

## **Consultation proposal by Fife Council**

### **Report by Education Scotland, addressing educational aspects of the proposal by Fife Council to close Crombie Primary School in December 2014 and to rezone the catchment area of Limekilns Primary School from that date.**

#### **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. As the council is proposing to close a school, it will need 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 the opportunity for representations to be made to Ministers.

#### **1. Introduction**

1.1 Fife Council proposes to close Crombie Primary School in December 2014 and to rezone the catchment area of Limekilns Primary School from that date.

1.2 The 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.

1.3 HM Inspectors undertook the following activities in considering the educational aspects of the proposal:

- attendance at the public meeting held on Wednesday 26 March 2014 at Crombie Village Hall 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 Crombie Primary School and Limekilns Primary School, including discussion with relevant consultees.

#### 1.4 HM Inspectors considered:

- the likely effects of the proposal for children and young people of the schools; 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.

1.5 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:

- reasonable alternatives to the closure of Crombie Primary School;
- 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 Fife Council undertook the consultation on its proposal with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*. In autumn 2013, the council consulted on the closure of Crombie Primary School with the plan to rezone the catchment area to Cairneyhill Primary School. During this earlier consultation, consultees were opposed to this proposal. Parents felt that the council had not explored fully the viability of the option to rezone the catchment area of Limekilns Primary School to include the catchment area for Crombie Primary School. In response to this, the council reviewed its initial proposal. As a result, between 17 March 2014 and 15 May 2014 the council consulted on a new proposal to close Crombie Primary School in December 2014 and to rezone the catchment area of Limekilns Primary School from that date.

2.2 The council received a total of eight responses to the consultation. Six respondents expressed a view on closing Crombie Primary School. Two responses were from parents or carers of children at Crombie Primary School. Half of those who responded supported the proposal to close Crombie Primary School. Seven respondents expressed a view on rezoning the catchment area of Limekilns Primary School. Over 70% of those who responded supported this aspect of the proposal.

2.3 The current roll of Crombie Primary School is 16. This includes some children who attend the school from outwith the current Crombie catchment area. Sixteen children who live within the current catchment area of Crombie Primary School currently attend Limekilns Primary School as the result of parental placing requests.

2.4 There is no Parent Council at Crombie Primary School, but the parents of those children who currently attend the school and who met with HM Inspectors want the school to remain open. They feel that the needs of their children are well met in the school. They feel that their children benefit from a small class size with greater one-to-one attention from their teachers. They believe this has helped build their children's self-esteem and self-confidence. The parents also have reasonable concerns about the timing of the closure of the school in December. They feel that closure of the school in mid-session will be of detriment to their children's education. They also believe this will mean that they will need to buy their children two school uniforms in the same year. Those children who attend the school and live in Crombie can currently walk or cycle to school and parents feel this is beneficial to their children's health and wellbeing. The children will not be able to do this if the school is closed as they will have to travel to Limekilns Primary School by bus. Some parents do not have access to their own transport during the school day. They are concerned about what they will do if their child becomes ill during the school day at Limekilns Primary School. They also feel that their children will not be able to benefit from the after school activities and clubs on offer at Limekilns Primary School as their children will need to catch the bus back to Crombie at the end of the school day. The parents also feel that closure of the school will have an adverse impact on the long-term viability and sustainability of the community.

2.5 The Parent Council of Limekilns Primary School provided a response to the council on the proposal. In its response, the Parent Council did not wish to express a view on the closure of Crombie Primary School. The Parent Council asked the council to consider employing a principal teacher in Limekilns Primary School if Crombie Primary School closes. The Parent Council also expressed a reasonable concern about the closure date in December 2014 as this will necessitate class changes in Limekilns Primary School in January 2015. The Parent Council has indicated to the council that it is keen to be involved in any forward planning in relation to the outcome of the proposal.

2.6 The children at Crombie Primary School are happy at the school and very positive about it. They would like their school to remain open. They like the mixed age group within the school and younger children feel that older children will look after them. Children at Limekilns Primary School are very positive about their school. They feel that their school provides them with a number of benefits such as lunchtime and after-school clubs. They understand that children from Crombie Primary School would be sad and anxious if their school were to close. However, they feel that they already know the children from Crombie Primary School well because of the shared activities they take part in together. They are keen to welcome the children to Limekilns Primary School if Crombie Primary School closes.

2.7 Staff at Crombie Primary School would prefer the school to remain open. They feel they have very positive relationships with the children, parents and the

local community and are able to meet children's needs well. They are aware of the challenges they face in meeting the needs of children in a multi-stage P1 to P7 class where a significant number of children require additional support with their learning. They feel the particular ethos of a small school has played a significant part in meeting the needs of some children. Staff at Limekilns Primary School are aware of the benefits of the proposal and feel that they will be able to meet children's needs very well, particularly at the point of transition from the nursery into P1. They are concerned about the timeline for the proposal and the impact it may have. They are aware that the timing will lead to the need to rearrange classes in January 2015. They feel that this may be disruptive to children's learning.

