

## **Consultation proposal by Fife Council**

**Report by Education Scotland, addressing educational aspects of the proposal to:**

- **close Pitcorthie Primary School in August 2015 and to rezone the catchment areas of Lynburn Primary School, Commercial Primary School and Touch Primary School;**
- **close Pitcorthie Primary School Nursery Stage if Pitcorthie Primary School is closed; and**
- **transfer the Primary Behaviour Support Service provision currently based within Lynburn Primary School building, to Camdean Primary School building.**

### **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 Pitcorthie Primary School and to rezone the catchment areas of Lynburn Primary School, Commercial Primary School and Touch Primary School, close Pitcorthie Primary School Nursery Stage if Pitcorthie Primary School is closed, transfer the Primary Behaviour Support Service provision currently based within Lynburn Primary School building, to Camdean Primary School building.

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 27 November 2013 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;
- consideration of further information provided by Fife Council and from the Save Pitcorthie Primary Campaign group; and
- visits to the site of Camdean Primary School, Commercial Primary School, Lynburn Primary School, Pitcorthie Primary School and Touch 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.

## **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 The Camdean Primary School community broadly accepts the proposal to relocate the Primary Behaviour Support Service provision to their building, particularly if this triggers the significant investment in the school outlined by the council. The opportunity for children with different needs to work together is viewed positively by the school community. However, concerns remain on a number of issues. The agreed location of the provision is yet to be identified and staff, children and parents are concerned that it may mean the relocation of the current Camdean Nursery Class or impact negatively on the space available within the early years primary area and school overall. Parents are still unclear as to the size and scale of the provision. They have concerns that recent indications of renewed house building in the school's immediate vicinity, if correct, will add to pressures on space within the school building brought about by relocating the provision. The school community

does not feel that the council has kept them fully informed about the proposed arrangements for the dropping off and collection of the children attending the Primary Behaviour Support Service provision. They feel that additional traffic may increase congestion and parking around the school at key times of the day which is already a school community concern. The community understands, however, that discussion and agreement would follow any final decision regarding the full set of proposals.

2.3 Staff from the Primary Behaviour Support Service provision currently located in Lynburn Primary, support relocating to a more appropriate setting. However, they are concerned that any identified site should be able to provide a full and safe education for children who are challenging to manage and can, at times, take flight. They do not yet have a clear understanding of how their provision would be located to ensure children's safety as the Camdean site is very open compared to their current site.

2.4 The community at Commercial Primary School broadly accepts the proposal to rezone a section of Pitcorthie Primary's catchment for their school. There is confidence that the positive experience gained from integrating children from Blacklaw Primary when it closed would be used well. Parents and staff, however, feel that they are still unclear as to the number of children and families who would be rezoned. This makes supporting the proposal difficult for them. Many are worried about general over-crowding and increased class sizes. There is also a current on-going concern regarding traffic congestion around the school and its impact on children's safety in walking to and from school. Parents have not been reassured about traffic management by the information provided within the consultation period. This should be considered further by the council.

2.5 The community at Lynburn Primary are positive overall about the proposals. They feel they can draw on their positive experience of welcoming new children and families into the school following the closure of Blacklaw Primary. Children at Lynburn are very supportive of the proposal and excited at having the opportunity to form new friendships and of taking responsibility for welcoming new children and their families. The school believes that the proposed investment in the school would support the integration of the new children and the further development of learning and teaching at Lynburn Primary. There is concern about a lack of information about the size of the proposed cohort of new families who will be rezoned and the subsequent impact on class sizes and general space, even with the relocation of the Primary Behaviour Support Service provision. The proposed new nursery is warmly welcomed but parents and staff feel they do not yet have enough information on location and design to be fully supportive. It is understood, however, that such information will follow any decision on the full set of proposals.

2.6 Parents, children and staff at Pitcorthie Primary strongly reject the proposal to close their school. There is general concern among the school community that the consultation period followed a significant period of media speculation surrounding the proposed closure. This, they believe, has impacted negatively on children, causing anxiety and uncertainty in many cases. Families are finding it difficult to make key decisions such as nursery enrolment and this is causing distress to some. Parents do not feel the educational benefits put forward by Fife Council or their arguments regarding managing surplus primary school places and the state of the

school building are strong enough to justify the proposed closure. Parents do not feel the council has provided robust evidence for their case that the building is unfit for long-term use. They do not believe the council has provided accurate enough information about projected numbers for house building, births and family sizes within the catchment and surrounding areas. They do not believe the council has taken account of the impact of the increasing size of social housing households within the area as a result of the UK Government welfare reforms. Many Pitcorthie Primary parents believe that the council has not yet provided them with all available information to consider fully the case for closure based on surplus places and the state of the school building.

2.7 The community at Touch Primary broadly accepts the council's proposal to rezone part of Lynburn Primary's catchment area to their catchment. Parents feel they are not yet clear about the number of children and families who would join their school and would appreciate further information before committing their support. They are concerned about the impact on class sizes and pupil-teacher ratios resulting from any rezoning.

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

3.1 Within the current proposal, Fife Council does not set out clearly how closing Pitcorthie Primary School and rezoning children to Commercial Primary or Lynburn Primary will be of direct educational benefit to the children who currently attend Pitcorthie Primary School. In the absence of evidence from the council, HM Inspectors considered inspection reports on Pitcorthie, Lynburn and Commercial Primary Schools that have been published since 2010. These reports do not provide clear evidence for the educational benefit of the proposal to close Pitcorthie Primary School for the children directly affected by it. In finalising the proposal, the council needs to set out more clearly how implementation of the proposal will improve the quality of the experiences and outcomes for children who currently attend Pitcorthie Primary School.

