

Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by Fife Council to close Milton of Balgonie Primary School and to rezone the catchment areas of Coaltown of Balgonie, Pitteuchar East and Thornton Primary Schools.

March 2024

1. Introduction

1.1 This report from Education Scotland has been prepared by His 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 a proposal from Fife Council to close Milton of Balgonie Primary School and to rezone the catchment areas of Coaltown of Balgonie, Pitteuchar East and Thornton Primary Schools. 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 schools; 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 public meetings held on 5, 12, 21 and 28 February 2024 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 Coaltown of Balgonie, Pitteuchar East and Thornton Primary Schools, 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 closure of Milton of Balgonie Primary School. HM Inspectors also considered the likely effect on the local community and of any different travelling arrangements of the proposed closure.

2. Consultation process

2.1 Fife Council undertook the consultation on its proposal(s) with reference to the [Schools \(Consultation\) \(Scotland\) Act 2010](#).

2.2 Milton of Balgonie Primary School is classified as an accessible rural school. For academic session 2019-20, the remaining pupils moved to other primary schools as a result of parental choice. Fife Council arranged free school transport to Coaltown of Balgonie Primary School for those distance entitled pupils living in the Milton of Balgonie catchment area from August 2019. The council agreed to mothball the school in January 2021. The council established the catchment areas of all four primary schools affected by this proposal prior to the construction of a regional trunk road. This road now bisects these catchment areas and has resulted in catchment boundary anomalies.

2.3 The statutory consultation ran from 24 January to 12 March 2024. Copies of the proposal were made available to stakeholders, including parents and pupils. Four public meetings were held throughout February 2024 in the catchment areas affected, which were attended by 11 stakeholders in total. The council received 20 responses to their consultation and one written representation. A minority of respondents were supportive of the proposed closure of Milton of Balgonie Primary School. There were mixed views about the proposal to rezone catchment areas. A few respondents expressed concern that it was too early to make changes to catchment areas due to planned housing developments. A few parents were also concerned about the future capacity of schools to accept placing requests. They feel this may result in siblings attending different primary schools.

2.4 The council facilitated consultation sessions with 84 P4-7 children from each of the schools affected. Almost all children are keen for more children to join their school. The majority of children enjoy being part of a bigger school. They feel that being part of a one class school could limit opportunities to be involved in team sports.

3. Educational aspects of proposal

3.1 HM Inspectors agree that Fife Council has clearly outlined a range of education benefits in the proposal to close Milton of Balgonie Primary School. The school roll for Milton of Balgonie Primary School is not predicted to rise significantly in the next four years and children from the catchment area are settled in Coaltown of Balgonie Primary School. They continue to benefit from an enhanced range of curricular experiences, more opportunities including team activities, and the wider social aspects of attending a larger school. Children also benefit from a buddy system, which helps them to support each other with learning and with whole school activities.

3.2 HM Inspectors agree with the education benefits outlined from rezoning the catchment areas of Coaltown of Balgonie, Pitteuchar East and Thornton Primary Schools. This will help to balance school rolls, which should support the sustainability and viability of the schools. It will enable children living in the Westwood Park area to attend the same school and be educated with peers living in close proximity. It will also enable those living in the Lochtyview area to attend the school in the community that they live in and increase options walk to school.

3.3 HM Inspectors met with children, parents and staff, including headteachers. All were supportive of the council's proposal to close Milton of Balgonie Primary School. Almost all were supportive of the council's proposal to rezone the catchment areas of Coaltown of Balgonie, Pitteuchar East and Thornton Primary Schools.

3.4 A few children who met with HM Inspectors had attended Milton of Balgonie Primary School. They are happy attending their current school and feel they have lots of opportunities to participate in clubs and after-school activities. They benefit from having a larger friendship group and value additional opportunities to try new things. Almost all children that met with HM Inspectors were supportive of the proposed changes to primary school catchment areas. Children recognised the importance of being able to walk to school. They believe the proposal

may reduce travel distances from home to school for some families and increase opportunities for more active travel. A few children were concerned that it may result in siblings attending different schools and the potential impact this may have on their parents. Children living in the current Milton of Balgonie catchment area are concerned about the future use of the school building. If the school closes, they would like to see the building used for community benefit.

3.5 The staff and parents that met with HM Inspectors consider that the proposed changes make sense. They believe it will bring catchment areas of the schools in line with the geography of the surrounding area and reduce the need to cross busy roads. They are clear that the proposal will enable more children to attend their nearest school and will help to sustain the school rolls in a more balanced way. Those living in the Thornton area believe children will make stronger connections with their local town. All staff believe that, should this proposal proceed, the changes will have little impact on children and families. No parents from the Coaltown of Balgonie Primary School or the Milton of Balgonie catchment area took up the opportunity to meet with HM Inspectors.

3.6 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 in special regard. The council took appropriate steps to consider reasonable alternatives to close Milton of Balgonie Primary School. These included the continued mothballing of the school and rezoning the catchment areas for other schools to allow Milton of Balgonie to reopen. Currently, children residing in the Milton of Balgonie catchment travel to school by private car or school transport and are settled in Coaltown of Balgonie Primary School. The implementation of the proposal would have little impact on almost all children. Most children from the Milton of Balgonie catchment area would like to see a positive outcome to be found for the use of the existing school building that could be used for community benefit.

4. Summary

Overall, HM Inspectors agree that the proposal to close Milton of Balgonie Primary School and the changes to catchment areas will result in educational benefits. Children from Milton of Balgonie catchment area are settled in their current school and enjoy learning alongside their peers in a larger school community. Almost all stakeholders agree that proposed changes to catchment areas will resolve catchment anomalies and enable children to attend their nearest school. The proposal will also help to balance school rolls and school capacity. If the proposal is approved, there may be a need to work with parents to reduce the likelihood of siblings attending different primary schools. The council should also work with the local community to explore the potential future use of the school building.

HM Inspectors
March 2024