

Consultation proposal by Fife Council

Report by Education Scotland, addressing educational aspects of the proposal to close Dunino Primary School and to rezone the catchment area of Kingsbarns 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 Dunino Primary School and to rezone the catchment area of Kingsbarns Primary School with effect from August 2014.

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:

- 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 both Dunino and Kingsbarns Primary Schools, including discussion with relevant consultees.

1.4 HM Inspectors considered:

- the likely effects of the proposal for children of both schools; any other users; children likely to become pupils within two years of the date of publication of the proposal paper; and other children 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 Dunino 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 proposals with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*.

2.2 All children at Dunino Primary School want their school to remain open. They feel their school is unique and strongly identify with it and that they enjoy their learning. If the proposal is approved they would prefer to attend other schools in the nearby communities of Anstruther or St Andrews. The substantive headteacher of Dunino Primary School is on a secondment and has not been involved in the process. Interim management arrangements involve the headteacher of Canongate Primary School managing Dunino and Kingsbarns, supported by two deputy headteachers. This link is enabling children from all three schools to join together for weekly sessions at Canongate Primary School. In addition, children from Dunino and Kingsbarns also join for physical education. Children from Dunino do not see the need to close their school for them to engage with larger groups as they already have these experiences. They think that the journey to Kingsbarns is too far on account of the distance from their home. They consider that the route identified by the council is not safe in winter as the road is prone to ice and flooding.

2.3 Children at Kingsbarns are keen to welcome children from Dunino. They want more children of their own age to play with and also to re-establish two classes.

They understood why Dunino children do not want their school to close, including the journey to Kingsbarns along a narrow road.

2.4 All parents of children who currently attend Dunino Primary School strongly oppose the proposal to close the school. Those who completed an online petition are also against the proposal. All parents from Dunino are of the view that the consultation process was not followed correctly and that there are inaccuracies in the proposal document, in particular financial projections and pupil roll projections at Kingsbarns. They 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 being met well. They report that the new management arrangements allow their children to experience learning in a larger establishment through their links with Canongate. They also felt strongly that they would have preferred the public meeting to close Dunino to be held at Dunino Primary School rather than at Kingsbarns Primary School. They feel their views have not been listened to, and that the council has not considered fully the implications for children and families travelling safely to and from Kingsbarns Primary School. They do not feel that the council has considered fully the viability of other alternatives to the proposal or the likely impact of the school's closure on the local community. They feel if the school was to close they would prefer if the catchment was rezoned to St Andrews and Anstruther. Parents reported that if the school were to close they would seek alternatives to Kingsbarns Primary School for their children. Parents feel the proposal makes no mention about the future of the nursery which has been mothballed in recent years. They consider that the proposal takes no account that all children at Dunino stay within the Dunino catchment area. They are of the view that the timing of the proposal is too short and that, if the school were to close, August 2014 would be too soon to make alternative arrangements. Parents do not feel that they have had a proper response from Fife Council. There is a strong sense of concern for long-term sustainability of the area and community of Dunino should the school be closed.

2.5 Parents from Kingsbarns Primary School feel very well informed by the council. Overall, they are positive about and agree with the proposal to close Dunino. They consider that Kingsbarns Primary School is welcoming and that their community would benefit from the proposal. Parents report that current interim management arrangements, including links to Canongate Primary School are leading to better access to facilities and more teachers for their children. Overall, parents would like to see Dunino children come to Kingsbarns Primary School and ensure that the transition is as smooth as possible. They see the benefits of returning to a two class school. Parents are also unclear about the nursery provision at Kingsbarns Primary School as it is currently mothballed. They feel that the council needs to address the road conditions of Station Road in order to better address pupils' safety, particularly during inclement weather.

2.6 Teaching and support staff at Dunino Primary School have mixed views about the proposal to close the school. A few feel that they provide quality education for children in the school and meet the individual needs of learners very well. Others consider that the school cannot provide the broad range of experiences within the school. They feel that preparing children for moving to Kingsbarns Primary School would be very challenging given the short timescales within the proposal. Teaching

and support staff at Kingsbarns Primary School are positive about the proposal to close Dunino Primary School and to rezone the catchment area to Kingsbarns. They feel they provide good quality education for children and meet the individual needs of learners very well. They recognise how staff at Dunino Primary School must feel about the proposal to close the school and to rezone the catchment area to that of Kingsbarns Primary School. Staff at both schools had not met officially with Fife Council officers as part of this consultation activity nor had they seen the proposal documentation, including the educational benefits statement which had been sent to both schools as part of this consultation process. A few knew that they could express their individual views through the online survey. Staff from both schools do not feel that the future management arrangements had been clearly set out in the proposal.

