

Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by Perth and Kinross Council to close Abernyte Primary School, move pupils to Inchtute Primary School and that the delineated catchment area of Inchtute Primary School be permanently extended to subsume the whole delineated catchment area of Abernyte Primary School from July 2020.

January 2019

1. Introduction

1.1 This report from Education Scotland has been prepared by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education (HM Inspectors) in accordance with the terms of the [Schools \(Consultation\) \(Scotland\) Act 2010](#) ("the 2010 Act"). The purpose of the report is to provide an independent and impartial consideration of Perth and Kinross Council's proposal to close Abernyte Primary School, move pupils to Inchtute Primary School and that the delineated catchment area of Inchtute Primary School be permanently extended to subsume the whole delineated catchment area of Abernyte Primary School from July 2020. 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 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 statutory 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 and the special provisions that apply to proposals to close a rural school.

1.2 HM Inspectors considered:

- the likely effects of the proposal for children of Abernyte Primary School and Inchtute Primary School; any other users; children likely to become pupils within two years of the date of publication 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
- 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 14 November 2018 in Inchtute Primary School 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; and
- visits to the sites of Abernyte Primary School and Inchtute Primary School, 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 Abernyte 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 Perth and Kinross Council undertook the consultation on its proposal(s) with reference to the [Schools \(Consultation\) \(Scotland\) Act 2010](#).

2.2 The formal consultation ran from 29 October 2018 to 14 December 2018. Copies of the proposal were made available electronically on the council website with a link to an online response form. Letters were issued to statutory consultees with a link to the proposal paper and details of where and how to obtain a paper copy. A public notice advert was placed in the local press on 29 October 2018. Public meetings were held at Abernyte Primary School on 12 November 2018 and at Inchtute Primary School on 14 November 2018. Twenty-nine members of the public attended the public meeting at Abernyte Primary School. Five members of the public attended the public meeting at Inchtute Primary School. Almost all were not in favour of the proposal.

2.3 The council received 26 online responses, including seven from parents and two from children. Of the 26 responses, one response agreed with the council's proposal, 24 disagreed and one neither agreed nor disagreed. In addition, 27 written responses were received. These included responses from the Abernyte Parent Council, the local community council, MP and MSP. All of the written responses disagreed with the proposals. Key areas of concern included: challenging the idea that experiences in Inchtute would provide educational benefit to Abernyte children through attending a larger school, the potential impact on the community of the proposed school closure and aspects of detail and procedure in the council's processes and conclusions.

3. Educational aspects of proposal

3.1 Abernyte Primary School is a non-denominational school providing education to P1-P7 pupils from the village of Abernyte and the surrounding area. There is no nursery provision at Abernyte Primary School. Local nursery provision is located at Inchtute Primary School. The school structure has one composite class across stages P1-P7. At the time of the HM Inspector's visit, the school roll had recently increased to eight children. The class consisted of one P2, one P4, one P5, three P6 and two P7 children. In January 2017, Abernyte Primary School was rated as 'B' (satisfactory) for building condition and 'A' (good) for educational suitability. Inchtute Primary School was rated as 'B' (satisfactory) for building condition and 'B' (satisfactory) for educational suitability. Data indicates that the roll of Abernyte Primary School has been falling over the last five years. Future projections indicate that pupil numbers are unlikely to increase above their current level. Currently, six catchment children attend neighbouring schools. If this pattern of parental choice continues, then the future sustainability of Abernyte is challenging.

3.2 The council has set out a number of reasonable arguments in support of its proposal. The council states there will be educational benefits for children if the proposal goes ahead. These include improved social interaction opportunities from attending a larger school among children of their own age. Participating in larger year groups will increase the opportunity for collaborative working with children of a similar age and stage of development. Opportunities to engage in a broader range of activities which enrich the curriculum will be increased. Children will benefit from participating in a wider variety of after school activities and the Inchtute House System. The proposal will assist the council to make efficient and effective use of its resources as it will not incur costs for running Abernyte Primary School. Inchtute Primary School has the capacity to accommodate additional children should Abernyte Primary School close. However, parents of children attending Abernyte believe that there are inaccuracies in the outline of council's financial costs, roll projections and educational benefits statement. HM Inspectors agree that the financial arguments are not evidenced clearly enough in the council's proposals. Inspectors also agree that the educational benefits statement does not give an appropriately balanced view of the improved

outcomes for children should Abernyte Primary School close. Whilst there are many accurate and sound arguments within the council's outline of educational benefits, there are some instances where the council overstates the advantages for children should they move to Inchtute. For example, in its assessment of the school grounds, the environment for learning, the school's work as an Eco school or being twinned with a school in France and the support of the Parent Council, the council fails to acknowledge that Abernyte Primary School provides these equally well. The local community believes the council is wrong about the impact on the wider community should Abernyte Primary School close as they believe that the school is used for a greater range of community activities. In finalising its proposal, the council needs to reconsider any further relevant information on this aspect.

