

Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010

Report by HM Inspectors of Education addressing educational aspects of the proposal by Aberdeenshire Council to discontinue education at Longhaven School, which is currently mothballed and reassign its catchment to either Boddam School and/or Port Erroll School.

March 2022

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 discontinue education at Longhaven School, which is currently mothballed, and reassign its catchment area to either Boddam School and/or Port Erroll 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 2010 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 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 virtual public meetings held on 24 and 25 January 2022 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
- virtual visits to Boddham School and Port Erroll School, including discussion with 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 the closure of Longhaven 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 The consultation process ran from 7 December 2021 to 24 February 2022. Copies of the council's proposal document were made available to the public 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 three different options. Proposed options are: to close Longhaven School and merge with Boddam School; close Longhaven School and merge with Port Erroll School; and close Longhaven School and create a dual zone/shared catchment between Boddam School and Port Erroll School.

2.3 Virtual public meetings were attended by three members of the public. There was a general acceptance of the proposal. In addition, it was felt that the council should proceed with the outcome of the consultation as quickly as possible. This would help secure the future of the Longhaven School building for future use. Comments also suggested that Longside Primary School is an option for children in the current catchment area for Longhaven School to attend. This option had already been discounted as part of pre-consultation work but it was agreed this could be explored again should there be further interest.

2.4 The council received 13 responses to the online questionnaire and email. Nine responses were in favour of the proposal and four against. Those against were local residents rather than parents with children of primary school age who could attend Longhaven School. The questionnaire asked respondents to indicate their preferred option from three choices if they supported the closure of Longhaven School. The responses indicated: one person preferred option one, to close Longhaven School and merge with Boddam School; two people preferred option two, to close Longhaven School and merge with Port Erroll School; and nine people preferred option three, to close Longhaven School and dual zone/shared catchment between Boddam School and Port Erroll School.

3. Educational aspects of proposal

3.1 Following consultation with affected parents and the school community, Longhaven School was mothballed by Aberdeenshire Council in October 2018. During school session 2017-2018, the pupil roll at Longhaven School fell to 12 pupils after a period of variable numbers and challenges in recruiting staff. Aberdeenshire Council consulted with all families in the catchment. This resulted children being offered alternative placements at local schools. As the primary aged population in the catchment area has not increased nor is likely to increase significantly in the future, the council proposes to permanently close Longhaven School. Parents of children who would be eligible to attend Longhaven School have expressed their wish that their children attend alternative local schools rather than reopen the school. Reasons include, for example, family circumstances, work locations of parents and concerns over the longer term viability of the school.

3.2 HM Inspectors broadly agree with the council's educational benefits statement and are confident there is sufficient merit to consider the permanent closure of Longhaven School. All stakeholders who spoke with HM Inspectors were in favour of the council's proposal to discontinue education at Longhaven School. They accept the rationale for the proposal but also acknowledge the sadness of the loss of a school within the community. Minimal use is made of the Longhaven School building by the community due to the availability of a modern public hall. The main concern expressed by consultees, is to secure productive use for the already vacant school building.

3.3 Due to Longhaven School being mothballed, all children in the existing catchment are enrolled in alternative schools in the local area. Parents welcome the commitment made to allow all children, and younger siblings, to continue their education at their current school regardless of new catchment arrangements.

3.4 HM Inspectors view each of the three options offered by the council for reassigning the school's catchment area as having merit. These include larger peer groups, continuity in educational provision from ages 3-12, wider leadership opportunities for children and access to a wide range of facilities and extra-curricular activities. Children whom HM Inspectors engaged with shared their favourable experiences in their schools, both learning experiences and extra-curricular clubs such as coding, cooking and woodwork. In considering how the catchment will be reassigned, stakeholders who engaged with HM Inspectors unanimously prefer the third option; to create a dual zone/shared catchment with Boddam School and Port Erroll School.

3.5 As the proposal will lead to the closure of a rural school, HM Inspectors also considered the factors to which the council should give special regard. Aberdeenshire Council have actively engaged with the wider community to explore all reasonable alternatives to closure of Longhaven School prior to statutory consultation. No parents have chosen to enrol their children at Longhaven School since 2018. Five children living in Longhaven catchment could potentially start Primary 1 in August 2022 or August 2023, once they reach school age. Through direct engagement with families the council has concluded that it is unlikely to achieve a viable school roll which would enable the reopening of the school. Consideration has been made to extending the Longhaven catchment area but this has been discounted due to increased travel times and implications for cluster boundaries. In addition, this may impact on the roll of other schools. Should the proposal proceed, travel arrangements for children will continue to the school they now attend, with free transport for the relatively short distance of a few miles. The proposal, should it proceed, will have minimal impact on the environment or on any other school due to very low numbers of children from the existing Longhaven catchment. Both Boddam School and Port Erroll School also have significant capacity to accommodate any increased roll.

4. Summary

HM Inspectors agree there are educational benefits in the proposal to discontinue education at Longhaven School. There are uncertainties about the viability of the school moving forward. Stakeholders welcome the stability offered by the increased rolls of other local schools. They value the different opportunities and experiences in these larger schools. Examples cited include, larger peer groups, leadership opportunities and range of additional activities and clubs.

When communicating with HM Inspectors, stakeholders expressed a unanimous view that parents and children should have a choice of school should their local school, Longhaven School, close. Therefore their view represents option three; to close Longhaven School and create a dual zone/shared catchment between Boddam School and Port Erroll School. HM Inspectors agree that this is a reasonable consideration. This will allow decisions about schooling to be made on a personal basis and secure transport options to both schools. If the proposal is accepted, Aberdeenshire Council should take account of the unanimous preference for the dual zone/shared catchment with Boddam and Port Erroll.

HM Inspectors
March 2022