

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by The Highland Council to discontinue education provision at Kinbrace Primary School and divide the catchment area between Helmsdale Primary and Melvich Primary Schools.

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 Kinbrace Primary School and divide the catchment area between Helmsdale Primary and Melvich 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 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:

- attendance at the public meeting held on 22 June 2016 in connection to 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;

- consideration of further information on all schools affected; and
- visits to the site of Helmsdale and Kinbrace 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 Kinbrace 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 30 May until 24 August. The council posted the consultation document on its website. It issued copies of the document to pupils and parents in the catchment areas of Helmsdale, Melvich and Altnaharra Primary Schools and to the Parent Councils of those schools. Further copies were available to pupils attending the associated secondary schools of Farr and Golspie High Schools as well as community groups. The council made appropriate arrangements to gather the views of children attending Helmsdale Primary. The council placed advance notice of a public meeting in the local newspaper. The meeting held on 22 June was attended by less than ten stakeholders, the majority of whom were supportive of the proposal. Ten written communications were received in response to the consultation. The majority were in favour of the proposal.

3. Educational Aspects of Proposal

3.1 Kinbrace Primary School is a rural school which was mothballed at the end of session 2012-13, when the school roll fell to one child. No children have attended since the school was mothballed. Projections for the next four years predict a maximum roll of five children if all parents choose to send their children to the school.

3.2 The proposal has clear educational benefits to children in The Highland Council. If the proposal goes ahead children who live in the catchment area which served Kinbrace will learn as part of a larger teaching group. This larger number and wider range of peers is likely to allow increased opportunities for socialising and making friends. The larger peer group allows children to engage more appropriately in peer and self-assessment activities. This could also provide greater opportunities to be involved in team sports and group activities which have the potential to contribute positively to children's social and emotional development.

3.3 The majority of parents saw benefits in their children having good access to visiting art, music and sports specialists. This access may be reduced if Kinbrace

were to reopen. Almost all parents and staff saw benefits in making the transition from Helmsdale Primary to secondary education as part of a larger group. The majority of parents in the Kinbrace catchment were, on balance, in favour of the proposal. Whilst they acknowledge the potential reduction in occasional local events with Kinbrace residents, they recognise the benefits afforded by the children attending a larger school with a greater number of children. Although the majority of Kinbrace parents would prefer less travelling time for their children, they do not consider it the most significant factor in determining where they wish their children to be educated.

3.4 Although the council had rated the building conditions of both Helmsdale and Kinbrace Primary Schools as B for suitability and C for condition, the nursery at Helmsdale has recently been refurbished to make it a very attractive learning environment. Greater numbers of children in Helmsdale provide improved opportunities for children in the nursery to learn through play. The parent and toddler room provides an opportunity for parents to meet and support each other and to develop strong family engagement with the school.

3.5 The Helmsdale Parent Council were strongly supportive of the proposal. They saw benefits for all children attending the school. They were concerned about the possible impact on the school due to reduced staffing and resources in Helmsdale Primary if Kinbrace Primary were to reopen. Almost all stakeholders were in favour of the revised catchment areas outlined. The majority of children who met with HM Inspectors and who gave their views were in favour of the proposal.

3.6 In arriving at its proposal, the council has given good consideration to any reasonable alternatives. Through mothballing, they have provided time for full consideration and sought to allow time for any increase in the local population. A few local employers feel that continuing to mothball the school will help to attract potential residents and employees. There is a lack of evidence to support this view, however, as there has been no upward trend. Kinbrace has a village hall which is used for community events from March to October each year. Although still available for community use since the mothballing of the school in 2012, the school building has not been used for community events and activities during that time. The council has expressed its willingness to discuss with the local community alternative uses for the school building. Reopening Kinbrace Primary School is most likely to lead to increased emissions from the school building itself and from increased traffic.

3.7 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. Rural and economic impact assessments conducted by the council identify few negative impacts, which the majority of parents consider are outweighed by the positive benefits of their children being educated in Helmsdale Primary.

3.8 The proposal will allow the council to make efficient and effective use of its resources as it will not be burdened with maintaining a 'mothballed' building.

3.9 During the consultation period the council was notified of alleged inaccuracies in the proposal. The council will need to ensure that it takes the necessary steps to investigate these alleged inaccuracies. In its final consultation report, the council will

need to set out the actions it has taken to address any alleged inaccuracies notified to it.

4. Summary

The proposal to close Kinbrace Primary School has the potential to continue to provide improved educational benefits for children. Almost all staff and the majority of parents and children support the council's plans. A few local employers would prefer the continued mothballing of the school as they feel that this may make it easier to attract families into the area as job opportunities become available. Historic evidence does not suggest this as a compelling argument in terms of making a significant impact on the roll of the school or on local employment. In its final consultation report, the council will need to set out the actions it has taken to address any alleged inaccuracies notified to it. If the council decides to proceed with its plans to close Kinbrace Primary School, it should work with the local community in exploring possible future uses for the school building.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
September 2016**