

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by The Highland Council to build a new community school in Dunvegan, Isle of Skye, replacing the current Dunvegan Primary School, Struan Primary School, Knockbreck Primary School and Edinbane Primary School.

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*. The purpose of the report is to provide an independent and impartial consideration of The Highland Council's proposal to build a new community school in Dunvegan, Isle of Skye, replacing the current Dunvegan, Struan, Knockbreck and Edinbane Primary Schools. 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 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
- 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;

- consideration of further representations made directly to Education Scotland on relevant educational aspects of the proposal; and
- visits to the sites of Dunvegan, Struan, Knockbreck and Edinbane Primary Schools, including discussion with relevant consultees.

1.4 As the proposal will lead to the closure of rural schools, HM Inspectors also took account of the council's consideration of any viable alternatives to the closure of Dunvegan, Struan, Knockbreck and Edinbane Primary Schools, the likely effect on the local community and the likely effect of any different travelling arrangements of the proposed closure.

2. Consultation Process

The Highland Council undertook the consultation on its proposal with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*. The council proposes to build a new community school in Dunvegan, Isles of Skye, to replace the current Dunvegan, Struan, Knockbreck and Edinbane Primary Schools. The proposal is part of a pan-Highland Sustainable School Estate Review. The consultation process was informed by an option appraisal report produced by external consultants. Notices were placed in the local press and on the council's website to alert people to the proposal. Approximately 173 responses were received from the online survey which was available during the consultation period. As part of the consultation a public meeting held on 16 June 2014 where 50 signed participants attended. A minute of the public meeting was made available to stakeholders and errors and inaccuracies were amended by the council and shared with stakeholders.

3. Educational Aspects of Proposal

3.1 Dunvegan Primary School serves a wide area of north-west Skye. It provides education in English and the medium of Gaelic. The school has four classrooms, one of which is in a demountable unit. It also provides nursery education which currently has six children educated in the medium of Gaelic. The current role, including the nursery is 53 pupils. This is projected to fall year on year. The school is rated as B (satisfactory) for educational suitability and C (poor) for building condition. Edinbane Primary School serves the village of Edinbane and surrounding area around Loch Greshornish. The current role is six and the projected roll is not expected to increase beyond a maximum of six by 2027. The school is rated as C for both educational suitability and building condition. Knockbreck Primary School serves the Waternish peninsula. It is 11.6 miles from Dunvegan. Currently four children attend the school. The projected roll is predicted to increase year on year with a maximum of 14 and an average of around 13 by 2020/21. The school is rated as C for educational suitability and B for building condition. Struan Primary School serves the area around Bracadale and is 8.8 miles from Dunvegan. The nursery has been mothballed. Currently the school roll is four. The projected roll is expected to rise to a maximum of 13 with an average of 12 by 2021/22. The school is rated as B for educational suitability and C for building condition. The enhanced physical learning environment which will result from implementation of the proposal will be of significant educational benefit to the children directly affected by the proposal.

3.2 The council states that there will be a number of educational benefits for children should the proposal go ahead. This includes: pupils being able to work in groups with others of a similar age and ability; teachers being able to employ a range of flexible teaching approaches more easily; and pupils having more opportunities to participate in a wider range of team sports, active recreational activities, and solo and group musical and artistic pursuits. While the council acknowledges that some of the educational benefits described in the proposal occur currently because of joint working across schools in the area, it believes that more pupils and teachers in the same location will enhance these educational benefits. The majority of parents and community representatives do not consider that the educational benefits described by the council will be realised by the proposal. They believe that school size does not impact on the quality of provision provided. Many pupils from across all schools, but in particular Dunvegan Primary School, had more positive views about the educational benefits of the proposal. A significant number felt that they would have more friends, a better gender mix, and greater opportunities to play team games. The proposal may provide further educational benefits for children. However, much of the educational benefits statement related to learning and teaching is too generalised. The council needs to set out more clearly and specifically how implementation of the proposal will improve learning and outcomes further for children.

3.3 The council sets out the financial case for the proposal. It estimates that the current cost per pupil of providing education in Carbost, Struan, Dunvegan, Edinbane, Knockbreck and MacDairmid is greater than the projected cost per pupil in the new school. Overall, the council believes the proposal will lead to an overall saving. If savings are realised from implementation of the proposal, it has the potential to help the council secure best value in the delivery of its services. However, the council has not separated out the costs for the current proposal, including the building costs and any other recurring costs sufficiently clearly. In its final consultation report, the council needs to provide a more detailed financial analysis. The current calculations on costs also include Carbost and MacDairmid Primary Schools and these schools are not included in the consultation. The council needs to address these issues in its final consultation report.

3.4 Almost all parents and community representatives from Struan, Knockbreck and Edinbane, and a few from Dunvegan felt the proposal did not take sufficient account of the impact of the proposal on the economic viability of the community. Many parents from Struan, Knockbreck and Edinbane Primary Schools indicated that, if the schools were to close, they would choose to send their children to Portree Primary School or Carbost Primary School. The council will need to consider if this would influence the roll projections for the new school and impact on the viability of the proposal.

3.5 A small number of parents felt that the proposal would be positive for those currently attending Dunvegan Primary School through providing a much better physical learning environment. Parents and others felt that the accommodation currently provided in Dunvegan Primary School was not of a suitable standard particularly the dismountable classrooms. The majority of parents felt that the possibility of wrap around care would be a significant benefit.

3.6 As the proposal will lead to the closure of rural schools, HM Inspectors also took account of the council's consideration of the factors to which it should have special regard. During the course of the options appraisal exercise a number of potential alternatives to the proposed mergers were identified. The council used two main criteria to consider 13 options. One criterion was the test of whether implementation of the proposal increased the likelihood of more pupils being taught in a school with at least three classes. This resulted in a number of options being discounted. A large number of stakeholders have concerns about the process used to inform the options identified. They felt that the option appraisal process has not considered sufficiently robustly a number of important issues. The council also considered the impact on the local community. It considered the use made of the current buildings and therefore the impact on the local community if Struan, Knockbreck and Edinbane Primary Schools were to close. The council assessed this to be of minimal impact given the current level of lets, the viability of other accommodation and the possibility of considering bids from each community to use the vacated school buildings. Despite these assessments, stakeholders have concerns about the impact of the proposal on their communities. The council also considered the effects of different travelling arrangements and the effects on staff and school management arrangements of the proposal. However, stakeholders have concerns about the impact on the environment created by increased travel to school that will result from implementation of the proposal. They also have concerns about the actual travel times to school, including safety aspects for children who will be required to travel on single track roads in winter. In its final consultation report, the council will need to consider these factors in more detail.

4. Summary

The council's proposal to build a new community school in Dunvegan, Isle of Skye, replacing the current Dunvegan, Struan, Knockbreck and Edinbane Primary Schools has some educational benefits for children. These benefits will be derived from children accessing improved accommodation resulting in an enhanced learning environment. A large number of parents and other stakeholders are not convinced that the proposal will result in educational benefits for their children. The council needs to set out more specifically how implementation of the proposal will improve the quality of children's educational experiences further. It needs to set out more clearly the case for securing best value through implementation of the proposal and strengthen the economic and environmental impact assessments of the proposal particularly for the rural communities of Struan, Knockbreck, and Edinbane. The council needs to ensure that the final consultation report considers the views expressed by parents, children and the wider community, and takes reasonable account of their concerns.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
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