

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by Scottish Borders Council to close St Margaret's RC Primary School in Hawick.

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 Scottish Borders Council's proposal to close St Margaret's RC Primary School in Hawick, with effect from August 2018. 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; 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; and
- visits to the site of St Margaret's RC Primary School and Drumlanrig St Cuthbert's Primary School, including discussion with relevant consultees.

2. Consultation Process

2.1 Scottish Borders 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 The council undertook a pre-consultation process whilst reviewing its school estate in 2016. This was promoted through letters, school mail, press releases, social media, posters and newsletters, with consultation events held across the region. As part of this there was a meeting with parents of children who attended St Margaret's RC Primary School. Meetings were also held between council officers and church representatives regarding the proposal to close St Margaret's RC Primary School and the educational benefits were discussed.

2.3 The formal consultation was begun as the school roll had continued to fall, resulting in a single P2 to P7 class with 14 children. This consultation took place between 22 November 2017 and 22 January 2018. A public meeting was held in St Margaret's RC Primary School on 5 December 2017. Members of the public were encouraged to respond to the proposal in a range of ways including written and online submissions. There were nine responses, four of which were from people who had a direct connection with St Margaret's RC Primary School. Five responses agreed with the proposal and four disagreed with it. School staff who spoke to HM Inspectors reported that the online response system was awkward to use and it would not let them proceed unless they indicated that they supported the proposal or that they were against it. Several staff would have preferred a third 'don't know' option as they were neither strongly for or against the proposal.

3. Educational Aspects of Proposal

3.1 The council considers that there are strong educational benefits associated with the proposal. It believes that being part of a larger school community will provide children with the opportunity to develop a wider and more diverse peer group within the community. It thinks that this will provide opportunity for interaction with a larger number of peers, allowing access to a wider range of views, and the opportunity to experience a wider range of teachers and learning experiences. It further believes that being part of a larger school community will enhance children's learning and provide them with opportunities to experience a broader curriculum. There is a strong case for children from St Margaret's RC Primary School benefitting by being part of a larger school and having a wider peer group. Children have very few peers of the same age, being part of a single class of 14 pupils from P2 to P7. They currently have to travel to a neighbouring school for physical education because they lack appropriate facilities in their own school. Overall, this aspect will be of significant educational benefit to children if the proposal moves forward.

3.2 The council believes that attending a primary school which has an early learning and childcare setting will allow children to learn with their peers from an early age. However, many schools across the country do not have nursery classes and this does not necessarily place children at a significant disadvantage. Overall, this aspect will be of more limited educational benefit to children.

3.3 The council thinks that attending a larger catchment school will provide more opportunities for children to participate in team sports and other activities, including benefitting from a wider range of solo and group musical and artistic opportunities. The current size and makeup of the school roll makes team sports difficult to organise and run. Local physical education teachers are clear that this puts children in St Margaret's RC Primary School at a disadvantage. Whilst these children undertake musical and artistic activities in their school, they will benefit from being part of a wider peer group, allowing them to come together in larger groups. Overall, this aspect will be of educational benefit to children if the council proceeds with the proposal.

3.4 The council considers that having a wider range of peers, to have discussions with, will help to develop children's awareness of the world of work, developing social and employability skills. Children from other local schools are clear that working in pairs and in groups is a very important aspect of their learning across the curriculum and they think that children from St Margaret's RC Primary School would benefit greatly from this approach. Overall, this aspect will be of educational benefit to children if the proposal moves forward.

3.5 Children who attend St Margaret's RC Primary School who spoke to HM Inspectors are sad at the prospect of their school closing. They can see advantages in being part of a larger school but will miss being in the same class. They are concerned about what will happen to the records of their achievements in the school such as certificates and trophies if the school closes. They would like the opportunity to visit the schools which they could transfer to with parents and classmates so that they can make an informed choice. In its final proposal paper, the council should ensure that appropriate time and opportunity is made available for enhanced transition procedures to take place for children from St Margaret's RC Primary School.

3.6 Parents of children who currently attend St Margaret's RC Primary School who spoke to HM Inspectors are not convinced that the closure is either necessary or desirable. They have concerns that the proposal paper gives the early learning provision in other schools as a benefit of closure and yet they have been asking for this provision to be put in place in St Margaret's for a number of years. They also have concerns that they have heard of instances of bullying in other schools. The council should ensure that they continue to discuss parents' concerns with them, including why early learning provision was never included in St Margaret's.

3.7 Staff at St Margaret's RC Primary School understand the rationale for the proposal, although they feel that the establishment of an early learning provision several years ago could have helped the school roll to rise. They have justifiable concerns that timings for the council decision-making followed by effective transitions for pupils may be too tight for the school to be closed by August 2018. In its final proposal paper, the council should confirm that appropriate time and opportunity will be available for enhanced transition procedures to take place for children from St Margaret's RC Primary School.

3.8 Children who attend other local primary schools who spoke to HM Inspectors are in favour of the proposal. They are keen to make the children welcome in their

own schools. They think that children from St Margaret's RC Primary School will benefit from a wider range of friends and from a wider range of learning opportunities. They also think that children and their parents should get the opportunity to visit other schools so that they can make an informed choice about where they would like to go next session.

3.9 Parents of children who attend other local primary schools who spoke to HM Inspectors are in favour of the proposal. They feel that the move to a larger peer group will be of benefit to the children who currently attend St Margaret's RC Primary School. They think that it will be important to have high quality transition procedures in place for these children and that the authority should be aware that the children will need ongoing support to help them to come to terms with closure of their school.

3.10 Staff from other local primary schools who spoke to HM Inspectors are generally in favour of the proposal. However, they have a justifiable concern that this will end Catholic education in the local area and they feel that the authority should make it clear how the children from St Margaret's will be supported in their faith journey should the school close.

3.11 Representatives from the Catholic Church acknowledge that the current situation in St Margaret's RC Primary School is not an effective use of council resources and that children are likely to benefit educationally from being part of a larger peer group. However, there is not clarity in the proposal paper about how children will be supported in their faith whilst in a non-denominational school. In its final proposal paper, the council should clarify how children will be supported in their faith journey if their school is closed.

4. Summary

- There is overall educational benefit to the proposal to close St Margaret's RC Primary School. Children who attend this school do not currently have the opportunity to benefit from working in age-appropriate groups and their school is not well-suited to modern learning and teaching across the curriculum. Children and staff currently have to travel to a neighbouring school for physical education because they lack appropriate facilities in their own school. Team sports and other group activities are compromised by the total school roll of 14 pupils from P2 to P7.

- There are a number of aspects which the council should consider when finalising this proposal. There are justifiable concerns that timings for the council decision-making followed by effective transitions for pupils may be too tight for the proposed closure date of August 2018. In its final proposal paper, the council should clarify the timescale for closure and confirm that children and their parents will get the opportunity to visit other schools so that they can make an informed choice about which school they attend next session. It should further confirm that appropriate time and opportunity will be available for enhanced transition procedures to take place for children from St Margaret's RC Primary School. The council should also clarify how children will be supported in their faith journey and to continue to progress with the curriculum for Religious Education in Roman Catholic Schools if their school is closed and be supported in coming to terms with the closure. If the proposal is

progressed, the council should ensure that it continues to discuss parents' concerns with them in the best interests of their children.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
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