

Consultation proposal by Fife Council

Report by Education Scotland, addressing educational aspects of the proposal to close New Gilston Primary School and rezone the catchment area of Largoward 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 New Gilston Primary School and rezone the catchment area of Largoward 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:

- 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
- a visit to Largoward Primary School, including meetings with consultees and a visit to New Gilston Primary School to view the site and the internal condition of the building.

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 New Gilston 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 Children who attend Largoward Primary School currently include children who formerly attended New Gilston Primary School. A number have already formally transferred from New Gilston to Largoward. There are no children currently attending New Gilston Primary School and it has been 'mothballed'. All children interviewed expressed positive views of the proposal. The New Gilston children felt they had better opportunities in Largoward Primary to make friends in general and with peers, including peers of the same gender. The older children felt it allowed them better opportunities to develop a peer group that would be supportive when moving into secondary school. As they had been attending Largoward since 2012, they felt they were receiving a better education due to increased opportunities and greater staffing stability. Some of the children who live in New Gilston were disappointed that they now travelled to school by taxi as they had enjoyed walking to their local school. The New Gilston children were concerned about the uncertainty over what will happen to the play park next to their old school and to the school playground which they enjoy using out of school.

2.3 Parents of children who had been attending New Gilston Primary and those of children who had always attended Largoward Primary support the proposal. They all felt the children were gaining from being part of a bigger and wider-ranging group. Parents of children from New Gilston understood the need for the council to rationalise their commitments to gain best value for council tax payers. A few would have preferred the council to try to keep New Gilston open as their local school but recognised that this was unrealistic given the decline in the school roll and difficulties in staffing the school. All parents felt it helped secure the long-term future of Largoward Primary School for their children and future families in both communities.

2.4 Staff strongly support the proposal. The staff team in Largoward Primary School comprises of some staff who have moved to Largoward Primary from New Gilston and some who worked between the two schools in the past as well as existing Largoward staff. Staff were unanimous that the children were benefitting from having more children to work and develop relationships with. Staff who knew the children in New Gilston felt they seemed happier now that they were settled into Largoward Primary. They felt the children were now enjoying a wider range of educational opportunities and a more stable learning environment. Staff also felt they were benefitting professionally from working regularly with a larger group of colleagues.

3. Educational aspects of the proposal

3.1 Given that all children attending New Gilston Primary School were relocated to other local schools of their choice in 2012 and that the majority chose to relocate to Largoward Primary, there has been a significant period of time elapsed in which to test Fife Council's proposal for the future of New Gilston and the local area's schooling.

3.2 New Gilston children had been spending a considerable amount of time in Largoward Primary each week prior to 2012, in part due to the appointment of a joint headteacher for the two schools, and were already well aware of the journey, building and staff. Settling into their new learning environment will not now be an issue.

3.3 The proposition put forward by Fife Council that children will benefit from learning in more age appropriate groups, be more able to participate in group and team activities and have more opportunities to develop their social skills is confirmed by the children themselves. They have access to a wider range of experiences and this will continue should the proposal be approved. All children are eligible for free transport to Largoward Primary from New Gilston and this does not impact significantly on the length of their day or on teaching time in school. Severe weather impacts on all children to some extent and not just New Gilston children.

3.4 Securing the long-term viability of Largoward Primary through the closure of New Gilston Primary provides more certainty about stable local education into the future for families and their children. The arrangements for nursery provision are not affected by the proposal so transition from nursery into primary will continue as before. Future entrants into Largoward Primary from New Gilston will have the same

transition experiences as before. Arrangements for transition to Madras College are also unaffected.

3.5 Projections for school roll for the combined schools suggest that there will be ample spare capacity for potential families moving into the Largoward/New Gilston area to enrol in Largoward Primary as their local school should the proposal be taken forward.

3.6 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. The council's proposal that removing uncertainty surrounding New Gilston Primary's future and confirming the long-term future for Largoward Primary will provide a sustainable future for rural education in East Fife is sound. The alternative of keeping both schools open would not secure the future of either school. The arrangements and cost of transporting a small number of children the short distance between New Gilston and Largoward are acceptable in the context of securing rural education in the area and making significant savings overall from closure and rezoning. There were no users of the school out of hours and there is an existing village hall in New Gilston so community activity will be unaffected.

3.7 There is concern in New Gilston regarding the intended future use of the school building and playground which is on a separate site. There is also uncertainty over the status and ownership of the playing field and play park adjacent to the school which are popular with families for leisure use. Fife Council needs to provide further reassurance to the New Gilston community regarding the school site, playground and surrounding area.

4. Summary

Fife Council makes a strong case for the closure of New Gilston Primary School and for rezoning the Largoward Primary catchment area. The proposal substantiates the *de facto* position which has been successful and effective. In the time since New Gilston was 'mothballed', the proposed benefits for children have begun to be realised in practice. These include access for the children to a wider group of children and peers as well as a broader range of learning opportunities. The expected savings support this proposal as a best value option for Fife Council. The proposal appears to have almost unanimous support across both communities as it will secure sustainable local rural education for this part of Fife. For the villagers of New Gilston, Fife Council now needs to provide further assurance regarding the future use of the school building and playground as well as clarifying the ownership and future plans for the nearby play park and playing field.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
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