

Consultation proposal by Fife Council

Report by Education Scotland, addressing educational aspects of the proposal to close Crombie Primary School and to rezone the catchment area of Cairneyhill Primary School.

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 and to rezone the catchment area of Cairneyhill Primary School to include the current catchment area of Crombie Primary School. Children enrolled currently at Crombie Primary School, and nursery-aged children living in the catchment area for Crombie Primary School, would be offered places at Cairneyhill Primary School.

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 23 September 2013 in connection with the council's proposal;

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 information on all schools affected and
- visits to the site of Crombie, Cairneyhill and Limekilns Primary Schools, including discussion with relevant consultees.

1.4 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
- 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:

- viable 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 initial consultation on its proposal with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*.

2.2 The children at Crombie Primary School are proud of their school and do not want it to close. However, they feel that if the proposal is approved they would prefer to go to Limekilns Primary School rather than to Cairneyhill Primary School. They feel that they have strong links with Limekilns Primary School. They appreciate the planned opportunities to join with children in Limekilns Primary School each week for aspects of their learning, such as physical education, mathematics and music. They feel that they already know many of the children and teachers there.

2.3 The council received 52 written responses to the consultation. The majority of those who responded to the consultation are opposed to the proposal to close

Crombie Primary School. This includes parents of children who currently attend Crombie Primary School and members of the wider community.

2.4 Most parents feel that in a number of respects the consultation process has not been satisfactory. They feel that the council has not considered fully the implications for children and families travelling safely to and from school. Almost all parents do not support the view that their children's education would be significantly better in a larger school environment. Parents are confident that their children's needs are currently being met well and that Curriculum for Excellence is already being achieved in Crombie Primary School. They feel that their children benefit from learning and achieving in a caring, family environment within a small school setting.

2.5 Parents and members of the wider community of Crombie, including the Crombie Residents' Association, do not feel that the council has considered fully the viability of other alternatives to the proposal or the likely effect on the local community. Parents feel that an alternative option to rezone the catchment area of Limekilns Primary School to include the catchment area for Crombie Primary School has not been explored thoroughly. In the community, there is a strong sense of concern for the long term sustainability of the village of Crombie should the school be closed.

2.6 Teaching and support staff at Crombie Primary School are also concerned about the proposal to close their school. They feel they provide a high quality education for children in the school and meet the individual needs of learners very well. They feel that preparing the children for moving to Cairneyhill Primary School would be very challenging given the short timescales within the proposal together with the fact that there are no existing links with Cairneyhill Primary School. They feel that should the closure of Crombie Primary School go ahead, that rezoning the catchment area to that of Limekilns Primary School would be a more practical and reasonable option.

3. Educational aspects of the proposal

3.1 There are currently 15 children attending Crombie Primary School. Although the school roll has declined in recent years, projections for the next five years show an increase. Children of nursery school age who live in Crombie are currently offered places in the nursery class at Limekilns Primary School, which is approximately three miles from Crombie Primary School. A shared headship between Crombie Primary School and Limekilns Primary School has been in place for around four years.

3.2 Cairneyhill Primary School is located approximately 1.25 miles from Crombie Primary School. The school roll is currently 206. Accommodation at Cairneyhill Primary School is spacious, bright and modern with good-sized classrooms and several multi-purpose areas. Playground space is plentiful and secure and there is purpose-built nursery accommodation. Cairneyhill Primary School also has community facilities and is very well used by local community groups. If all the children from Crombie Primary School were to transfer to Cairneyhill Primary School in August 2014, the children could be accommodated within current class arrangements, and without the need for additional teaching staff.

3.3 The council is concerned that children's learning experiences in Crombie Primary School are limited by a lack of opportunities to learn alongside more children of the same age and stage and lack of access to the wider range of resources and teaching expertise which can be provided in a larger school. The council's proposal set out a number of potential benefits of providing education in a larger school setting. These relate to a wider range of opportunities to learn and play in larger groups and extended social interaction with more children of the same age. If the proposal is implemented, the children will benefit from increased learning opportunities through Cairneyhill's Primary School's links with a wide range of community partners. Staff, children and parents at Cairneyhill Primary School promote a sense of inclusion and are sensitive to the social and emotional needs of newcomers to their school. Overall, they are very positive about the proposal.

3.4 Crombie Primary School currently provides a bright and warm environment for learning. Children experience a broad and balanced curriculum delivered by teachers, support staff and visiting specialists and outside organisations. They have very good access to a wide range of resources and the outdoor environment is used regularly for learning. Whilst most of their learning takes place in their multi-stage class, children do have regular and planned opportunities each week to play and learn with children of the same age and stage in Limekilns Primary School. As a result of the shared headship arrangement between Crombie and Limekilns Primary Schools, a programme of joint learning and engagement in shared activities between the two schools is well embedded and friendships among children are already established. In taking forward the proposal, the council needs to ensure that the current strengths in the quality of children's experiences at Crombie Primary School are built upon. In addition they need to consider the existing strong links between Crombie and Limekilns Primary Schools.

3.5 The proposal would enable efficiencies accruing from the closure of Crombie Primary School to contribute to the overall benefit of children and young people elsewhere in the council's area.

3.6 Scottish Ministers have the right to call-in decisions to close schools. The current timeline for this proposal does not give sufficient consideration to the possible impact of this process on the council's plans and on the children concerned, were the call-in process to take place. If the council cannot advise children and parents until a late stage in the school year of the school they will be expected to attend in the following school session, it could be detrimental to the children's education because of the need to prepare for their transitions. The current timescale for the proposal will make it difficult to avoid this. In taking forward the proposal, the council needs to ensure that it provides sufficient time for effective communication with parents, staff and children to alleviate some of their concerns and ensure effective transitions for children.

