

# **Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by The Highland Council to discontinue the provision of education at the Black Isle Education Centre.**

## **1. Introduction**

1.1 This report from Education Scotland has been prepared by HM Inspectors in accordance with the terms of the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010* and the amendments contained in the *Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014*. The purpose of the report is to provide an independent and impartial consideration of The Highland Council's proposal to discontinue the provision of education at the Black Isle Education Centre. 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 legislative 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.

### 1.2 HM Inspectors considered:

- the likely effects of the proposal for children and young people of the centre; any other users; 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:

- attendance at the public meeting held on 29 June 2016 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; and

- visits to the sites of the Black Isle Education Centre, Inverness Royal Academy and Nairn Academy, including discussion with relevant consultees. Telephone conversations were held with the headteachers or their representatives of all the other schools from which pupils accessed provision at Black Isle Education Centre.

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 the Black Isle Education Centre, 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* and the amendments in the *Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014*.

2.2 The consultation took place between 30 May 2016 and 24 August 2016. The consultation document was published on the council's website and copies were sent to statutory consultees. A public meeting held on 29 June 2016 at the Black Isle Education Centre was attended by six members of the public and five members of staff. Five written responses to the consultation were submitted, three of which opposed the proposed closure on the grounds that closure would impact negatively on young people with additional support needs. The response from Fortrose and Rosemarkie Community Council agreed with the proposal to close the Black Isle Education Centre as a school but urged the continued provision of education at the centre through its operation as an outreach service.

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

3.1 The Black Isle Education Centre is a rural school serving children and young people with social emotional and behavioural needs. It is located near Raddery in the Black Isle. The centre has been operating an outreach service model following changes to its approach in recent years. Currently, there are no pupils on the school roll. Fourteen pupils from other schools access the services provided on a flexible basis. The accommodation at the centre, which includes a variety of buildings, is classified as poor for suitability and condition. The Highland Council provides a clear rationale for undertaking its consultation, including reference to national guidance and council policy in its Additional Support Needs Review, published in 2014. However, the educational benefits statement in the council's proposal is not sufficiently detailed nor specific on how provision will be improved as a result of its proposal. The council's proposal paper refers to a more flexible approach and enhanced local provision but does not provide details on how this will be delivered. The potential benefits to young people using the service and the wider benefits to Highland schools are not stated in sufficient detail or clarity in the council's proposal paper.

The headteacher at Black Isle Education Centre supported the proposal. He was of the view that an outreach service model with children and young people remaining on their mainstream school roll but accessing the service on a flexible basis would

result in improvement to young people's learning and wellbeing. He emphasised the development of the centre's role in supporting young people to reintegrate into mainstream settings and the changes that had been made in recent years to achieve this approach. Staff at Black Isle Education Centre who spoke with HM Inspectors supported the general principle of moving from a school based provision to an outreach service model. They were unclear on aspects of the proposal. Staff were not aware of more specific details such as where this off-site support might be located or what the specific role, if any, individual members of staff might have as a result of the proposal.

3.2 Young people who met with HM Inspectors spoke highly of their experience of the centre. They valued the environment and the individual support provided by staff. They enjoyed the outdoor learning activities including the use of the extensive woodland area for outdoor learning, in addition to mountain biking and kayaking activities. Some young people had gained sufficient skills in mountain biking to take part in national competitive events. Young people were not well informed on the details of the proposal. Some young people felt anxious and unsettled by potential changes.

3.3 Parents and staff who spoke with HM Inspectors did not feel sufficiently well informed or involved in the details of the consultation. Almost all who met with HM Inspectors felt strongly that the support provided by Black Isle Education Centre was instrumental in keeping the most vulnerable young people in an educational setting. They valued the support provided and were concerned about the lack of detail on future provision. Headteachers from those schools most distant from the Black Isle could see advantages in locating provision more locally but they were clearly of the view that there was a pressing need for the continuation of the service and that provision could not simply be replaced in a mainstream setting. They felt they should have more opportunity to be involved in discussion on the shape of future provision.

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. The council's proposal considered two alternatives. The first, to retain the centre as a school would, in the council's view, hinder the development of an improved service to pupils with social emotional and behavioural needs. The second, to operate as an outreach centre offering part-time provision for young people in the Moray Firth area would not address the accommodation issues. However, there is limited detail of the shape of future provision with which to compare the alternatives to the proposal.

3.5 There are potential benefits for children and young people through reduced travel time. The council's proposal paper states that the proposed new arrangements will eliminate the need for pupils to be transported out of their local school to attend the Black Isle Education Centre. A few young people currently travel a significant distance from their mainstream school to the Black Isle Education Centre. More locally based provision could reduce travel time and reduce transport costs.

3.6 The centre is not used by the local community. There is therefore no impact on current or future local community use from the council's proposal. There is no information in the council's proposal documents on the intended future use of the site.

#### **4. Summary**

There could be potential benefits to discontinuing the provision of education at the Black Isle Education Centre. The centre already operates an outreach service following recent changes to its approach to supporting young people. This supports inclusion and maintains young people's relationships with their mainstream school. Some of the buildings on the site are not in use and all are in a poor condition. There is the potential to improve the provision in more suitable accommodation. However, no details on alternative accommodation options are included in the proposal paper. There are significant weaknesses in the council's educational benefits statement. The educational benefits to young people with social emotional and behavioural needs are not sufficiently clear. The potential wider benefits to other schools in The Highland Council area are not stated in sufficient detail. The council will need to provide more specific detail in its final report. The council will need to clarify the specific nature of the service proposed, including, the roles of staff, the level of resource and the proposed location of the service. A clear plan is required in advance of a decision to discontinue provision. The council will need to ensure that it engages more effectively with stakeholders in taking forward its proposal and that staff, parents and young people have a voice in shaping developments.

**HM Inspectors  
Education Scotland  
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