

Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by Aberdeenshire Council to close Strachan School and reassign its catchment area to Banchory Primary School and/or Finzean School.

March 2020

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 Aberdeenshire Council's proposal to close Strachan School and reassign its catchment area to Banchory Primary School and/or Finzean 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 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 and the special provisions that apply to proposals to close a rural school.

1.2 HM Inspectors considered:

- the likely effects of the proposal for children 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; and
- visits to the sites of Strachan School, Finzean School and Banchory Primary School and discussions with the headteachers of Durris School and Hill of Banchory School, and other 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 Strachan 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 Aberdeenshire Council undertook the consultation on its proposal(s) with reference to the [Schools \(Consultation\) \(Scotland\) Act 2010](#).

2.2 Aberdeenshire Council set out to undertake the consultation between 7 January and 21 February 2020. During the consultation period, the council became aware that due to school closure and staff in-service days, the statutory requirement to hold the consultation for 30 days of term time could not be met within the dates scheduled. The council therefore extended the consultation by one week to 28 February 2020. A public meeting was held on 6 February 2020 at Strachan Village Hall. Copies of the council's proposal document were made available to consultees and a copy was posted on the council's website along with an online questionnaire. The questionnaire sought stakeholders views on the closure proposal and on four different options. These were to close Strachan School and merge with Banchory Primary School; close Strachan School and merge with Finzean School, close Strachan School and divide the catchment between Banchory Primary School and Finzean School, or continue to mothball Strachan School. Staff and children of affected schools were given the opportunity to discuss the proposal.

2.3 The council received 66 responses to its online survey questionnaire of which 43 supported the proposal to close Strachan School whilst 22 did not support the proposal and one did not answer that question. The second question on the council's online questionnaire asked respondents to indicate their preferred option from four choices if they supported the closure of Strachan School. The fourth option was to continue to mothball the school. However, during the public meeting a council officer stated that, although this option was included in the proposal document, it had been discounted during the options appraisal process. The council will need to clarify this in its final proposal paper. Of those who responded to the second question in the council's online questionnaire, 20 people preferred option one, to close Strachan School and merge with Banchory Primary School; 11 people preferred option two, to close Strachan School and merge with Finzean School; 15 people preferred option three, to close Strachan School and divide its catchment area between Banchory Primary School and Finzean School, and 16 people preferred option four, to continue to mothball Strachan School.

2.4 There is no analysis in the council's documents of the status or proportions of different stakeholders who completed the online survey, since no information of this nature was requested in the council's online questionnaire. This has resulted in limited information as to which parents, staff or others from which schools or other organisations supported which of the four different options offered. The council should clarify its approach to this survey in its final proposal paper.

2.5 In addition to the online survey, the council received five email responses to its consultation of which one supported the proposal to close Strachan School, three, including a detailed response from Feughdee West Community Council, supported a continuation of mothballing, and one objected to the way the council had conducted its consultation and online survey.

3. Educational aspects of proposal

3.1 There are potential educational benefits in the council's proposal to close Strachan School and for each of the three different options offered by the council for reassigning the school's catchment area. Strachan School has been mothballed since 2017 when its one remaining pupil was transferred to Banchory Primary School. Although there are currently 48 children of primary school age living in the catchment area of Strachan School these children attend other primary schools as a result of school placing requests. Aberdeenshire Council has sought enrolments at Strachan School for the last two academic years but has not received any. The council has

concluded that it is unlikely to achieve a viable school roll which would enable the reopening of the school.

3.2 The council's proposal option to close Strachan School and reassign its catchment area to Banchory Primary School is of potential educational benefit. During the mothballing period Banchory Primary School was nominated as the designated school for children living in the Strachan School catchment area. At present, 29 children from the Strachan School catchment area attend Banchory Primary School. The school has a current roll of 405 children with an additional 52 children attending the nursery. Banchory Primary School is located a relatively short distance of 3.7 miles from Strachan School. Children from the Strachan School area attending Banchory Primary School would have access to a much broader range of facilities and better space for learning. They would be able to benefit from learning with their peers and have more opportunities to work in groups, socialise and take part in sport and cultural activities, including lunchtime and after school clubs. They would have more opportunities to develop leadership skills through taking part in a number of school committees and groups. Children's development of skills for life and work could be enhanced through the school's partnerships with local businesses and other organisations. Banchory Primary School is designated as the council's Enhanced Provision Centre and has a sensory room, a life skills area, nurture space and other quiet space. Children with additional support needs could benefit from the resources available at Banchory Primary School. The school is located geographically close to Banchory Academy, which is the designated secondary school for Strachan School. Staff and children are able to access some of Banchory Academy's facilities including physical education and science areas. Children could potentially benefit from an improved experience when making the transition from primary to secondary school.