3.7 As the proposal will lead to the closure of a rural school as defined in the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*, HM Inspectors took into account a number of other considerations. In its proposal, the council has given consideration to, and rejected, an alternative option to close Crombie Primary School and rezone the catchment area for Limekilns Primary School to incorporate the current Crombie Primary School catchment area. Overall, however, parents, staff and children in

both Crombie and Limekilns Primary Schools do not feel that the council has considered thoroughly the viability of this option. In taking forward the proposal, the council needs to ensure that it has explored fully the viability of this alternative and set out its reasons for rejecting it.

3.8 Crombie Primary School is a secure and well maintained building with good facilities for community use, however currently there are no community lets. The council's proposal indicates that community events and groups can be accommodated in the community hall. The council has specified that, should the closure go ahead, the site will be declared surplus by the Education and Learning Directorate and that the council's Asset and Facilities Management Service would determine possible use or sale of the site. Overall, the local community is very concerned that the closure of the school would have a detrimental effect on village life. In taking forward its proposal, the council needs to clarify to stakeholders the assessment of the impact of the school's closure on the community.

3.9 Should the proposal be approved, the council proposes to provide transport for all children living in the current Crombie Primary School catchment area to attend Cairneyhill Primary School. It is anticipated that journeys made to Cairneyhill Primary School by staff and other visiting professionals would not be significantly different from those at present. However, parents are very concerned about the lack of public transport between Crombie and Cairneyhill villages and the implications this would have on their ability to participate as full partners in their child's learning. The council has stated that there are no safe walking routes between the villages and there is no direct bus service. Parents who do not have access to private transport are unsure how they would, for example, be able to attend parent teacher meetings at Cairneyhill Primary School, or collect their child should they become ill at school, or how their children would get home safely if they chose to attend after-school clubs. Using the current public bus service would require them to take a bus into Dunfermline and then take another bus to Cairneyhill. The same would be required on the return journey. Parents feel they would be put at considerable disadvantage in terms of time and cost. There is a regular public bus service between Crombie and Limekilns villages. In taking forward its proposal, the council needs to consider fully the needs of all users in determining safe and reasonable travelling routes to school.

3.10 Crombie Primary School is in the cluster for Woodmill High School. Cairneyhill Primary School is in the cluster for Queen Anne High School. Should the proposal be approved and implemented, the council has stated that it intends to carry out a review of secondary catchment areas and conduct a further consultation exercise. Parents of children currently attending Crombie Primary School, who also have older children who attend Woodmill High School, are very concerned about the uncertainty about which secondary school their younger children will eventually attend. In taking forward its proposal, the council should engage directly with parents in order to reassure and clarify the options and choices available to them with regard to accessing secondary education.

4 Summary

4.1 The proposal from Fife Council to close Crombie Primary School and transfer children to Cairneyhill Primary School with effect from August 2014, offers some educational benefits to the children directly affected by the proposal and more widely across Fife Council. The council has set out a reasonable case for the likely educational benefits to be gained by transferring the children to a larger school. These relate to a wider range of opportunities to learn and play in larger groups and extended social interaction with more children of the same age. Children would also benefit from increased learning opportunities through the school's links with local community partners and through a wider pool of staff expertise. However, children at Crombie Primary School already benefit from weekly opportunities to work in larger groups and interact socially with children of a similar age and stage through the well-established links and shared headship with Limekilns Primary School.

4.2 The council has presented clear arguments for the benefits likely to accrue to the wider educational community in the council from savings resulting from the proposed closure. This proposal would contribute to the council's duties to secure best value.

4.3 Almost all of the parents of children at Crombie Primary School are not in favour of the proposal to close the school. They do not accept the argument that education in a larger school is necessarily better for their children. This view is shared by the children themselves, staff and by many members of the wider community. In taking forward its proposal, the council needs to ensure that it addresses these concerns. In particular, the council needs to ensure that it has fully explored the viability of alternatives to the closure of Crombie Primary School and the rezoning of the catchment area of Cairneyhill Primary School to include the catchment area of Crombie Primary School.

4.4 Parents and members of the community do not feel that the council has considered the full impact of the closure of the school on the long term future of the village of Crombie. In taking forward the proposal, the council needs to ensure that it addresses these concerns.

4.5 The council's proposal paper does not set out sufficiently clearly the arrangements for supporting children at Crombie Primary School to make a positive transition to Cairneyhill Primary School. Given the opposition to the proposal, and the absence of any existing links between the two schools, the council needs to ensure that the necessary arrangements are planned and implemented in good time for children to be well supported in their learning and wellbeing during the time of transition. In taking forward the proposal, the council needs to ensure that it provides sufficient time for effective communication with parents, staff and children to alleviate some of their concerns and ensure effective transitions for children from Crombie Primary School to Cairneyhill Primary School.

4.6 Whilst the arrangements for transporting children to and from Crombie village to Cairneyhill Primary School are detailed within the council's proposal paper, there is a lack of information about arrangements for the safe travel of other key users, such as parents, carers and families. Given that the council has stated that it considers that there is no safe walking route between the schools, it needs to fully consider the safe travel of all users when taking the proposal forward.

4.7 Whatever course of action the council chooses to take, it needs to continue to consult with parents, children, and staff of both schools and the wider community to engage them fully in the implementation of its proposal.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
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