

## **Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by The Highland Council to close Altnaharra Primary School.**

### **1. Introduction**

1.1 This report from Education Scotland has been prepared by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education (HM Inspectors) in accordance with the terms of the [Schools \(Consultation\) \(Scotland\) Act 2010 \("the 2010 Act"\)](#). The purpose of the report is to provide an independent and impartial consideration of The Highland Council's proposal to close Altnaharra Primary School and divide its catchment area between the catchments of Tongue Primary School, Farr Primary School and Lairg Primary School. Section 2 of the report sets out brief details of the consultation process. Section 3 of the report sets out HM Inspectors' consideration of the educational aspects of the proposal, including significant 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, in finalising the proposal, it has reviewed the initial proposal, including a summary of points raised during the consultation process and the council's response to them. The council has to publish its final consultation report three weeks before it takes its final decision. Where a council is proposing to close a school, it needs to follow all statutory obligations set out in the 2010 Act, including notifying Ministers within six working days of making its final decision and explaining to consultees the opportunity they have to make representations to Ministers and the special provisions that apply to proposals to close a rural school.

#### 1.2 HM Inspectors considered:

- the likely effects of the proposal for children and young people of the schools affected; 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
- the educational benefits the council believes will result from implementation of the proposal, and the council's reasons for coming to these beliefs.

#### 1.3 In preparing this report, HM Inspectors undertook the following activities:

- 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 Altnaharra Primary School, Tongue Primary School, Farr Primary School, Farr High School and Lairg Primary School, including discussion with relevant consultees.

1.4 As the proposal will lead to the closure of a rural school, HM Inspectors also took account of the council's consideration of any reasonable alternatives to closure of Altnaharra Primary School, the likely effect on the local community and the likely effect of any different travelling arrangements of the proposed closure.

## **2. Consultation Process**

2.1 The Highland Council undertook the consultation on its proposal(s) with reference to the [Schools \(Consultation\) \(Scotland\) Act 2010](#).

2.2 The Highland Council proposes to discontinue education provision at Altnaharra Primary School and divide the catchment area between the catchments of Tongue Primary School, Farr Primary School and Lairg Primary School. The proposal will also result in an alternation to the catchment boundary between Farr High School and Golspie High School. The council undertook the consultation between 27 August and 26 October 2018. Consultees were notified of the proposal and a notice was placed in a local newspaper. Children in the affected primary schools were provided with an opportunity to discuss the proposal and provide their views. A public meeting held at Altnaharra Primary School on 10 October 2018 was attended by 13 members of the public. The council received five written responses of which three supported and two opposed the proposal.

## **3. Educational Aspects of Proposal**

3.1 The Highland Council's proposal to close Altnaharra Primary School has the potential to be of educational benefit. Altnaharra Primary School has been mothballed since February 2017. At present, there is only one primary school aged child living in the catchment area of the school who currently attends Tongue Primary School. There are no pre-school children and school roll forecasting indicates that there will be no additional pupils in the area in the foreseeable future. Children attending Tongue Primary School, Farr Primary School and Lairg Primary School benefit from learning and participating with their peers. They would be able to take part in more group learning and skills development experiences and have access to a broad range of cultural, sports and social opportunities. The Highland Council has reasonably concluded that, as the school roll shows no signs of increasing, those opportunities would not be available to the same extent at Altnaharra Primary School. The council's proposal to divide the catchment area of Altnaharra Primary School amongst Tongue Primary School, Farr Primary School and Lairg Primary School arises from discussion with the local community. It has the potential to be of benefit by reducing travel times for families who could move into the local area in future.

3.2 Parents, staff, children and young people who spoke with HM Inspectors supported the council's proposal. Whilst they regretted the loss of the school, they could see no reasonable prospect for re-opening Altnaharra Primary School. Those children and young people who had attended Altnaharra in the past recalled feeling

socially isolated from time to time and reported that they valued the contact they have with their peers in a larger school. Stakeholders support the council's proposal to divide the catchment area of Altnaharra Primary School amongst Tongue Primary School, Farr Primary School and Lairg Primary School as this would reduce travel times to school for families who might move into the area in future.

3.3 Stakeholders had some concerns over travelling arrangements, particularly in the winter months when they felt that a 4X4 vehicle might be required. The distances involved in travelling to each of the three alternative schools range from 16 to 24 miles on single track roads with journey times of between 30 and 50 minutes. Journey times could take longer in adverse winter conditions. The council will need to consider stakeholders views on suitable transport arrangements in its final report.

3.4 As the proposal will lead to the closure of a rural school, HM Inspectors also took account of the council's consideration of the factors to which it should have special regard.

3.5 The council considered alternatives to closure of Altnaharra Primary School. It reasonably concluded that re-opening the school with its current catchment was not a viable option. The option of extending its catchment was considered but this would have a negative impact on travel distances for pupils currently attending the other schools. This would not increase the roll of Altnaharra Primary School to a viable number. The council considered the option of continued mothballing but concluded that, as there appears to be no prospect of the pupil roll at Altnaharra Primary School returning to a viable number, this was not a reasonable option.

3.6 The council considered the effect of its proposal on the local community and indicated that it would be prepared to work with the local community to consider community use of the school building. Stakeholders who spoke with HM Inspectors felt that the closure of the school could make it even more difficult to attract new families to live and work in the area. They hoped that the building could be used by the local community under Community Asset Transfer arrangements. An Altnaharra Community Trust has recently been formed and has begun to formulate proposals for the use of significant levels of funding arising from a local windfarm development. Their proposals include potential alternative uses for the school building some of which could result in local employment opportunities. The council will need to consider the community's aspirations and outline in its final report how it will engage with Altnaharra Community Trust to support local developments including community use of the school building.

#### **4. Summary**

The Highland Council's proposal to close Altnaharra Primary School and divide its catchment between other schools has the potential to be of educational benefit. Children would benefit from learning and socialising with their peers in schools with viable rolls. The council will need to consider stakeholders views on school transport arrangements in its final report. The council will also need to outline in its final report

how it will engage with the local community and the Altnaharra Community Trust on future community use of the school building and associated development plans for the area.

**HM Inspectors  
Education Scotland  
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