3. Educational aspects of the proposal

3.1 Ten children currently attend Dunino Primary School. The school roll projections for the next five years show numbers of approximately 12 pupils. Children of nursery school age who live in Dunino are currently offered places in St Andrews Nursery which is approximately five miles from Dunino Primary School. The shared nursery between Dunino and Kingsbarns has been mothballed in recent years. This proposal does not make reference to the future of nursery provision at Kingsbarns Primary School. A shared headship between Dunino Primary School and Kingsbarns Primary School has been in place for a number of years. The current interim arrangements, in place till June 2015, requires the headteacher of Canongate Primary School in St Andrews to also manage Dunino and Kingsbarns Primary Schools. She has undertaken this role since January 2013.

3.2 Kingsbarns Primary School is located approximately 4.7 miles from Dunino Primary School via a country route called Station Road. The better road is around nine miles from Dunino Primary School. The Kingsbarns Primary School roll is currently 18 and school information shows it is predicted to be 14 in August 2014. This is not consistent with the information contained in the proposal document. Accommodation at Kingsbarns Primary School is more spacious than Dunino Primary School with two good-sized classrooms and a multi-purpose area. If children from Dunino Primary School were to transfer to Kingsbarns Primary School in August 2014, children could be accommodated within the two current class arrangements, and would establish provision for all teaching staff from both schools. Facilities for staff are much better at Kingsbarns Primary School, including a larger staffroom and office facility.

3.3 At times, children's experiences in Dunino Primary School are limited by a lack of facilities, resources and teaching expertise. The council's proposals set out a number of potential benefits of providing education in a larger school setting. These relate to more opportunities to learn and play in larger groups and extended social interaction with more children of the same age. Children from Dunino Primary School already benefit from such experiences through current arrangements to join with children at both Canongate and Kingsbarns Primary Schools. However, valuable time for learning is lost due to travelling arrangements.

3.4 HM Inspectors' report of April 2011 stated that overall, Dunino Primary School provided good educational experiences for children. The report on Kingsbarns Primary School which was published at the same time also reported good educational provision. Children from Dunino currently travel by bus with children from Kingsbarns to St Andrews for physical education. This situation would remain the same if the proposal was agreed. Time would be saved by the bus leaving from one location, thus increasing time for learning.

3.5 The council has presented 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. However, parents of children at Dunino Primary School are of the view that the financial information and roll projections are flawed and inaccurate. The council needs to have further discussion with parents and continue to be transparent in both these aspects.

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 proposes to close Dunino Primary School and rezone the catchment area for Kingsbarns Primary School to incorporate the current Dunino Primary School catchment area. In taking forward the proposal, the council needs to set out clearly its reasons for rejecting the viability of other options to Anstruther or St Andrews. The council does state that if the proposal is agreed then the council would be willing to look at a school in St Andrews as an alternative.

3.8 Dunino Primary School is a secure building with adequate 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 a local hall. The council has not yet specified future plans for the building should the closure go ahead. In taking forward its proposal, the council needs to set out more clearly its future plans for the community, including an 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 Dunino Primary School catchment area to attend Kingsbarns Primary School. It is anticipated that journeys made to Kingsbarns Primary School by staff and other visiting professionals would not be significantly

different from those at present. However, parents have reasonable concerns about transport arrangements between Dunino and Kingsbarns and implications for their children's safety. The route, which is 4.7 miles between Dunino and Kingsbarns, is narrow and prone to ice and flooding. It is currently not gritted in poor weather. There is mud on the road near Kingsbarns Primary School due to housing developments and larger vehicles coming and going. This adds to the road conditions and children's safety. The alternative and safer route is around ten miles. The council needs to address these issues in its final consultation report.

3.10 Dunino and Kingsbarns Primary Schools are in Madras College Cluster in St Andrews. Arrangements remain unchanged for accessing secondary education.

4 Summary

4.1 The proposal from Fife Council to close Dunino Primary School and rezone the catchment area of Kingsbarns Primary School with effect from August 2014, offers some educational benefits to 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 closing Dunino Primary School and sending children to Kingsbarns Primary School, thus providing a school with more viable numbers. These relate to increased experiences to learn and play in larger groups and extended social interaction with more children of the same age. Children would continue to benefit from existing links with Canongate Primary School and through a broader range of teacher learning community.

4.2 Given the opposition to the proposal, 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 their concerns and ensure effective transitions for children from Dunino Primary School to Kingsbarns Primary School. Furthermore, the council needs to ensure that it has fully explored the viability of alternatives to the closure of Dunino Primary School and the options for rezoning the related catchment areas. It also needs to ensure it considers fully the impact of the closure of the school on the community in the Dunino area. It also needs to address parental concerns about the accuracy of the financial case set out in the proposal. Whilst the arrangements for transporting children to and from Dunino to Kingsbarns Primary School are detailed within the council's proposal paper, the council needs to ensure it considers fully the safe travel of all users particularly with regard to the narrow route along Station Road. The council also needs to continue to consult with parents, children and staff of both schools on the long-term management and staffing arrangements in the school. The proposal does not make it clear that the mothballed nursery provision in both Dunino and Kingsbarns Primary Schools is to be closed. The council now needs to address this and consult more fully with stakeholders on this aspect of the proposal.