

Consultation proposal by Midlothian Council

Report by Education Scotland, addressing educational aspects of the proposal to change the catchment areas of Cornbank St James, Cuiken, Glencorse, Mauricewood and Strathesk Primary Schools and to nominate Penicuik High School as the secondary school to enrol all P7 pupils resident in the Strathesk catchment area.

Context

This report from Education Scotland is required under the terms of the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*. It has been prepared by HM Inspectors in accordance with the terms of the Act. The purpose of this report is to provide an independent and impartial consideration of the council's consultation proposal. Section 2 of this report sets out the views expressed by consultees during the initial consultation process. Section 3 sets out HM Inspectors' consideration of the educational aspects of the proposal and the 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 it has reviewed the initial proposal, including a summary of points raised during the consultation and the council's response to them. The council has to publish its final consultation report three weeks before it takes its final decision.

1. Introduction

1.1 Midlothian Council proposes to change the catchment areas of Cornbank St James, Cuiken, Glencorse, Mauricewood and Strathesk Primary Schools and also Beeslack Community and Penicuik High Schools. The proposal sets out the details of the suggested future catchment areas of the Cornbank St James, Cuiken, Glencorse, Mauricewood and Strathesk Primary Schools. This includes areas of land where new houses may be built in the future. The proposal also makes Penicuik High School the enrolment secondary school for all P7 pupils resident in the Strathesk catchment area.

1.2 The report from Education Scotland is required under the terms of the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*. It has been prepared by HM Inspectors in accordance with the terms of the Act.

1.3 HM Inspectors undertook the following activities in considering the educational aspects of the proposal:

- attendance at the public meeting held on 11 and 20 March 2014 in connection with the council's proposal;
- 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;
- consideration of further information on all schools affected;
- visits to the site of Cornbank St James, Cuiken, Glencorse, Mauricewood and Strathesk Primary Schools; and
- visits to the site of Beeslack Community and Penicuik High Schools.

1.4 HM Inspectors considered:

- the likely effects of the proposal for children and young people of the named schools; any other users and children likely to become pupils within two years of the date of publication of the proposal paper;
- 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
- benefits which the council believes will result from implementation of the proposal, and the council's reasons for coming to these beliefs.

2. Consultation process

2.1 Midlothian Council undertook the initial consultation on its proposal with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*. Two public meetings were held and staff from the education authority visited the schools concerned to discuss the proposed changes with the staff, children and young people. There was also an opportunity for stakeholders to give their responses through written and online submissions.

2.2 Overall, parents, children, young people and staff in all schools appreciated that it was a natural and necessary time to review the catchment areas in the town of Penicuik. They also expressed an interest in continuing to work with the council.

2.3 Overall, parents, children, young people and staff in all schools affected by proposals with regard to the future catchment areas of the Cornbank St James, Cuiken, Glencorse and Mauricewood and Strathesk Primary Schools were content with the consultation process and most supported it. They recognised that there was a need to review how well catchment areas are meeting the evolving needs of the town of Penicuik. However, some of those consulted did have some concerns which they felt needed to be addressed to ensure successful implementation of the proposed catchment areas. In raising these concerns, parents acknowledged that the council has specified that proposed changes will take effect with new pupil enrolments from August 2015. Some parents considered the proposal from the perspective of the current cohort of pupils in the Penicuik schools. They were particularly concerned that siblings could be in two different schools and saw this as having challenges for managing childcare. Other parents felt that their child had

started the early curricular level in a nursery at a particular primary school. They would like reassurances that this early learning would be continued within the same primary school. Staff in some of the primary schools highlighted that their school rolls would decrease as a result of the proposed catchment areas. However, the rolls could increase again if the proposed building of houses goes ahead. For staff, the lack of concrete plans for the proposed housing raised concerns about the security of their jobs. All of the primary schools currently have capacity for the proposed catchment alignments. However, in some of the primary schools, should the proposed building of houses go ahead, primary schools would require extensions to their accommodation. In such circumstances, staff would like to be consulted on the nature of future extensions to their school's accommodation.

