

Consultation proposal by Fife Council

Report by Education Scotland, addressing educational aspects of the proposal to close Rathillet Primary School and to rezone the catchment area of Balmerino 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 Rathillet Primary School and to rezone the catchment area of Balmerino Primary School. Rathillet Primary School building is currently mothballed and has been since June 2010. There are currently no pupils on the school roll.

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 sites of Rathillet and Balmerino 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; 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 Despite the school not being on a list of rural schools, it would be classified as a rural school if there were any pupils on the school roll. Therefore, 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 Rathillet 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 The council consulted with stakeholders on its proposal. Stakeholders were invited to attend a public meeting on 28 September 2013. Notices were placed in local newspapers, libraries and local council offices. In addition, Balmerino Primary School publicised the consultation process within school newsletters and through texts to parents. The proposal paper was made available at Balmerino Primary School, St Andrews local office in St Andrews, Fife House in Glenrothes, the Fife Council Education and Learning Directorate Headquarters, Rothesay House, Glenrothes and was available on the Fife Council website. Stakeholders who met with HM Inspectors were generally satisfied with the consultation process. However, staff who had originally been at Rathillet were of the view that the decision had been made when the school was closed in 2010 when it was mothballed. Staff had not met officially with Fife Council officers as part of this consultation activity. Officers from Education and Learning Directorate recognised this gap and are putting in place arrangements to share officially their proposals, including the educational benefits with staff. Other stakeholders, including pupils who resided within both the

Rathillet and Balmerino catchment areas were consulted, as was the chairperson of Balmerino Parent Council.

2.3 No member of the general public attended the public meeting. However, the chair of the parent council reported that there had been discussion at parent council meetings and that, overall, parents saw this as a natural next step in the process since Rathillet Primary School had been mothballed. It was reported that bringing both schools together had resulted in significant benefits for both groups of learners. A few parents, despite reporting that they were happy with the quality of education which their children received at Balmerino Primary School, viewed the proposal document as not presenting a fully informed case for closing Rathillet. They also considered that the journey to school in a bus was long for children residing further away.

2.4 Almost all children who had been consulted were very positive about the proposal. Children who had previously attended Rathillet welcomed the opportunity to have more friends and more children with whom to learn. They welcomed the plans to have improved information and communications technology (ICT) and enhanced out-of-hours activities which they could attend. Children within the Balmerino catchment area liked having children from Rathillet at the school. All children from both catchments reported that they liked being at Balmerino Primary School and that they enjoyed their learning. Those from the Rathillet catchment area did not want the school to close as they had also enjoyed learning there. However, if given the choice they also reported that they would want to move Balmerino Primary School nearer to where they stayed. They considered that they had to spend lengthy periods on the bus. They did, however, like Balmerino Primary School and also all the outdoor learning which took place. Almost all children, on account of Rathillet Primary School being mothballed three years ago, were positive about the proposal.

2.5 Staff who met with HM Inspectors were, overall, in favour of the proposal. Staff who had originally been at Rathillet Primary School were of the view that the decision to close the school was made in 2010 when it was mothballed. They felt the decision to mothball the school had been made very quickly and without their views being gathered. They did recall some discussion with them at the point where parents were making placing requests for Balmerino Primary School in 2010. The consequence of this was that staff were informed that, for continuity, transfer to Balmerino Primary School was in the best interests of the then Rathillet pupils. Staff who had originally been at Rathillet Primary School considered that this proposal was just a formality in order to now officially close the school. However, staff who had originally been at Rathillet Primary School, reported that they would not want to go back there. They felt that despite initial concerns over the management of the mothballing, they enjoyed working and taking forward children's learning in Balmerino Primary School. Staff who had originally been at Balmerino Primary School considered that they had benefitted greatly from Rathillet Primary School being mothballed. For example, in terms of increased resources and new developments being taken forward by the headteacher who had also been headteacher at Rathillet Primary School. Staff 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 the school as part of this consultation process.