3.2 Fife Council has undertaken a strategic review of the school estate. The council estimates there are currently over 11,000 surplus places in the school estate. The proposal to close Pitcorthie Primary School is set within the context of that review. The council's policy is that all schools should be rated at A or B for both condition and suitability. The council currently rates Pitcorthie Primary School at C for its condition and B for its suitability. The council claims that the structural condition of Pitcorthie Primary School will require it to close at some point in the near future. This is disputed by parents. The policy also states that a school should have an occupancy rate greater than 60% and that, to ensure equity of provision, schools should operate with an optimal efficiency of 80 – 100% capacity. Within the proposal, Fife Council claims that Pitcorthie School is currently at 78% capacity. This is disputed by parents because they claim this is not the figure for the school's capacity currently registered with Scottish Government. The proposal also indicates that the school roll has increased steadily since 2007, largely due to placing requests to attend the school from parents of children who live outside the school's catchment area. The proposal indicates that 32% of children on the current roll are from outwith the school's catchment area. The council projects that the school roll will fall by 2020 and that the school will be at 72% capacity by this date. It is not clear from the

proposal how these projections are calculated. The council claims that implementation of the proposal will enable it to make more efficient use of its resources and help it secure best value. The council needs to set out more clearly, transparently and convincingly the financial case for the closure and the overall educational benefit implementation of the proposal to close Pitcorthie Primary School will achieve.

3.3 If the proposal to close Pitcorthie Primary School is implemented, children in Commercial, Camdean, Lynburn and Touch Primary Schools will benefit from substantial planned investment, including significant improvement in access to wifi services and resources for learning and teaching. The proposed replacement nursery for Lynburn Primary will provide the opportunity to design a learning environment built with Curriculum for Excellence at its heart. These investments will improve the environment for learning at these schools and have the potential to be of educational benefit to the children at the schools. If taken forward, these improvements would also have the potential to benefit children from Pitcorthie Primary who, if the proposal is implemented, would become pupils in the receiving schools beyond August 2015. However, the number of children moving into any of the proposed receiving schools is unclear and so it is difficult to assess fully from the current proposal how buildings will be reconfigured to add educational value. In certain schools, there is concern that they may lose some flexible learning spaces and curriculum opportunities may be more restricted than at present.

3.4 A number of Pitcorthie children will be rezoned for Commercial Primary. This will also mean that they will be zoned to transfer to Dunfermline High School and not Woodmill as is the current arrangement. Commercial Primary has well established transition arrangements with both high schools. However, affected parents should be made fully aware of this change in entitlement to avoid confusion and uncertainty.

3.5 Both proposed receiving schools for Pitcorthie children feel confident that having successfully integrated substantial numbers of children when Blacklaw Primary closed that they will be well placed to plan, manage and implement integration programmes should the proposal to close Pitcorthie be approved.

3.6 The proposal to transfer the Primary Behaviour Support Service into the proposed Camdean setting is of educational benefit. However, the council will need to plan and manage such a move carefully given the vulnerable nature of the children involved who find change unsettling and disruptive.

3.7 The council states it will seek advice and support for minimising risks arising from their proposals. They specifically mention traffic management plans. The council has provided useful information on transport arrangements with regard to the provision of free transport. However, it has not yet provided enough reassurance to families affected by these proposals regarding traffic management and safe routes to school. Some of the proposed receiving schools already experience significant traffic congestion at key points in the school day and have identified risks on key routes when walking to school. The council has not yet provided sufficient information to the families affected on how they will manage the increased numbers of cars and pedestrians implied by their proposals.

## **4. Summary**

4.1 Fife Council has set out its proposals at length. However, the proposal focuses more on planning for change rather than on the specific educational benefits of the proposal. In taking forward the proposal, the council needs to set out clearly how implementation of the proposal will improve the quality of the experiences and outcomes for children who currently attend Pitcorthie Primary School. If the proposal is implemented, children in Commercial, Camdean, Lynburn and Touch Primary Schools will benefit from substantial planned investments that have the potential to improve the environment for learning at these schools and be of educational benefit to the children at the schools, including those from Pitcorthie Primary who may move to these schools if the proposal is implemented. However, given that the number of children who will move into any of the proposed receiving schools is unclear, it is difficult to assess fully from the current proposal how buildings will be reconfigured to add educational value. The council needs to provide more detail to parents of children at the schools affected by this about the potential impact of these arrangements. If the proposal is implemented, the council will need to ensure that it plans and implements effective transitional arrangements.

4.2 The proposal to transfer the Primary Behaviour Support Service into the proposed Camdean setting is of educational benefit. In taking forward the proposal, the council will need to ensure that it plans and manages carefully the transition for children affected by the proposal given the vulnerable nature of the children involved.

4.3 There is significant opposition to the proposal from the Pitcorthie community. Those opposed to the proposal contend that the council's case rests on assumptions regarding the condition of the building and its long-term future. In finalising the proposal, the council needs to provide further reassurance to parents and others about its reasons for rejecting the long-term viability of keeping Pitcorthie Primary School open. It also needs to provide further reassurance about the accuracy of their demographic projections, including the claimed capacity of Pitcorthie Primary School as set out in the proposal compared with the capacity currently registered with Scottish Government. Parents believe that the council has not provided robust demographic information to justify their contention that significant surplus primary places exist and need to be attended to in order to secure best value. Overall, the council needs to set out more clearly, transparently and convincingly the financial case for the closure and the overall educational benefit implementation of the proposal will achieve, particularly for those children who currently attend Pitcorthie Primary School.

**HM Inspectors  
Education Scotland  
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