2.4 Overall, those consulted were divided on the proposal to nominate Penicuik High School as the secondary school to enrol all P7 pupils resident in the Strathesk catchment area. All stakeholders at Penicuik High School supported the proposal as the school roll would increase. They saw this as being beneficial to the school, particularly for its potential to expand the range of subjects that could be offered at the senior stages. While staff and children at Strathesk Primary School supported the proposal, about half of the parents consulted were not in favour of Penicuik High School being the designated school that their children would transfer to for their secondary education. For these parents, their homes were much closer to Beeslack Community High School. To go to Penicuik High School would mean that young people would be walking adjacent to a busy main road to the other side of the town. As a result, parents were anxious about children's safety near this road. They also talked about the inconvenience of transporting their children to after school clubs at Penicuik High School compared to the nearby Beeslack Community High School. All those consulted at Beeslack Community High School raised significant concerns with the proposal to nominate Penicuik High School as the secondary school to enrol all P7 pupils resident in the Strathesk catchment area as they considered the plans to be less well thought out. In presenting their concerns, stakeholders were very keen to highlight their desire to engage with the council in discussing the option. All those consulted at Beeslack Community High School had concerns that the proposal had the potential to reduce their school roll. Although new housing may be built within the catchment area of Beeslack Community High School, these plans were too tentative to give any reassurances that Beeslack Community High School's roll would not be affected in the long-term.

3. Educational aspects of the proposal

3.1 The proposal to amend the catchment areas of Cornbank St James, Cuiken, Glencorse, Mauricewood and Strathesk Primary Schools is of overall educational benefit as it will improve the distribution of places in schools for children in Penicuik across the five primary schools. The council states that this will lead to more viable rolls in these schools and assist with delivering a broad curriculum that takes forward the principles of Curriculum for Excellence. The council has also endeavoured to take account of housing to be built at some time in the future for Penicuik. However, the lack of a clear timeline for the proposed housing developments makes the proposal less convincing. In its final consultation report, the council needs to make clearer any implications for staffing should school rolls decrease. The council also needs to provide reassurances about the nature of proposed extensions to

accommodation. A number of parents have concerns about the proposals in relation to a change of establishment as their children move from nursery to the primary stages. Should the proposal be accepted, the council needs to provide parents with reassurance on how their children will be supported to ensure continuity and progression of their learning when moving from nursery to primary school. It should also provide reassurance to parents on how the principles of Curriculum for Excellence will be implemented at the secondary stages should staffing be reduced.

3.2 The proposal highlights that children at Strathesk Primary School will enjoy a better transition by enrolling at Penicuik High School. The two schools already collaborate to support progression in what children learn as they move from primary school to secondary school. They organise events and activities to help children in P7 prepare for going to secondary. However, a number of parents do not fully recognise the benefits of these transition arrangements. Additionally, the geography of the proposed Strathesk catchment area is such that some children live closer to Beeslack Community High School than Penicuik High School. These parents stated their intention to continue to send their children to Beeslack Community High School. The council needs to describe more clearly in their final consultation report the transition arrangements for children moving from P7 to secondary school. This includes arrangements for children from Strathesk Primary School who may still go to Beeslack Community High School.

3.3 The consultation highlights that the proposed changes to the catchment areas will result in sustainable numbers and curriculum for both Beeslack Community and Penicuik High Schools. Those consulted at Penicuik High School look forward to such benefits. The stakeholders of Beeslack Community High School are still to be convinced of the educational benefits of this proposal. In particular, the council needs to address stakeholders' concerns that the proposal could lead to a decrease in the school roll with any pending increase being based on whether new housing goes ahead. All stakeholders expressed a willingness to engage with the council in exploring options. In its final consultation report, the council needs to set out more clearly why it regards enrolling at Penicuik High School all P7 pupils resident in the Strathesk catchment area as the most reasonable option open to it.

3.4 Parents have concerns around safe routes to school, in particular with regard to those young people who may have to walk adjacent to a busy main road should this proposal go ahead. In its final consultation report the council needs to outline how these concerns will be addressed as well as having clearer plans on access routes to schools.

4. Summary

The council's case for realigning the catchment areas of Cornbank St James, Cuiken, Glencorse, Mauricewood and Strathesk Primary Schools is sound and has won the support of most stakeholders. It will achieve a more balanced approach to school rolls. However, a number of issues have been identified by parents and staff as outlined in this report. The council needs to give full consideration to these issues. While the principle of a review of catchment areas is broadly supported, there is significant opposition to the proposal to nominate Penicuik High School as the secondary school to enrol all P7 pupils resident in the Strathesk catchment area.

This includes the potential impact on Beeslack Community High School. As a result, the council needs to ensure it considers further this proposal to provide reassurances that it is the most reasonable option open to it.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
April 2014**