2.8 The Community Residents Association (CRA) in Crombie is strongly opposed to the proposal. It has submitted an extensive rebuttal of the proposal to the council claiming a number of inaccuracies and omissions in the proposal paper. The CRA feels that the school has an important part to play in the sustainability and wellbeing of the village of Crombie and that closure of the school will be of detriment to the long-term future of the village and the local community.

### **3. Educational aspects of the proposal**

3.1 Staff in Crombie Primary School provide children with a positive learning experience. This has included regular joint working with Limekilns Primary School. Children have also benefited from visits to Ardroy outdoor centre, Callendar House, Hopetoun House and the botanic garden at St Andrews. Overall, however, the proposal to close Crombie Primary School and rezone the catchment area of Limekilns Primary School has a number of clear educational benefits. Fife Council's policy, *Staffing in Primary Schools (Supporting Information) Revised – June 2012*, states that 'where the school roll is no greater than 18, one class will be allocated to accommodate the whole school population.' As the roll at Crombie Primary School is currently 16, this means that there is one class. The class is made up of children from every stage across P1 to P7. At some stages, there is only one child at each stage. If the proposal is implemented, there will be up to six single or multi-stage classes in Limekilns Primary School and children will work in classes of no more than 25 with some classes having class sizes of no more than 19. This arrangement will enable children to benefit from working together in pairs, groups and teams with children of the same age and stage and has the potential to enhance children's personal and social development and their learning experiences.

3.2 The proposal also has the potential to improve provision for providing support for children who require additional support with their learning. A support for learning teacher works in Crombie Primary School for one morning a week. In Limekilns Primary School, a support for learning teacher works in the school for the equivalent of two days per week. Implementation of the proposal will enable more effective use of this time with increased capacity for supporting children's learning and increased access for children and staff to specialist support and advice. This has the potential to enhance further arrangements for meeting children's learning needs.

3.3 Children from Crombie village already attend the nursery at Limekilns Primary School. If the proposal is implemented, the children who will live within the revised

catchment area for Limekilns Primary School will benefit from enhanced transition arrangements from nursery to P1 in Limekilns Primary School with their peers.

3.4 There are currently no after school clubs or groups at Crombie Primary School. If the proposal is implemented, children will have access to a wider range of experiences and opportunities at Limekilns Primary School. Lunchtime and after school clubs at Limekilns include football, karate, running and dance. Children at Limekilns, including those who live within the Crombie catchment area and currently attend Limekilns Primary School, are very positive about these opportunities. Fife Council also provides access to out-of-school care before and after school at Limekilns Primary School. In taking forward the proposal, the council needs to give some consideration to how those children who will be dependent on travelling to school by contract bus will be able to benefit from participating in these after-school activities.

3.5 Children who currently attend Crombie Primary School receive tuition in violin. To access these lessons children have to travel to Limekilns Primary School. If the proposal is implemented the children will continue to have access to violin tuition but will have less disruption to their learning as the requirement to travel between schools will be removed.

3.6 Crombie Primary School and Limekilns Primary School have a shared headteacher who has overall responsibility for leading and managing both schools. To support the headteacher a principal teacher works at Crombie Primary School. There is no longer a principal teacher at Limekilns Primary School as this post was removed following a review of promoted posts across Fife. The proposal will create a single and larger staff team that has the potential to enhance the professional development of staff and create increased opportunities for them to share ideas and work in teams. Given that there is currently a principal teacher at Crombie Primary School, in its final consultation report the council needs to set out clearly the management and staffing model it will establish at Limekilns Primary School.

3.7 Both schools currently provide an attractive and stimulating environment for learning. If the proposal is implemented, the council has given a commitment to investing £330,000 in improving the learning environment at Limekilns Primary School. The council plans to invest in: upgrades to information and communications technology and wireless access; redecorating the school and improving floor coverings; and, the partial replacement of the roof. Once completed, this investment will improve the environment for learning at the school and be of overall benefit for the children.

3.8 Fife Council has undertaken a strategic review of the school estate. The council estimates there are currently over 11,000 surplus places in the primary school estate. The proposal to close Crombie Primary School is set within the context of that review. As such, implementation of the proposal has the potential to help the council meet its duty to secure best value in the delivery of its services and meet its other statutory duties. Consultees, particularly CRA, have challenged the accuracy and transparency of the council's financial calculations. The response from the CRA also challenges the level of savings the council claims closure of Crombie

