

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by The Highland Council to discontinue education provision at Dalwhinnie Primary School and Nursery, re-assigning its catchment area to that of Newtonmore Primary School and Nursery.

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 education provision at Dalwhinnie Primary School and Nursery, re-assigning its catchment area to that of Newtonmore Primary School and Nursery. 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 Dalwhinnie Primary School and Nursery; 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:

- attendance at the public meeting held on 23 February 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 Dalwhinnie, Newtonmore and Gergask Primary Schools, 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 the closure of Dalwhinnie Primary School and Nursery, 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 with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010* and the amendments in the *Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014*.

2.2 The formal consultation ran from 1 February 2016 until 18 March 2016. The council posted the consultation document on its website. It issued copies of the document to all parents of pupils in the catchment areas of Newtonmore and Gergask Primary Schools and Nurseries and the Parent Councils of both schools. Further copies were made available to local community groups. The council made suitable arrangements to gather the views of children currently attending Newtonmore and Gergask Primary Schools about the proposal. The council placed advance notice of a public meeting in the local newspaper. The meeting on 23 February 2016 was attended by nine stakeholders who were all supportive of the proposal. Less than ten written communications were received in response to the consultation.

3. Educational Aspects of Proposal

3.1 The proposal has clear educational benefits to children and The Highland Council has the confidence of stakeholders with regard to the closure of Dalwhinnie Primary School. No children have attended Dalwhinnie Primary School since the end of session 2011-12, when the school was 'mothballed'. If the proposal goes ahead, children living in the current Dalwhinnie Primary School catchment area would receive almost all of their curriculum in the same school. Previously, they travelled between their own school and their partnership school, Newtonmore Primary School, for some of their learning. Currently, children from the Dalwhinnie Primary School catchment area attend either Gergask or Newtonmore Primary Schools. Children attending both schools would continue to have a larger group of peers with which to engage, both in and beyond the classroom. There would be continued opportunities to participate in team activities including sports and also music and drama. This would have the potential to contribute positively to children's social and emotional development. Suitable arrangements would continue to be available to support children who need additional help with their learning.

3.2 All stakeholders, including parents, children and staff who responded to the consultation and met with HM Inspectors were supportive of the aspect of the proposal relating to the closure of Dalwhinnie Primary School. Stakeholders had been kept well-informed and consulted about the proposal. All parents and children who met HM Inspectors expressed their appreciation for the benefits of learning in a larger school as afforded by Gergask and Newtonmore Primary Schools. The proposal will assist The Highland Council to make effective and efficient use of its resources by addressing capacity issues within its school estate.

3.3 Whilst there was a clear consensus over the aspect of the proposal to close Dalwhinnie Primary School, the parent body, staff and children of Gergask Primary School and the Laggan community were strongly of the view that the catchment area of Dalwhinnie Primary School should be re-assigned to Gergask Primary School rather than Newtonmore Primary School. They felt that the shorter travel time from Dalwhinnie to Gergask combined with existing closer links between the Dalwhinnie and Laggan communities provided a strong argument for this. Gergask stakeholders acknowledged that the numbers of children affected by the closure of Dalwhinnie Primary School now and in the future is likely to be relatively small, but felt that an increased roll at Gergask would help to sustain and support their school moving forward. They were concerned about the impact of re-zoning children to Newtonmore Primary School where there have already been pressures on accommodation and places. Overall, the small number of parents of children attending Newtonmore Primary School who expressed their view was in favour of the proposal. However, a few stakeholders raised the issue of further pressure on space within the school with additional children coming from the Dalwhinnie catchment area.

3.4 During the consultation period the council was notified of alleged inaccuracies and omissions in the proposal. Gergask Parent Council has provided information to the council and HM Inspectors which suggests that the data outlined by The Highland Council in section 10.4 of its proposal underestimates the number of placing requests into Gergask Primary School in the timeframe outlined. In its final consultation report, the council will need to set out the actions it has taken to address any alleged inaccuracies and omissions notified to it.

3.5 The Highland Council has given due consideration to reasonable alternatives to closure. These include: considerations on re-opening Dalwhinnie Primary School and Nursery with an increased catchment area; or continuing with mothballing the school building. Parents of pupils at both Gergask and Newtonmore Primary Schools have significant concerns over any suggestion that the Dalwhinnie catchment area could be enlarged because of the negative impact it might have on the viability of their children's school in the future. HM Inspectors are of the view that a sufficient range of alternatives has been considered and that the council's proposal to close Dalwhinnie Primary School is reasonable and fair.

3.6 An assessment of rural and economic issues associated with the closure has been carried out by The Highland Council. It has not identified any negative impact of the proposed closure.

3.7 A small minority of stakeholders has requested more clarity on how the council's policy on school transport will be applied to children currently living in the Dalwhinnie catchment area should the proposal go ahead. The council will need to address this request in its final report.

3.8 The community of Dalwhinnie village does not make use of the school building for events and gatherings. Instead, the community makes use of the village hall. The Highland Council has indicated that it would be keen to explore with the local community whether all or part of the school could be turned over to community use. For example, the play facilities in the school playground.

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

- As outlined above, The Highland Council considered carefully whether there were any reasonable alternatives to closure of the school including re-opening Dalwhinnie Primary School, enlarging its catchment area or continuing to mothball the school before it consulted on the proposal.
- It is the view of HM Inspectors that The Highland Council has appropriately assessed the likely educational benefits of the proposal and the alternatives to it.
- Dalwhinnie Village Hall is a focal point for community events and meetings and stakeholders interviewed by HM Inspectors agreed that Dalwhinnie Primary School did not have a crucial community role.
- The council also looked at travel arrangements and the possible impact on children and families and the environment. The council considered travel routes including the likelihood of road closures due to bad weather. However, Gergask parents consider the long term and significant road works over stretches of the A9 were not factored into the council's analysis when recommending the catchment area is re-assigned to Newtonmore Primary School. The council should address this concern in its final report. Overall, the council concluded that the proposal would not impact negatively on the environment.

4. Summary

The proposal to close Dalwhinnie Primary School and Nursery has clear educational benefits for children. Stakeholders are strongly supportive of the aspect of the proposal to close Dalwhinnie Primary School and Nursery. Future pupils will have access to almost all of their curriculum in the same school and benefit from interacting with more children. The proposal will also help The Highland Council to address capacity issues in its school estate and secure best value. However, Gergask stakeholders and Laggan Community disagree strongly with the council's plans to re-assign the Dalwhinnie Primary School catchment to Newtonmore Primary School. The council will need to ensure that it continues to engage with stakeholders where further consideration and clarification is required, such as the

re-assignment of the catchment area, arrangements for travel and the play facilities within the school grounds. In its final consultation report, the council will need to set out the actions it has taken to address any alleged inaccuracies and omissions notified to it.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
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