3.3 The council's proposal option to close Strachan School and reassign its catchment area to Finzean School is also of potential educational benefit. The school has a current roll of 45 children and capacity for 71. Five children from the catchment area of Strachan School currently attend Finzean School. The school has three classrooms and good outdoor learning and play facilities. The school makes good use of a nearby Forest School facility enabling children to learn outdoors and develop a range of skills relevant to rural life. Children from Strachan School catchment area attending Finzean School would benefit from a continuity of educational experience through attending another remote rural school with similar features. They could benefit from learning skills for life and work through the school's partnership work with local organisations including the Birse Community Trust and the Birse Estate. Finzean School roll is forecast to reduce to 28 children by 2023-24. Reassigning the Strachan School catchment area to Finzean School could potentially improve the sustainability Finzean School and enable children to continue to learn together in classes comprised of age appropriate peer groups. Finzean School is located a distance of five miles from Strachan School. However, it is zoned to Aboyne Academy for secondary school education which is situated 12 miles from Strachan School. This option would result in longer home to school journey times for the majority of children and young people residing in the current Strachan School catchment area.

3.4 The council's proposal paper option to close Strachan School and divide its current catchment area between Banchory Primary School and Finzean School is also of potential educational benefit. However, as a high proportion of the population in the Strachan area resides in or near the village of Strachan, assigning the west part of the Strachan School catchment area to Finzean School would have a marginal impact on the pupil roll of Finzean School.

3.5 It is not sufficiently clear from the council's proposal documents and statements made at public meetings that the council's fourth option, to continue mothballing Strachan School, remains an option under the council's active consideration. The council will need to clarify its position in its final proposal document. Whilst the number of children residing in the Strachan School catchment

area is sufficient to establish a viable school roll, the council will need to consider the potential for a sufficient proportion of parents to choose to enrol their children at Strachan School in future, if considering this option.

3.6 Parents, staff and children from both Banchory Primary School and Finzean School who spoke with HM Inspectors agreed with the council's proposal to close Strachan School. Parents felt that children from the Strachan School catchment had settled well in other schools and it was highly unlikely that many parents would choose to move children again, were Strachan School to reopen in future.

3.7 In Banchory Primary School parents, staff and children felt that with a roll of 405 children the school offered a very different experience for children than that of Strachan School. They valued the greater range of facilities available at the school and the opportunities children had to learn and socialise with their peers. They felt that the proximity and joint work between Banchory Academy and Banchory Primary School enhanced children's experiences when moving from P7 to S1. Parents thought that the After School Club, Breakfast Club and the proximity to other childcare services in the town of Banchory were important for working parents. They supported the option to reassign Strachan School's catchment area to Banchory Primary School.

3.8 In Finzean School parents, staff and children emphasised how much they valued their school's strong sense of community and the opportunities children had to learn both within the school and in outdoor learning at the nearby Forrest School facility. Children felt safe, enjoyed learning and were proud of their school. Parents were highly supportive of the school and its staff and valued the particular features of a small rural school. They were concerned about the declining school roll and anxious that a reducing roll could result in moving from a three class provision to a two class provision. They felt that this could have a further negative impact on the sustainability of the school. They supported the proposals to assign all or part of the Strachan School Catchment area to Finzean School. Those parents who had chosen to move their children from Strachan School to Finzean School felt their children responded much better to school life in a small rural school than they would in a much larger school. The council will need to consider what steps it can take to provide reassurance to parents about working with them on the longer term sustainability of Finzean School.

3.9 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.

3.10 The council considered alternative options to the closure of Strachan School. It was not considered viable to reopen Strachan School, since the council had already unsuccessfully sought enrolments into the school since mothballing the school. Reopening the school with an expanded catchment area was also not considered possible since this could result in longer travel times for children and could have a negative impact on the pupil rolls of other remote rural schools including Durriss School and Finzean School. It is not sufficiently clear from the council's proposal paper and its consultation process if the option to continue to mothball Strachan School remains under active consideration. This option was included in an online questionnaire but discounted at the public meeting.

3.11 The council also considered and discounted the option to reassign Strachan School's catchment to Hill of Banchory School. Thirteen children from the Strachan School catchment area currently attend Hill of Banchory School. This option was discounted due to pressure on the Hill of Banchory School roll. The option of Durriss School was also considered and discounted as there would be insufficient space to accommodate all of the children in the Strachan School catchment area.

3.12 The council considered the likely impact on the local community and has engaged with community members on possible alternative uses of the Strachan School building, should it decide to close the school permanently. The council has also considered the likely effect of different travelling arrangements on the environment. All children and young people in the current Strachan School catchment area would be entitled to school transport. This would not have a major additional impact on emissions or traffic above that of the current situation.

4. Summary

Aberdeenshire's proposal to close Strachan School and reassign its catchment area is of potential educational benefit. Children attending Banchory Primary School would have access to a much broader range of facilities and more opportunities to learn and socialise with their peers. Children attending Finzean School could benefit from a continuity of educational experience through attending a remote rural school with a strong sense of community. Increasing Finzean School's roll through reassigning all or part of the Strachan School catchment area is also of potential benefit to the longer term sustainability of Finzean School.

The council will need to take account of stakeholders' views on each of its four consultation options in its final consultation paper. It should also clarify its position on consideration of its fourth option to continue mothballing Strachan School and its approach to analysing stakeholder views through its online survey.

HM Inspectors
March 2020