in its final consultation report. Almost all parents, pupils and staff, and other stakeholders of Amisfield Primary School who met with HM Inspectors oppose the proposal.

3.4 The financial information included by the council in its proposal paper lacks clarity. HM Inspectors are of the view that it does not adequately support the case for the closure of Ae Primary School.

3.5 During the consultation, stakeholders alleged inaccuracies and omissions in the proposal, including in relation to financial data. The council will need to ensure that it takes the necessary steps to investigate these issues. In its final consultation report, the council will need to set out the actions it has taken to address any alleged inaccuracies or omissions notified to it.

3.6 As the proposal would lead to the closure of a rural school, HM Inspectors also took account of the council's consideration of the factors to which it should have special regard.

3.7 The council has assessed the effects of its proposal. It has not identified any significant impacts resulting from closure. HM Inspectors do not believe the council has provided clear evidence to support this view. The council needs to consider further the impact on local residents of all ages who believe that their school is an integral part of their community.

3.8 Ae Primary School has been in partnership with Amisfield Primary School, with a shared headteacher since 2014. The educational benefits to children of this arrangement are noted in the proposal. However, the proposal does not make clear what further significant educational benefit will result from closing Ae Primary School and moving the children to Amisfield Primary School.

3.9 A number of alternative proposals were considered, but stakeholders would have liked to have been more involved in this process and felt that they were not able to offer alternatives to the proposal. In taking forward the proposal the council needs to revisit the alternatives with the community.

3.10 The council looked at travel arrangements and the possible impact on the environment. This section of the proposal appears to be incomplete. In its final report, the council needs to provide an accurate assessment of the impact on children and the environment of proposed travel arrangements, paying particular attention to the impact of bad weather on travel from Ae to Amisfield.

#### **4. Summary**

Overall, HM Inspectors do not believe that the council has demonstrated sufficient and clear educational benefits. In taking forward this proposal, the council needs to identify more clearly the educational benefits for the children of both schools. It needs to engage more thoroughly with parents and members of the community particularly around alternatives to the proposal. Working closely with the local community, the council needs to address a range of issues which may impact on the children and the local community should the proposal proceed. This includes community use of the school and the impact of travel on the children and the environment. Consultees notified the council of a number of inaccuracies and omissions in the proposal. HM Inspectors believe these materially affect their ability to understand fully the benefits which the council asserts the closure of Ae Primary School will deliver. In its final consultation report, the council will need to set out the actions it has taken to address these alleged inaccuracies or omissions.

**HM Inspectors  
Education Scotland  
October 2017**