

Consultation proposal by Comhairle nan Eilean Siar

Report by Education Scotland, addressing educational aspects of the proposal to review the common boundary of the catchment areas for Sgoil an Taobh Siar and Lionel school; Breasclete and Shawbost school; and Sir E Scott and Leverhulme Memorial School on the Isles of Lewis and Harris.

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

1. Introduction

1.1 Comhairle nan Eilean Siar proposes to define the catchment areas for six primary schools. The schools are:

- Sgoil an Taobh Siar and Lionel;
- Breasclete and Shawbost; and
- Sir E Scott and Leverhulme Memorial.

1.2 The 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.

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

- attendance at the two public meetings held on 20 November 2013 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 Sgoil an Taobh Primary School; Lionel School; Breasclete Primary School; Shawbost Primary School; Sir E Scott School; and

Leverhulme Memorial Primary School including discussion with relevant consultees.

1.4 HM Inspectors considered:

- the likely effects of the proposal for children and young people of the schools; 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.

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 All parents, staff and children felt that the council had provided appropriate opportunities for them to express their views. Only a few parents attended the public consultation meetings in Sir E Scott and Sgoil an Taobh Siar with no parents attending the one in Shawbost. The numbers of parents attending were higher in the other meetings with a maximum of eight at Leverhulme Memorial School.

2.3 The council has consulted with children drawn from P4 to P7 and senior pupils where possible. Children in the schools were aware of the proposals and only a few living in villages on the proposed new boundary expressed a concern about their friends going to a different school. Regardless of which school they are attending all the children felt a strong sense of connection to their own school.

2.4 The majority of responses received by the Council were in favour of the need for a review of common boundaries. The main concerns raised related to the proposed position of the new boundary line. A number of responses were concerned about the boundary dividing historically linked communities of North and South Galston, and Carloway and Tolsatachaolais. Parents had different views on which schools the combined communities should attend.

2.5 A small number of parents of Sir E Scott and Leverhulme Memorial Schools were concerned about the suitability of the single-track bus route to Leverburgh from Geocrab village, and considered the route to Sir E Scott to be more suitable and safer.

2.6 A number of parents of children currently attending Sir E Scott School from Geocrab and Manish want the school to be their designated school rather than Leverhulme Memorial School. Parents living in Geocrab and Manish who attended the public consultation sessions believed that Sir E Scott was already their children's designated school rather than Leverhulme.

2.7 All the headteachers and staff interviewed supported the proposal to review the catchment areas. The recent closure of schools as a result of rationalisation of the council's educational estate had created a number of anomalies whereby children were not attending their nearest school. Staff generally did not have strong views about the proposals as the changes affect very low numbers of children. A few staff were concerned about where the proposed common boundary was to be placed.

3. Educational aspects of the proposal

3.1 The proposal to review the common boundary of the catchment areas is of overall educational benefit. If implemented it would address a number of anomalies whereby children are not attending their local school which would reduce travelling time. The six schools named in this proposal are rural schools and the periphery of the boundaries for all schools is to be placed in areas which include very few families with school aged children. The proposals are unlikely to impact on the numbers attending any of the schools. However, in a very small number of cases parents may qualify for free transport to school or be liable for costs as a result of the changes. The council has indicated that parents would continue to be able to make placing requests should they want their children to attend a school other than the one designated for their area. The council's figures indicate that all the schools have spare capacity. Sir E Scott School has an occupancy rate of 89 per cent in the primary school, and is the only school close to capacity. The council will not introduce transport costs to children affected by the changes until the start of the new summer term. The council offers a subsidised bus service for parents not eligible for free home to school transport.

3.2 The proposal to review the catchment areas would allow the council to respond more confidently to demographic changes. There are proposals to release a small number of plots of land for houses in the Carloway area and any prospective parents will want to know their designated school.

3.3 The proposal to use the river running through the Galston village as the common boundary between Lionel School and Sgoil an Taobh Siar was considered by a number of parents and staff to be creating a divide in a small village. There are only four school aged children in the village. The children and parents affected are concerned that going to different schools will have a detrimental impact on friendships. In taking forward its proposals the council needs to consider fully the respective merits of the suggested boundary changes on the local communities.

3.4 A few parents in Breasclete Primary School believe there are strong historical links between the Carloway and Tolsatachaolais areas. The new boundary between Breasclete and Shawbost Primary Schools is to be placed between the two hamlets. In taking forward its proposals the council needs to consider fully the respective merits of the suggested boundary changes on the local communities.

3.5 Parents and staff from the two schools of Sir E Scott and Leverhulme Memorial Schools want the villages of Geocrab and Manish to be in the catchment area of Sir E Scott due to the travel time of the bus on the single-track road to Leverhulme Memorial School. In taking forward its proposals the council needs to

consider fully parents' concerns over the suitability of the single track road for public transport travelling from Geocrab to Leverhulme Memorial School.

3.6 The proposal does not envisage the closure of any school or stage of education. The council should continue to reassure parents in Leverhulme Memorial School that the changes will not mean the closure of the school. Currently the school has 30 per cent occupancy based on the figures provided by the council. The staff in Lionel School are concerned about the impact of any changes on their secondary provision.

3.7 All schools offer Gaelic medium both in primary and pre-school levels. All the schools had wireless internet connection, almost all classrooms have interactive white boards and children were observed using netbooks. Children requiring additional support needs were being supported in all schools. All schools had facilities for disabled toileting but the older schools would not be as accessible for wheelchair use. All schools were provided with auxiliary staffing. The schools had facilities for physical activity either in the school or by using adjoining community centres. All schools were allocated peripatetic support from visiting specialist teachers. Sir E Scott, Shawbost and Lionel Schools have swimming pools. All the schools offer after school clubs or are planning to do so. A few of the schools offer a wide range of clubs including chanter, Gaelic youth club and church groups. Sir E Scott is a school for three to 18 years of age and Lionel School supported by the Nicholson Institute, offers the first two years of secondary school.

3.8 The council's 2013 assessment of the condition of the schools rates Sgoil an Taobh Siar and Sir E Scott as condition 'A' good. Breasclete, Lionel and Shawbost Schools are rated as condition 'B' satisfactory and Leverhulme Memorial school is rated as condition 'C' poor. The majority of parents and staff in Leverhulme Memorial School have concerns that the external condition of their school would deter parents from choosing the school over the newly built Sir E Scott School. The council stated at the consultation meeting at Leverhulme Memorial School that the school has been identified within the council's capital spending programme. The council needs to keep the school community of Leverhulme informed about the progress of planned improvements to the fabric of the school.

4. Summary

4.1 The council's proposal is of overall educational benefit as it clarifies the shared boundaries resulting from the recent review of the schools' estate. In taking forward the proposal, the council needs to consider the position of the shared boundaries at Geocrab, Galston and Tolsatachaolais to ensure it addresses fully the concerns raised by the community during the consultation.

4.2 All schools are able to provide a similar range of activities including the Gaelic medium classes. The proposed changes are not expected to change the numbers attending each school.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
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