2.6 Overall, parents were positive about the proposal. They felt that the mothballing had resulted in enhanced learning opportunities for their children. However, they also expressed the view strongly that Rathillet Primary School had offered high quality education to their children. A few were disappointed that their children had a longer distance to travel to school. A few parents did not want Rathillet Primary School to close and did not feel that the proposal document provided sufficient information to support the closure recommendation.

2.7 No members of the wider community attended the public meeting.

3. Educational aspects of the proposal

3.1 The proposal by Fife Council to close Rathillet Primary School and to rezone the catchment area of Balmerino Primary School would continue to offer significant educational benefits for children.

3.2 The school buildings at Rathillet are now in a poor state of repair due to neglect. Access to some areas within the school would cause challenges for children in the catchment area who have limited mobility. Limited sports facilities also serve as a dining area located outwith the main building. ICT within the buildings is also limited.

3.3 The proposal would allow children to continue to engage with more pupils within their own age range. There would also be continuing increased opportunities to engage in more team and group activities. The learning environment for children and young people would continue to be improved by the council's proposal. The proposal offers continuing nursery and primary provision within the same school. Combining school resources and staff have already enhanced children's learning since 2010 through sharing of resources but also in developing the skills and expertise of staff. The proposal would also provide additional improvements, including better access to ICT. Children from both catchments will continue to benefit from enhanced outdoor learning and increased opportunities to participate in a variety of clubs. The location of the school offers greater opportunities for community engagement. The Rathillet community is a hamlet with the pupil population spread across a wider area. Currently, no changes to secondary school catchment areas are proposed in the context of the Admissions Policy of Fife Council. Parents will be consulted over any future changes to these arrangements. Overall, the proposal would continue to bring educational benefits for children and the wider community.

3.4 The proposal has the potential to contribute to the council's efforts in securing best value within the context of school capacity in the council's school estate. As a result, the council may be able to make more efficient and equitable use of its resources to the benefit of children and young people throughout the council area.

3.5 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 a number of other considerations. The council has considered the viability of alternative arrangements. In the three years since the council mothballed Rathillet Primary School there has been no evidence of an upturn in the school population and based on the school projections in this part of north east Fife, it is unlikely that the school roll will increase to a viable level. Over the past year, there has been no community use of the school building. The proposal points to a positive impact on the local community surrounding Balmerino Primary School, including the village shop. Children within the Rathillet catchment area who attend Balmerino Primary School will continue to be provided with appropriate school transport. The Education and Learning Service has clear procedures for the transportation and accommodation of children in severe weather.

4. Summary

4.1 Children currently residing in the Rathillet catchment area have attended Balmerino Primary School since 2010 due to mothballing arrangements. The proposal from Fife Council to close Rathillet Primary School formally and rezone the catchment area to Balmerino Primary School will offer continued benefits to children directly affected by the proposal. Children will continue to have increased opportunities for learning together and for social interaction with others of similar ages. They will also have improved access to learning when outdoors and through increased and better ICT facilities. Children are currently well supported in moving from nursery into P1 and transition arrangements have the potential to be improved further with this proposal. Children would also continue to benefit from improved learning opportunities within a spacious, fit for purpose learning environment.

4.2 The council has consulted with a range of stakeholders. A few parents have concerns about the proposal document and the reasons for closure of Rathillet Primary School. All children enjoy their learning at Balmerino Primary School and recognise the advantages of the catchment areas coming together through rezoning the Balmerino catchment. Children who reside within the Rathillet catchment area do not want the school to close, whilst at the same time they want to stay at Balmerino Primary School. A few stakeholders, including children, commented on the amount of time spent on the bus coming from and going to the school. Education staff recognise the need to have further discussions with staff. Former staff from Rathillet Primary School do not feel that they were consulted on the mothballing of the school or that they have been consulted on the proposal to close the school. The council needs to continue to work with all stakeholders to resolve these issues.