

# REPORT BY HM INSPECTORATE OF EDUCATION (HMIE) ON THE EDUCATIONAL ASPECTS OF THE PROPOSAL BY MORAY COUNCIL TO CLOSE CABRACH PRIMARY SCHOOL AND TRANSFER CHILDREN TO MORTLACH PRIMARY SCHOOL, DUFFTOWN

October 2010

## 1. Introduction

1.1 Moray Council proposes the closure of Cabrach Primary School and the transfer of the children to Mortlach Primary School in Dufftown.

1.2 This report has been prepared by HMIE in accordance with the terms of the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*.

1.3 HM Inspectors' role is to report on the educational aspects of the proposal. HMIE undertook the following activities:

- attendance at the public meetings on the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> September 2010 in connection with Moray 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; and
- scrutiny of further information on the establishments affected, including the contents of an HMIE report prepared in 2007 in response to an earlier proposal for closure.

1.4 HMIE considered:

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

1.5 As the proposal will lead to the closure of a rural school as defined in the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*, HMIE also took account of the council's consideration of:

- viable alternatives to the closure of Cabrach Primary School;

- the likely effect on the local community with regard to sustainability and on the community's access to the buildings, grounds and facilities if the school were to close, and
- the likely effect of different travelling arrangements on the environment and on children and young people and other school users occasioned by the closure.

## **2. Consultation process**

2.1 The council carried out the consultation with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*. The consultation included an invitation for written submissions and public meetings, held in September 2010.

2.2 Parents of the two children who currently attend Cabrach Primary School are opposed to the proposed closure. They feel that their children benefit from the very small class at Cabrach. They are concerned that their children might be unable to return home in the event of severe weather. They are of the view that the closure of Cabrach Primary School could discourage families with young children from moving to the area.

2.3 Children from both Cabrach and Mortlach Primary Schools completed questionnaires. The views expressed were unsurprising with the Cabrach children wishing to retain their provision while those attending Mortlach supported closure.

2.3 Almost all members of the general public, from various localities across Moray, who responded are supportive of the closure proposal citing financial benefits for all young people in Moray and educational gain for Cabrach children.

2.4 Three community associations responded to the consultation. There was some variation in the views expressed. Dufftown Community Association recognised the validity of the rationale for school closure. Speyside Area Forum supported closure at the present time. Cabrach Community Association opposed the closure proposal indicating that, given the very recent appointment of a local development worker, it would be detrimental to future regeneration efforts and would result in the loss of the last remaining public building in the area.

2.5 Should the proposed closure proceed, all three associations support mothballing the school for a defined period to give the community the opportunity to implement regeneration proposals.

## **3. Educational aspects of the proposal**

3.1 The roll at Cabrach Primary School has continued to decline and is now operating at an 8% occupancy rate with two pupils. There are currently two pre-school children in the local area.

3.2 Mortlach Primary School is located in Dufftown, approximately ten miles from Cabrach. The school currently operates at 77% occupancy with approximately 155 pupils. The school also offers pre-school education. The transfer of children from Cabrach would have no impact on provision at Mortlach Primary School.

3.3 The council's papers detail sound educational benefits arising from its proposals. These include the argument that by moving from Cabrach Primary School to Mortlach Primary School, children will benefit socially and educationally from being part of a larger cohort. They will have greater opportunities to learn collaboratively and interact with more of their peers as well as participating in a wider range of educational activities such as sporting and arts activities. By doing so, they would more readily develop the capacities embedded in *Curriculum for Excellence*.

3.4 There is sufficient space in the proposed receiving school to accommodate the two children currently attending Cabrach Primary School. The children will also benefit from improved access to physical education and library facilities.

3.5 The council's proposals will enable efficiencies accruing from the closure to contribute to the overall benefit of children and young people elsewhere in the authority's area.

3.6 As the proposal will lead to the closure of a rural school as defined in the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*, the authority has considered the viability of alternative arrangements. In the three years since the council last proposed closure of Cabrach Primary School there has been no evidence of an upturn in the school population and based on the current economic climate in the wider Moray area it is unlikely that the school roll will increase to a viable level. Over the past two years there have been no requests for community use of the school.

3.7 The Cabrach Community Association has recently appointed a development officer. A proposal to build five new houses is at a very early stage and, should it proceed, is unlikely to have a significant impact on the school population in the foreseeable future. At the public meeting in Cabrach education officials advised that the Community Association should forward details of their proposals together with outline timescales. Officers indicated this information would be included in the collated response which would be presented to elected members. Information on the proposed housing does not appear to have been submitted during the consultation period.

3.8 The children transferring to Mortlach Primary School would be provided with school transport. The change to the delineated catchment area will eliminate daily journeys by families who are currently transporting children to Mortlach Primary School due to placing requests. The education service has clear procedures for the transportation and accommodation of children in severe weather. During the unusually severe weather conditions last year the education service ensured that all children were able to return to their own home safely.

#### **4. Summary**

4.1 The proposal from Moray Council to close Cabrach Primary School and transfer children to Mortlach Primary School in Dufftown offers educational benefits to children directly affected by the proposal and to the wider community in Moray. These benefits relate to the social and personal development of the children moving to the larger school and to the efficient and effective use of available resources for the education service. The proposed move to the larger school offers children from Cabrach an enhanced range of educational experiences. The proposal will not adversely affect the quality of education for children in Mortlach Primary School. The council has appropriate plans in place to transport children to Mortlach Primary School.

4.2 In taking forward the proposal, officers should provide a reasonable estimate of the likely impact of adverse weather for those involved, over and above what would happen if Cabrach Primary School remained open. The council should outline its position with regard to the issues raised by the Cabrach Community Association. The council should also indicate the date of the proposed closure and transfer of children to Mortlach Primary School.

**HM Inspectorate of Education  
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