

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by The Highland Council to discontinue education at Inverasdale Primary School, reassigning its catchment area to that of Poolewe Primary School.

1. Introduction

1.1 This report from Education Scotland has been prepared by HM Inspectors in accordance 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 at Inverasdale Primary School, reassigning its catchment area to that of Poolewe 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 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 school; 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;
- visits to the site of Poolewe and Inverasdale 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 closure of Inverasdale 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 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 27 May 2015 until 21 August 2015. The council posted the consultation document on its website and placed a notice in the local Ross-shire Journal and the Gairloch and District Times. It issued copies of the document to all parents of pupils in the catchment areas of Inverasdale Primary School and Poolewe Primary School; all P4-7 pupils attending Poolewe Primary School; the Parent Council of Poolewe Primary School; NHS Highland; and to local community groups. Further copies were made available in Poolewe Primary School and in the Gairloch Public Library. The council made arrangements to gather children's views about the proposal. The council received 15 written responses from children via a questionnaire. Of the 15 responses, eight were in favour of closure with four suggesting keeping the status quo for a bit longer. Three indicated a preference to re-open the school on the basis it was less distance to travel. A public meeting on 10 June 2015 was attended by 47 stakeholders. All present were supportive of the proposal. In response to the consultation, 26 letters from individuals and community organisations were received. All were supportive of the proposal. In addition, a letter containing 341 signatures in support of the proposal was received. There were no letters against the closure.

3. Educational Aspects of Proposal

3.1 Inverasdale Primary School is situated to the north-west of Poolewe. The school is classified as very remote rural. The catchment area includes the communities of Cove, Inverasdale, Midtown, Brae and Naast. The school has been 'mothballed' since the end of session 2011-12, when the school roll fell to two, and the pupils transferred to Poolewe Primary School. Inverasdale School does not have a nursery class. When the school was in operation, nursery education for pupils from Inverasdale was provided at Poolewe Primary School. Inverasdale Primary School is rated 'B' (satisfactory) for educational suitability and 'C' (poor) for building condition.

3.2 There are currently eight pupils of P1-7 age living within the catchment area of Inverasdale Primary School. All of these pupils currently attend Poolewe Primary School. Five of these pupils are either in P6 or P7. There are, in addition, four children below school age living in the Inverasdale catchment. One of these has enrolled for Gaelic Medium education in Gairloch Primary School for session 2015-16. The roll of Inverasdale Primary School is projected to fall year on year. The notional 2018-19 roll of five pupils would represent 10% use of capacity.

3.3 Since the school was 'mothballed' in 2013, the community of Inverasdale have made extensive use of the school building. This includes a tea room operated by Inverasdale Heritage Group, acting as a home for an exhibition on the Russian Convoys of WW2, and providing a venue for a variety of local groups to meet. Community groups have detailed plans to develop the facility should the proposal be approved.

3.4 The council has set out a good case in support of the proposal. In arriving at its proposal it gave good consideration to any reasonable alternatives. These included: to re-open Inverasdale School as a stand-alone primary school; or to continue with the current 'mothballing' arrangement. The council states there will be a number of educational benefits for children if the proposal goes ahead. These include improved social interaction opportunities from attending a larger school among more children of their own age. Opportunities to engage in the widest possible range of activities beyond the core curriculum, including music, sports, drama and art will be increased. HM Inspectors are of the view that since July 2012 the operation of a single combined school at Poolewe Primary School, has been of benefit to the pupils of both schools for the reasons outlined above. The council makes a strong case for the overall educational benefits of the proposal.

3.5 Rural and economic impact assessments conducted by the council identify no negative impact. The proposal is seen to be of positive economic benefit, with scope to develop Inverasdale Primary School as a community venue. Poolewe Primary School is 5.4 miles from Inverasdale Primary School. The maximum travel time is 21 minutes. Children, parents, and staff were clear that existing travelling arrangements were not detrimental to either the children or the environment. In some instances children's time-keeping had improved as a result of the travel arrangements.

3.6 The proposal will assist the council to make efficient and effective use of its resources as it will not be burdened with maintaining a 'mothballed' building. The proposal would allow the community to develop options for the future use of the building and to attract external funding.

3.7 Children, parents, staff and members of the local community who met with HM Inspectors were very positive about the prospect of formalising the current arrangement whereby Inverasdale children attend Poolewe Primary School. They were well-informed about the proposal and keen for matters to progress without delay. Children, parents and staff were able to articulate clearly the benefits of Inverasdale children attending Poolewe Primary School. Benefits included improved interaction; better socialisation; and increased opportunities to participate in team activities and competitions both in and out of school. Children from Inverasdale make a valued contribution to Poolewe Primary School life. Poolewe parents valued the contribution made by the Inverasdale teacher.

3.8 A joint headship between Poolewe and Gairloch Primary Schools offers good opportunities for children to participate in residential outdoor activities alongside pupils from Gairloch Primary School. This is helping prepare children well in terms of positive transitions to secondary school in Gairloch. Children and parents were of

the view that the proposal will help to secure and consolidate teacher numbers within Poolewe School.

3.9 Members of the community who met with HM Inspectors were very positive about the benefits to Inverasdale children, and the community as a whole, if the school closes. Community groups were also very positive about the proposal. They clearly identified the benefits of better integration and increased learning opportunities for children. They also identified the potential of the vacant Inverasdale Primary School to act as a community hub which would be of clear social and educational benefit to people of all ages locally. Community groups such as the Inverasdale Heritage Group and Russian Artic Convoys were already making good use of the vacant property. Detailed plans for further development are in place, subject to the outcome of the consultation.

4. Summary

The Highland Council's proposal to discontinue education provision at Inverasdale Primary School, reassigning its catchment area to that of Poolewe Primary School has clear educational benefits for current and future pupils of Inverasdale Primary School and the local community. It has very strong support from stakeholders. It will help Poolewe Primary School to maintain teacher numbers. Children will continue to have access to increased learning opportunities, wider experiences and better socialisation through being part of a larger school. The proposal will assist the council to deliver *Best Value* through making more efficient and effective use of its resources. The council has expressed an interest in working with the Inverasdale community to develop a sustainable community facility.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
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