Primary School will realise. It is not clear from the proposal paper whether the cost per pupil calculation of £16,438 per pupil within the proposal is based on the current cost per pupil in the school. In 2012, the school roll was 19. Under Fife Council's policy, *Staffing in Primary Schools (Supporting Information) Revised – June 2012*, the school may have had two classes. The current roll of Crombie Primary School is 16 and, under Fife Council's policy, means that the children are currently taught in one class. Whatever the reason, the council needs to ensure that the cost per pupil of providing an education for children at Crombie Primary School that appears in the final consultation report is accurate and that the method for calculating it is open and transparent. It is clear, however, that, if the school were to remain open and the roll go over 18 with two classes, there would be a significant increase in the cost per pupil of running the school from the costs in the current session. As the school roll at Crombie Primary School is lower than 70, the council also receives an allocation within the General Revenue Grant from Scottish Government. Within the proposal the council estimates this to be around £2,860 per pupil at Crombie Primary School. If the proposal is implemented and Crombie Primary School is closed, the council will no longer receive this funding because the combined roll at Limekilns Primary School will be more than 70.

3.9 The council plans to close Crombie Primary School in December 2014. The current timeline means that the children from Crombie Primary School will move to Limekilns Primary School in mid-session in January 2015. From August 2014, there will be five classes at Limekilns Primary School. Implementation of the proposal in December 2014 will require the reforming of classes in Limekilns Primary School from January 2015 to create six classes. This has the potential to disrupt continuity and progression in children's learning and means that some children will have to move classes midway through the year. In taking forward the proposal, the council also needs to ensure that it has taken due account of the legal process governing school closures. This includes the right of Scottish Ministers to call-in and determine proposals to close schools. Fife Council cannot implement its decision to close Crombie Primary School, in part or whole, until such time as Scottish Ministers have granted permission for the council to close the school. It is not clear from the current proposal if the council has allowed itself sufficient time to work in partnership with, parents, staff and children at both Crombie Primary School and Limekilns Primary Schools in establishing the best date for implementation of the proposal to ensure that children's needs are met effectively. In taking forward the proposal, Fife Council needs to consider, in its final consultation report, reviewing the date for the closure of the school to give sufficient time for it to consult and work with parents, staff and children in planning the transition process. The Parent Council at Limekilns Primary School has already indicated to the council that it is keen to be involved in any forward planning in relation to the outcome of the proposal.

3.10 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 the factors to which it should have special regard. In the past, the council has taken a number of steps to keep Crombie Primary School open. This has included establishing a shared headship and appointing a principal teacher to the school. The council had earlier consulted on the closure of Crombie Primary School with the plan to rezone the catchment area to Cairneyhill Primary School. During this earlier consultation, parents felt that the council had not explored fully the

viability of the option to rezone the catchment area of Limekilns Primary School to include the catchment area for Crombie Primary School. The council responded positively to this response and consulted on the current proposal. Overall, the council has given reasonable consideration to the viability of alternatives to closing Crombie Primary School. The proposal gives due consideration of the impact of the proposal on the local community. Some parents in Crombie and the CRA challenge the council's assessment of the impact of the proposal on the community. The council needs to take appropriate account of these concerns in its final consultation report. The council has given due consideration to the travel arrangements that will come into force if Crombie Primary School closes. Crombie village is just over three miles from Limekilns Primary School and all children who live in the current catchment area of Crombie Primary School will be entitled to free travel to school. This includes children who currently attend Limekilns Primary School as the result of placing requests from parents. In taking forward the proposal, the council needs to give some consideration to how those children who will be dependent on travelling to school by contract bus will be able to benefit from participating in after-school activities at Limekilns Primary School.

#### **4. Summary**

4.1 Fife Council's proposal to close Crombie Primary School and rezone the catchment area of the school to Limekilns Primary School is of overall educational benefit for children and is the most reasonable and viable option open to the council. It has the potential to bring further educational benefits to children. Children will have more opportunities to work with children of the same age and stage and this has the potential to enhance further children's personal and social development and their learning. Children will benefit from increased capacity for supporting their learning with increased access to specialist support staff. Implementation of the proposal will create a single and larger staff team with the potential to enhance the professional development of staff while creating increased opportunities for staff to share ideas and work in teams. Implementation of the proposal will also result in significant investment in improving the learning environment at Limekilns Primary School.

4.2 Fife Council makes the case that implementation of the proposal will enable it to secure its duty to deliver best value. In its final consultation report, the council needs to ensure it uses the most up-to-date financial information in setting out openly and transparently how implementation of the proposal will help the council to secure this duty. In doing so, it needs to explain the costs per pupil of keeping Crombie Primary School open, the impact of the loss of the General Revenue Grant and the savings over the longer period that the council believes will accrue from closure of Crombie Primary School. In its final consultation report, the council also needs to set out clearly the management and staffing model it will establish at Limekilns Primary School.

4.3 In taking forward the proposal, Fife Council needs to take due account of the right of Scottish Ministers to call-in and determine proposals to close schools. In doing so, it needs to consult and work closely with parents, staff and children in planning the transition process and reviewing the date for the closure of Crombie Primary School and the transition to Limekilns Primary School.

**HM Inspectors  
Education Scotland  
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