

Consultation proposal by Comhairle nan Eilean Siar

Report by HM Inspectors, Education Scotland, addressing educational aspects of the proposal to close Eriskay Primary School, to extend the catchment area of Daliburgh School to include the current catchment area of Eriskay Primary School and to educate Eriskay Primary School pupils at Daliburgh School.

Context

This report from Education Scotland is required under the terms of the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*. It has been prepared by HM Inspectors in accordance with the terms of the Act. The purpose of this report is to provide an independent and impartial consideration of the council's consultation proposal. Section 2 of this report sets out the views expressed by consultees during the initial consultation process. Section 3 sets out HM Inspectors' consideration of the educational aspects of the proposal and the 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 it has reviewed the initial proposal, including a summary of points raised during the consultation and the council's response to them. The council has to publish its final consultation report three weeks before it takes its final decision.

As the council is proposing to close a school, it will need 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 the opportunity for representations to be made to Ministers.

1. Introduction

1.1 Comhairle nan Eilean Siar proposes to secure the best possible educational experiences for pupils in Comhairle nan Eilean Siar. It aims to deploy resources in order to secure continuous improvement in educational achievement and attainment and provide improved facilities in the most viable settings.

1.2 The report from HM Inspectors is required under the terms of the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*. It has been prepared by HM Inspectors in accordance with the terms of the Act.

1.3 HM Inspectors undertook the following activities in considering the educational aspects of the proposal:

- 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 Eriskay Primary School and Daliburgh School, including discussion with relevant consultees.

1.4 HM Inspectors considered:

- the likely effects of the proposal for the children of Eriskay Primary School and Daliburgh 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
- benefits which the council believes will result from implementation of the proposal, and the council's reasons for coming to these beliefs.

1.5 As the proposal will lead to the closure of a rural school as defined in the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*, HM Inspectors also took account of the council's consideration of:

- viable alternatives to the closure of Eriskay Primary School.
- the likely effect on the local community with regard to sustainability and on the community's access to the buildings, grounds and facilities if the school were to close; and
- the likely effect of different travelling arrangements on the environment and on children and young people and other school users occasioned by the closure.

2. Consultation process

2.1 Comhairle nan Eilean Siar undertook the initial consultation on its proposals with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*.

2.2 There are currently no pupils in attendance at Eriskay Primary School. Parents of children who live in the catchment area of Eriskay Primary School, have exercised their right to make placing requests to Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and allow their children to benefit from being educated at Daliburgh School, South Uist. Concerns have been raised by consultees regarding the continuing deterioration of the Eriskay Primary School buildings. They also raised issues about the length of the journey made by children from Eriskay to attend Daliburgh School. No parents of children attending Daliburgh School have expressed any objection to Eriskay children currently attending or of those who may attend in the future.

2.3 All children of nursery and school age currently living on the island of Eriskay, attend Daliburgh School. Those pupils who made a transition from Eriskay Primary School to Daliburgh School in August 2013 say they are settling in well. All have

made new friends and report that they enjoy the wide range of opportunities they now experience there. They are proud of their personal achievements and the responsibilities available to them in the school. Some younger children are still adapting to the longer day they now experience, due to travel time being greater than when they attended Eriskay Primary School. There is no nursery provision at Eriskay Primary School. Nursery children on the island of Eriskay attend nursery in Daliburgh. There is a small number of children under the age of three currently living on Eriskay. Once of nursery age, they are entitled to attend the nursery provision at Daliburgh. The projected number of children within the existing catchment area for Eriskay Primary School is expected to continue to decline.

2.4 Staff value opportunities to share good practice across Gaelic medium classes and English medium classes and reported this sharing of practice has already brought about benefits for the children through increased challenge in their learning. Staff commented on the travel arrangements for the children living on Eriskay. They have concern about the length of time the bus takes to make its journey from Eriskay to Daliburgh School and about the safety of the children crossing the road from the bus shelter on Eriskay to board the bus. Staff suggested that Eriskay children be offered the option of a dedicated bus to allow them to make the eight mile journey more quickly and more safely. The server for the internet located in Eriskay Primary School serves the whole of the island. Concern has been expressed by staff about the future of this vital facility for the children and their families and asked that this be made clear. Staff also raised concern about the continuing deterioration of the Eriskay Primary School buildings.