3.3 Parents and children from Abernyte Primary School who met with HM Inspectors did not support the proposal. Parents did not agree that there would be educational benefits for Abernyte children. Concerns were expressed about the perceived loss of the inclusive, supportive environment the children currently experience. Children enjoy the relaxed atmosphere and the space within and outside of the school building. The outdoor space is used imaginatively by children, sometimes directed by staff. Both parents and children were concerned about the potential for greater noise in a larger school. Parents felt there would be a reduction in the quality of the educational experience and individual attention. Parents did not accept the projected roll figures. They felt that in the future the school roll could increase. Parents acknowledged that the lack of nursery provision and parents exercising the right to send their child to other schools contributed to the lower numbers at Abernyte. Significant concern was expressed about the loss of the school as a community facility. Parents raised a legitimate concern regarding requiring greater clarity with regard to the approximate costs of upgrading the school fabric in the medium term. Whilst HM Inspectors acknowledge the legitimate concerns of parents, there is no evidence to suggest children would not make appropriate progress and enjoy rich educational experiences should they move to Inchtute.

3.4 Staff and children in Inchtute Primary School who met with HM Inspectors were supportive of the proposal. Staff thought that engagement with a wider peer group of similar age and stage would improve children's learning. They felt that transitions were easier for children both from the nursery into P1 and from P7 to secondary education in a much bigger school. They felt that children would benefit from access to a wider pool of staff. Teachers thought that a larger staff provided more opportunities for moderation activities and professional learning. Inchtute children would welcome the chance to develop new friendships. Children from Abernyte currently join some classes in Inchtute Primary School for art on a weekly basis. Children in Inchtute thought Abernyte children would benefit from having access to an increased range of school teams. They also felt that their P7 residential trip was one of the highlights of their school experience and children from Abernyte missed out on this kind of opportunity. Parents, staff and children did not have any concerns about the potential increase in the school roll if the proposal proceeds.

3.5 During the consultation period, parents 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 a more balanced educational benefits statement and outline the actions it has taken to address any alleged inaccuracies notified to it, including a more transparent financial case.

3.6 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. In arriving at its proposal the council has assessed the likely benefits to children and in doing so has given due consideration to any reasonable alternatives. The council carried out a detailed options assessment in which it considered four options. These included: keeping Abernyte Primary School open with the existing catchment area; mothballing Abernyte Primary School and moving children

to Inchtute Primary School; reviewing the catchment area of Abernyte Primary School to determine whether or not this would increase the roll to a sustainable level; and closing Abernyte Primary School and moving children to Inchtute Primary School. Due to insufficient demand, coupled with parents choosing to place their children at other primary schools, none of the options bar closure were considered as viable or sustainable. The council considers that the current school building is not used sufficiently regularly for community activity to impact negatively. Inspectors note, however, that in the last year the school has extended its activities with the local community through, for example, the community café. The proposal does not impact negatively on children at Inchtute Primary School. Abernyte children will be entitled to free transport. The journey time is not unreasonable when compared with other parts of the authority and is likely to have limited environmental impact.

4. Summary

Perth and Kinross Council's proposal to close Abernyte Primary School, move pupils to Inchtute Primary School and permanently extend the Inchtute Primary School delineated catchment area to subsume the whole delineated catchment area of Abernyte Primary School has some potential educational benefits. The council will need to balance these potential benefits against the potential loss to the children, families and community of the local village school. Abernyte Primary School children currently enjoy learning in a bright, attractive, inclusive and supportive environment. Children currently have access to an extensive and varied outdoor area to play and learn. HM Inspectors agree that Abernyte children will have access to wider experiences and increased socialisation through being part of a larger school at Inchtute. Opportunities to engage in assemblies, after school and team events will be increased. Transition from the nursery class to the P1 class will be enhanced. Projected numbers of children within the catchment do not indicate that the roll at Abernyte is likely to grow significantly. An important factor in this is parental placing requests to other schools in recent years. The small number of pupils and earlier gender imbalance at Abernyte Primary School have proved to be important factors for some families making choices about the kind of school they want for their children. Inchtute Primary School has the capacity to accommodate additional children. The proposal will assist the council to deliver 'Best Value' through making more efficient and effective use of its resources. Should the council decide to take forward the proposal for closure, it should set out how it will ensure that current Abernyte children are supported to positively make the transition to Inchtute Primary School. It should also work with parents to address, and correct where necessary, any inaccuracies as outlined by the Abernyte Parent Council. The council should also consider carefully how the vacant school might be used to the benefit of the local Abernyte community.

HM Inspectors
January 2019