

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by Perth and Kinross Council to close Balhousie Primary School and combine its catchment area with a new build North Muirton Primary School from August 2022.

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* 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 Perth and Kinross Council's proposal to close Balhousie Primary School and combine its catchment area with a new build North Muirton Primary School from August 2022. 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 of Balhousie Primary School and North Muirton 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 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 24 April 2018 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 site of Balhousie Primary School and North Muirton Primary School, including discussion with relevant consultees.

2. Consultation Process

2.1 Perth and Kinross 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 Prior to the consultation, the council undertook an options appraisal and a pre-consultation exercise in which a number of alternative options for Balhousie Primary School and North Muirton Primary School were explored. The council concluded that the proposal option was the most viable and consistent with its statutory responsibilities to secure best value and to make adequate and efficient provision of school education.

2.3 The council undertook the consultation between 19 March and 17 May 2018. Letters were issued to the list of statutory consultees with a link to the proposal paper and details of where and how to obtain a paper copy and advertisements were placed in the local press. Two public meetings were held. The first, held on 24 April 2018, was attended by seven members of the public. The second, held on 1 May 2018, was attended by six members of the public. The council received 53 returned consultation forms of which 43 were against the proposal and ten in favour. A further six written representations opposing the proposal were received by the council.

3. Educational Aspects of Proposal

3.1 There are clear potential educational benefits to Perth and Kinross Council's proposal. The council intends to establish a two stream primary school with flexible learning spaces, improved technology, outdoor areas and good facilities for sport and leisure. Its proposal includes plans to provide improved early years facilities, a nurture class and enhanced provision for children with additional support needs. Children and staff from both Balhousie Primary School and North Muirton Primary School could benefit from much improved and modern learning facilities. The council's proposal has the potential to improve experiences and outcomes for children from both of the affected schools.

3.2 The existing Balhousie Primary School building is under occupied and in a very poor condition with significant limitations to learning and teaching areas and to outdoor play space which impact negatively on the experience of children and staff. Prior to the consultation, the council examined the cost of refurbishing the existing building and concluded that refurbishment would be unduly costly and would not resolve many of the limitations of the existing building.

3.3 The existing North Muirton Primary School building also has significant limitations. The council has concluded that it would be uneconomic to refurbish and

maintain the existing building. In addition to the benefits to children and staff from both affected schools, the proposal to build a new school brings potential wider benefits to children and young people in Perth and Kinross arising from the council's approach to securing best value.

3.4 Children currently attending from Balhousie Primary School would have an increased distance to travel to a new school in North Muirton but all pupils would be within the statutory walking distances to school. Appropriately, the council has undertaken to develop a travel plan for the new school including safe walking routes.

3.5 Almost all parents, staff and children from Balhousie Primary School who spoke with HM Inspectors were not in favour of the council's proposal. Although they could see benefits to the purpose built, modern and enhanced facilities in the council's proposal, they felt the existing school building should be refurbished and brought up to standard. They valued the strong sense of community in Balhousie Primary School, the existing ethos, positive relationships and the strong historical and community links to their school. Parents were of the view that the council had allowed the school building to fall into disrepair over a number of years and now had a responsibility to fund refurbishment. Staff and parents felt that the additional distance to the proposed new build school would bring several disadvantages and could negatively impact on existing community links and levels of parental engagement. Parents and staff spoke of the important intergenerational work which involves children working with residents of a local care home. They were concerned that this and other examples of community partnerships could suffer in the council's proposal. Perth and Kinross Council will need to provide reassurance that the school's existing work in partnership with the local community in Balhousie can be maintained if it decides to implement its proposal.

3.6 Almost all parents, staff and children from North Muirton Primary School were in favour of the council's proposal and enthusiastic about the opportunities a new building could provide to enhance learning and teaching. Staff agreed that the proposed two stage primary school could provide benefits to staff for mutual support and challenge to improve learning and teaching. They welcomed the proposals for improved space for early years and enhanced provision for additional support needs. They were aware of the limitations of the existing building and felt that the facilities were in serious need of improvement. They were confident that with appropriate planning the two school communities could be brought together successfully to benefit from the new facilities.

3.7 Staff and children from both schools expressed a wish to be involved in detailed decisions about the design and layout of the new school, should the council decide to implement its proposal. Parents of Balhousie Primary School felt that if the council were to decide to proceed, a new school name and uniform should be considered to ensure that the new school's identity represented the whole catchment area. Appropriately, the council in its proposal document has undertaken to consult with staff, parents and Parent Councils of both schools on the development of plans for the integration of pupils into the new school.

4. Summary

There are clear and strong potential educational benefits to Perth and Kinross Council's proposal. Staff and children from both schools could benefit from much improved modern facilities for learning and teaching and better outdoor space, improved early years provision and improved provision for children with additional support needs. Perth and Kinross Council has undertaken to involve and consult with stakeholders in the implementation process if it decides to proceed with its proposal. The council will need to provide reassurance to parents, children and staff from Balhousie Primary School that the school's existing links with the local community can be maintained and enhanced.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
May 2018**