3. Educational aspects of the proposal

3.1 Comhairle nan Eilean Siar has identified educational benefits which it believes would arise as a result of its proposal. They correctly identify the enhanced learning environment provided by the new Daliburgh School, which opened in August 2012, as a benefit to children attending there. The wide range of quality facilities offered by the newly built school offers improved opportunities and experiences for children. Gaelic medium classes and English medium classes share the school's spacious provision for sports, dining and outdoor learning. Information and communications technology resources are of a high standard. The range of activities offered after school is very good. The learning environment offers flexibility to meet the needs of learners well. A follow through inspection report on Daliburgh School was published in August 2013. This report noted that the school has improved in many areas since the original inspection but work remains to be done to continue to improve aspects of the curriculum and to raise attainment further. As part of its ongoing approaches to improving the quality of education at Daliburgh School, the council should ensure that the quality of children's learning experiences and achievements at the school continue to improve.

3.2 The new Daliburgh School is accessible for those who have a disability. It offers an inclusive environment for children who have additional support needs. It is reasonable to state that this environment enhances learning and teaching for children, but the proposal does not make clear the ways in which support for children

will be improved. Greater consideration needs to be given to the ways in which partnership working can be improved.

3.3 Gaelic medium classes are offered at Daliburgh School and numbers in attendance are increasing. Opportunities for children to learn together across the school are provided and are having a positive impact on the ethos of the school.

3.4 It is reasonable to predict that future numbers of pupils from Eriskay will not result in the capacity of Daliburgh School being compromised. Indeed, the inclusion of Eriskay children at Daliburgh School increases learning opportunities for all pupils and in particular those learning together in the Gaelic medium classes. The ways in which teaching sets are made effective need to be more explicit in terms of outcomes for children.

3.5 As the proposal will lead to the closure of a rural school as defined in the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*, HM Inspectors also took account of the council's consideration of the factors to which it should have special regard. Comhairle nan Eilean Siar has reviewed its education provision and identified the declining numbers of pupils in Comhairle nan Eilean Siar as a significant challenge. It has set out the context for this proposal within the strategic overview of and rationalisation of provision. The investment in building the new school in Daliburgh ensures a sustainable future since it has capacity to increase its roll. The condition of Eriskay Primary School is of a poor standard and would require significant investment to bring about improvements. Its continuing deterioration will result in ever-increasing maintenance and repair costs. The council received a submission suggesting that the school be 'mothballed'. In responding to this suggestion, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar needs to establish the clear costs of 'mothballing' the school. Eriskay has strong traditions sustained through regular events held in the community hall. Comhairle nan Eilean Siar needs to consider the impact that closure of Eriskay Primary School may have on the long term sustainability of the community. The entire population of Eriskay relies upon their internet access from a server located in the school. Comhairle nan Eilean Siar needs to address how this essential means of communication will be sustained in the long-term.

3.6 The care and welfare of children travelling from Eriskay needs to be given careful consideration. As part of its routine arrangements for risk-assessing children's travel to school it needs to ensure that it monitors the time taken and travel conditions of the eight mile journey. This includes taking full account of weather conditions, the volume of traffic from the Barra ferry and the cumulative effect the current travel arrangements may have on some of the youngest children. The council needs to give consideration to the ways in which it can reduce the travel time for children.

4. Summary

4.1 The proposal from Comhairle nan Eilean Siar to close Eriskay Primary School and change the catchment area of Daliburgh School to include Eriskay Primary School offers some clear educational benefits to the children directly affected by the proposal and more widely across the council. The learning environment offered at

the new school in Daliburgh provides high standard accommodation from which children have benefited. During this time, the children have also benefited from access to a broader range of learning opportunities and from working together with children of a similar age and stage in paired, group and team activities. As part of its ongoing approaches to improving the quality of education at Daliburgh School, the council should ensure that the quality of children's learning experiences and achievements at the school continue to improve.

4.2 Parents and staff are justifiably concerned about the travel arrangements. In taking forward its proposal, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar needs to monitor the bus journey made by Eriskay children and provide information on how it ensures children's care, welfare and health and safety. The wider community of Eriskay has expressed concerns about the sustainability of their community. In taking the proposal forward Comhairle nan Eilean Siar needs to ensure all other viable options have been accurately assessed and provide stakeholders with information to ensure it has fully explored and explained the reasons for not pursuing any alternative options.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
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