

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by Perth and Kinross Council to discontinue education provision at Straloch Primary School

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 Perth and Kinross Council's proposal to discontinue education provision at Straloch Primary School. 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 of the 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:

- 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 Kirkmichael Primary School and Straloch 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 Straloch 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 with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010* and the amendments in the *Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014*.

2.2 Perth and Kinross Council proposes to discontinue education provision at Straloch Primary School with effect from 31 March 2017 and extend the delineated area of Kirkmichael Primary School to include the whole delineated area of Straloch Primary School. The council undertook a consultation on its proposal between 17 August and 28 September 2016. Letters were sent to consultees and a copy of the proposal document was published on the council's website. A public meeting held at Kirkmichael Primary School on 13 September 2016 was attended by two members of the public. No written responses to the consultation were received.

3. Educational Aspects of Proposal

3.1 Straloch Primary School is a remote rural primary school. It has been mothballed since August 2011 when the school roll fell to two pupils. The school has capacity for 22 pupils. The projected roll of Straloch Primary School is estimated at six pupils by 2019/20, although it is not certain that any of those children would attend Straloch Primary School were it to reopen. Children from the Straloch Primary School catchment area have been zoned to Kirkmichael Primary School for almost five years.

3.2 Perth and Kinross Council's proposal to close Straloch Primary School has clear educational benefits. Kirkmichael Primary School and Straloch Primary School together have a combined roll of 50 pupils. The distance between Straloch Primary School and Kirkmichael Primary School is 3.5 miles. Children attending Kirkmichael Primary School benefit from learning with their peers and participating in social, educational and sporting activities which would not be possible with the low numbers in Straloch Primary School. The presence of the pre-school nursery at Kirkmichael Primary School contributes to children's positive experience of transition from nursery to primary school. Those in P7 who will make the transition to Blairgowrie High School benefit from planned transition activities with their peers.

3.3 Parents, children and staff who spoke with HM Inspectors fully supported the proposal. They saw clear benefits in the greater range of learning experiences open to children at Kirkmichael Primary School than would be possible at Straloch Primary School. Children spoke of the importance of making friends and being able to learn together in groups and socialise together at break times. Parents valued the smooth transition from the co-located nursery to school. All felt that their experience of Straloch Primary School children attending Kirkmichael Primary School over the past five years had been positive and had helped to strengthen a shared sense of

community in the wider area. There is no recorded opposition to the council's proposal.

3.4 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. Perth and Kinross Council undertook a detailed options appraisal prior to undertaking the consultation on its proposal, including consideration of four alternative options to closure. These were re-opening Straloch Primary School within its existing catchment area; continuation of mothballing; changing the catchment area of Straloch Primary School to increase pupil numbers and closure of Kirkmichael Primary School and rezoning pupils to Straloch Primary School. The council also considered the alternative school zoning arrangement of transferring Straloch Primary School pupils to Pitlochry Primary School. Following discussion with stakeholders and detailed examination of the potential alternative options the council reasonably concluded that its consultation proposal was the best option available. It also demonstrates best value for the council through more efficient use of the school estate.

3.5 Perth and Kinross Council also gave appropriate consideration to the impact on the community from its proposal. There is no current or previous use of Straloch Primary School as a venue for community events or meetings. A range of alternative venues is available to community groups operating in the area. Children attending clubs and groups after school travel to Kirkmichael, Pitlochry or further afield. Some parents who spoke with HM Inspectors regretted the loss of Straloch Primary School but spoke of how rezoning the catchment to Kirkmichael Primary School was helping to sustain the Kirkmichael community. A few stakeholders who spoke with HM Inspectors were keen to be kept informed of the council's plans for the site and the school building. They hoped that the resource could be used for the benefit of the community and local business in the area.

3.6 Perth and Kinross Council examined the effect of different travelling arrangements arising from its proposal. It concluded appropriately that the 3.5 miles between the two schools is a reasonable travel distance. The environmental impact of additional travel is off-set by the closure of the Straloch Primary School building.

4. Summary

Perth and Kinross Council's proposal to discontinue education provision at Straloch Primary School and extend the catchment area of Kirkmichael Primary School has clear educational benefits. Arrangements proposed in the consultation have been in place during a five year mothballing period. During this time there has been an improved range of learning and social experiences for children. Should the proposal go ahead, these improvements will be sustained for current and future pupils.

Stakeholders expressed a desire to be involved in discussion of the potential future disposal of the site of Straloch Primary School. Perth and Kinross Council will need to consider how it engages with the local community in taking forward its plans.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
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