

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by Inverclyde Council to increase the qualification for free mainstream primary school and secondary school transport to children and young people residing more than 1.5 miles and 2.5 miles from their school respectively. In addition it is also proposed to enable those children and young people entitled to free school meals to access transport at closer distances of 1 mile (primary pupils) and 1.5 miles (secondary pupils).

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 Inverclyde Council's proposal to change mainstream school transport policy which will increase the mileage limits for free school transport as set out above. 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 attending primary and secondary schools across Inverclyde; 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 meetings held on 28 September, 3 October, 4 October and 13 October 2016 and 'drop in' meeting on 31 October 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;
- visits to the site of All Saints Primary School, Notre Dame High School, St Joseph's Primary School, St Columba's High School, St John's Primary School, Port Glasgow Campus (including St Stephen's High School and Port Glasgow High School) including discussion with relevant consultees; and
- meeting with the Roman Catholic Church representative on the Inverclyde Education Committee.

2. Consultation Process

2.1 Inverclyde 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 formal consultation ran from 12 September until 31 October 2016. Public meetings were held on, 28 September, 3 October, 4 October and 13 October 2016. In addition an informal 'drop in' for parents was held on 31 October 2016. An advert was placed in The Greenock Telegraph outlining the proposed changes and inviting the views of interested parties. The council posted the consultation document on its website. Copies of the consultation document were made available at local schools, council customer services and local libraries.

2.3 The council received 1456 responses to the proposal. Of these, 1109 (76.2%) opposed the proposal. Two hundred and fifty-one (17.2%) were supportive. Ninety-six (6.6%) were undecided. Of those who opposed the proposal 72.2% expressed concerns regarding safe walking routes for their child, 62.9% raised lack of alternative transport modes and 18.1% raised concerns relating to childcare arrangements.

2.4 Formal written responses were received from a number of Parent Councils. The Parent Councils of Notre Dame High School, St Columba's High School, Whinhill Primary School, St Stephen's High School, Inverclyde Academy and St Andrew's Primary School were not supportive of the proposal. The detrimental effect on young people's learning and attainment, lack of alternative public transport, distances involved, the safety and security of proposed walking routes and impact on parents both in terms of finance and their own employment were of major concern.

2.5 Formal written responses were received from a number of Pupil and Student Councils. All Saints Primary School, St Ninian's Primary School and St Mary's Primary Schools' Pupil Councils and Port Glasgow High School's Student Council were not supportive of the proposal. Concerns expressed included the lack of alternative public transport, the safety and security of children and young people undertaking the suggested walking routes, and the sizeable distances to be walked in inclement weather over hilly terrain.

3. Educational Aspects of Proposal

3.1 The proposal has the potential to allow the council to make savings of around £170,000 each year thus avoiding the need for this level of savings in other areas of education provision. This would enable the council to support all children and young people to achieve their full potential and in doing so protect the use of resources that are required to ensure high quality learning and teaching is maintained across all Inverclyde schools. The proposal has potential health and wellbeing benefits for children and young people through increased physical activity and active travel to and from school. As a result, this proposal offers potential benefits to children and young people across the whole council area.

3.2 All parents, staff, children and young people who met with HM Inspectors did not support the proposal. They indicated concerns over the safety of the proposed walking routes to school and the journey time. Of particular concern was the volume of traffic and the lack of footpaths, lighting and traffic controls at key crossing points. They raised particular safety concerns over the use of known shortcuts by young people which could put young people at risk. Teachers and parents raised concerns over the level of rainfall Inverclyde experiences (double that of Glasgow) and that the gradient of some of the hills are very steep and exposed to the elements. They were also concerned that some young people did not have the appropriate clothing or footwear to walk this distance.

3.3 All parents, staff, children and young people who met with HM Inspectors raised concerns over the potential impact on young people's attainment where they arrive cold, tired, wet and possibly late to begin the school day. Teaching staff raised particular concerns that the school day would be disrupted by late comers and the potential for an increase in non-attendance and absenteeism. Concerns were also expressed for those young people who play instruments, carrying large and heavy equipment over a significant distance in adverse weather. This may have a negative effect on the future uptake of music or after school activities.

3.4 All parents, staff, children and young people who met with HM Inspectors expressed concern over the lack of alternative transport options, in particular the lack of direct bus routes and the possible increased flow of traffic around schools should more young people be driven to school. Concerns were also expressed over the proposed reduced mileage element for those young people entitled to free school meals. They felt this was a direct contradiction to removing barriers and could result in stigmatisation. Teachers and parents raised concern over the potential impact on school rolls as a result of increased placing requests to schools closer to home.

3.5 All parents who met with HM Inspectors indicated concerns over the potential economic impact on families, both in terms of costs of public transport and employment. For example, accompanying young people to school due to age or vulnerability, impact on travel time to work and costs of public transport. This was of particular concern for families whose children attend different schools.

3.6 The council also received a written submission from the Diocese of Paisley. The Diocese did not support reducing eligibility for school transport beyond the current distance limits. Specific concerns were raised about the proposals having an

adverse effect on school attendance and as a result on overall attainment. The Diocese was of the view that the more affluent, outlying areas would benefit most with the impact of the proposal falling disproportionately on those areas of Inverclyde experiencing high levels of deprivation. Concerns were also expressed about the possible detrimental impact on Inverclyde's Catholic schools provision both in terms of the asymmetrical placement of Catholic schools within their catchment areas and the lack of public transport connecting Catholic schools with their communities. In taking forward its proposal, the council will need to engage with the Diocese to address these concerns.

4. Summary

The proposal to increase the qualification for free mainstream primary school and secondary school transport to children and young people residing more than 1.5 miles and 2.5 miles from their school respectively and to enable those children and young people entitled to free school meals to access transport at closer distances of 1 mile (primary pupils) and 1.5 miles (secondary pupils) has some potential educational benefits. Financial savings made in this area may reduce the need for savings in other areas, including resources for learning and teaching. Valuable resources required to ensure high quality learning and teaching across all Inverclyde schools will be secured. Children and young people will benefit through increased physical activity and active travel to and from school. There is, however, almost universal opposition to the proposal from parents, school staff, children and young people across the council area. In taking forward the proposal, the council needs to address the significant and reasonable concerns of many stakeholders who responded to the survey or met with HM Inspectors. It needs to address the concerns of young people and their families about the safety and security relating to walking routes and any issues of increased congestion around schools. It also needs to address the concerns of teaching staff with regard to the potential disruption to learning and impact on improving attainment that any increase in late coming might generate. The council should also engage directly with the Diocese of Paisley to address concerns raised.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
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