

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by South Ayrshire Council on the arrangements for primary school admission, P7-S1 secondary transfers and placing requests.

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 South Ayrshire Council's proposal to review arrangements for primary school admission, P7-S1 secondary transfers and placing requests. 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 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.

1.2 HM Inspectors considered:

- the likely effects of the proposal for children and young people of South Ayrshire; 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 23 May 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, including representation from the Galloway Diocese; and

- visits to the site of Alloway Primary School, Forehill Primary School, Holmston Primary School, Sacred Heart Primary School and Struthers Primary School, including discussion with relevant consultees.

2. Consultation Process

2.1 South Ayrshire Council undertook the consultation on its proposal(s) with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*.

2.2 The formal consultation ran from 30 April 2018 to 15 June 2018. The council posted the consultation document on its website. A public meeting was held on 23 May 2018. In total, two people attended the meeting. There were over 150 responses to the online survey. Of these, less than half supported the proposal, which outlined changes to the admissions and P7-S1 transfer arrangements. While a few respondents felt this was a fair system developed to tackle overcrowding in their local schools, a number of respondents were concerned about the implications for their children's education and did not want their choice to be restricted. A few objections came from the Girvan community where parents were anxious about their chosen primary school being capped. In response to the proposed criteria for placing requests, the majority of respondents were supportive of the proposal. However, a few would welcome the presence of siblings to be given higher priority in the outlined criteria. The council also received a number of responses from young people who voiced a range of views, a few supported the proposal, a few were against the proposal and several expressed no preference. Responses were also received by letter, including from the Diocese of Galloway.

3. Educational Aspects of Proposal

3.1 The proposal has a number of potential educational benefits for children and young people. The proposal, if implemented, will provide an open and fair system for managing entry into primary school, transfer from P7-S1 and establishing placing request criteria in the event of oversubscription in any of South Ayrshire's schools.

3.2 The proposal will support the council in meeting its statutory requirements to secure adequate and efficient provision of school education under the terms of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980. The proposal has the potential to help the council to manage its school estate more effectively and efficiently ensuring best value in the delivery of its services.

3.3 The council will, where there is oversubscription in denominational schools, prioritise the requests of those children who have a Roman Catholic Baptismal Certificate. This will help the council in continuing to meet its legislative requirements in relation to denominational education.

3.4 In amending the policy on admission to primary schools, P7-S1 transfers and establishing placing request criteria, the authority is reducing the risk of high occupancy levels which may restrict curricular, achievement and social opportunities available for children and young people.

3.5 Overall, staff from denominational and non-denominational schools who met with HM Inspectors were supportive of the proposal. They felt the proposal would reduce the existing pressure on accommodation and resources. Timetabling and planning would be improved. However, staff expressed concern about the possible negative impact of transitional planning on children and young people, particularly those with additional support needs, while waiting on the outcome of placing requests.

3.6 Most parents, carers and Parent Council representatives from denominational and non-denominational schools who met with HM Inspectors did not fully support the proposal. While they recognised the need to address overcrowding and make better use of resources and space to enhance learning, many proposed alternative options such as increasing the size of the establishment or amending the catchment areas. A few wondered why the building of new schools or classrooms had not been considered. A few felt they had insufficient opportunity to explore the proposal with council officers, reporting that they had been unaware of the date for the public meeting. A majority felt that the document was over-technical and would welcome a more accessible document with which they and their children could more readily engage. The level of priority given to siblings of children currently attending out of catchment non-denominational or denominational primary schools was a major concern for a number of parents. A few parents expressed the view that siblings be moved higher up the proposed priority list for placing requests. In the Girvan area, parents, while understanding of the rationale for prioritising the placement of Roman Catholic children from within catchment at times of oversubscription, were anxious about the placement of their own children and that of any siblings.

3.7 The majority of children and young people from denominational and non-denominational schools who met with HM Inspectors were not fully aware of the implications of the proposal. However, they recognised the pressures on their schools from overcrowding, providing examples of carefully timetabled lunch and break times. A few who were transferring to secondary school in August spoke about their earlier anxieties while waiting for a placing request decision. Although this year they were all successful in transferring to the school of their choice, some were anxious that their siblings would, in the future, not be able to attend the same school.

3.8 The Diocese of Galloway welcomes the proposal to have guidelines in place to cover the potential oversubscription of schools. In its written submission, the Diocese supports the council's intention to give priority to Catholic children when allocating places in denominational schools. The Diocese also appreciates the need to be sensitive to the provision of places for those children who are not Catholic but who already have a sibling in a denominational school. The Diocese also raised a number of questions regarding the criteria for oversubscription and asked the council to also look at expanding provision in individual establishments as well reallocating pupils to alternative provisions.

4. Summary

South Ayrshire Council has set out a fair and reasonable case for revising its guidelines on admissions and for managing placing request procedures in primary and secondary schools. If implemented, the proposal will be of overall educational benefit to the children and young people who reside permanently within the catchment areas of the primary and secondary schools of South Ayrshire Council. The proposal should in addition ensure that school places remain available for young people and their families who wish for them to be educated in a Roman Catholic faith establishment. However, the council does not yet have broad support from the wider parental community for this proposal. In taking forward the proposal the council needs to set out how it will address the range of concerns raised during the consultation, in particular the request for further engagement with the wider parental community regarding the implications of the proposal. It should in addition ensure that placing request decisions are made at the earliest opportunity to ensure all young people, particularly those with additional support needs, are given the highest quality of support in transitioning into primary school and onto secondary school.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
June 2018**