

Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by Argyll and Bute Council to close Achaleven Primary School and realign its catchment area to Lochnell Primary School.

November 2023

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 Argyll and Bute Council's proposal to close Achaleven Primary School and realign its catchment area to Lochnell Primary 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 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 meeting held on 4 October 2023 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 Lochnell Primary School, Dunbeg Primary School and Oban High School, including discussion with relevant consultees.

1.4 As the proposal will lead to the closure of a rural school(s), HM Inspectors also took account of the council's consideration of any reasonable alternatives to closure of Achaleven Primary 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 Argyll and Bute Council undertook the consultation on its proposal(s) with reference to the [Schools \(Consultation\) \(Scotland\) Act 2010](#).

2.2 In June 2021, Argyll and Bute Council approved the mothballing of Achaleven Primary School. In August 2022, the council agreed to undertake a preliminary consultation and options appraisal required by the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010. The council considered four options including the reopening of Achaleven Primary School, continued mothballing with pupils zoned to either Lochnell or Dunbeg Primary School, and the closure and realignment of the catchment area to Dunbeg Primary School. In August 2023, the council agreed to proceed with the fourth option, to consult on a proposal to permanently discontinue education provision at Achaleven Primary School from 31 May 2024, and to realign the catchment area to Lochnell Primary School.

2.3 The council undertook the consultation between 31 August and 27 October 2023. The proposal notice and a summary was advertised in the local press and sent to relevant consultees. The full proposal document was published on the council website. Argyll and Bute Council held a public meeting at Achaleven Primary School on 4 October 2023. This was attended by three members of the local community, including one parent, and council officials. Most of the discussion focused on the potential future use of the school building if the closure is approved. The council received one response to the online consultation.

2.4 Children attending Lochnell and Dunbeg Primary Schools were also consulted by council officers, including children who live in the Achaleven catchment area. Children were given the opportunity to provide their views. Most children in both primary schools thought it was a good idea to close the Achaleven Primary School. They particularly enjoy the social aspects of being in the larger schools, their school's facilities, and more variety of staff. They suggested several alternative uses for the building if it were to close.

3. Educational aspects of proposal

3.1 The council has set out clearly the educational benefits arising from the proposal to close Achaleven Primary School and realign its catchment area to Lochnell Primary School. HM Inspectors agree that there may be educational benefits for children. These include participation in a broader range of experiences and opportunities to learn, develop and socialise with a wider group of peers. The council has highlighted one negative aspect around additional travel. However, HM Inspectors agree that the positive aspects of the proposal outweigh this negative aspect.

3.2 HM Inspectors met with primary school children and staff, and a few young people in Oban High School who had previously attended Achaleven Primary School. All of these stakeholders understand why the council is proposing to permanently close the school. The young people that met with HM Inspectors have fond memories of their time at Achaleven Primary School and recall positive learning experiences that prepared them well for secondary school. They would like the primary school to remain open to provide more choice. However, they accept that in the current context reopening the school is not practical. Most primary school children and staff that met with HM Inspectors support the proposal. Children enjoy and benefit from the learning environment and experiences provided in Lochnell and Dunbeg Primary Schools. Both schools have sufficient capacity to meet learners needs.

3.3 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. The council took appropriate steps and due consideration of alternatives before consulting on the proposal to permanently close Achaleven Primary School. The additional travel time resulting from the school closure is relatively short and none of the stakeholders that HM Inspectors met with had any significant concerns about the added journey time. A few stakeholders suggested alternatives to the proposed new catchments. This included that a more natural boundary would be to divide the

school catchments at Connel Bridge. While accidents and bridge repairs are not a frequent occurrence, aligning the school catchments at this location could help to mitigate any potential negative impact on school attendance if the bridge is closed. Another suggestion is to realign the full catchment to Dunbeg Primary School, which currently has sufficient capacity to accommodate children from the Achaleven catchment. Should the council decide to permanently close Achaleven Primary School, stakeholders would like the existing building and adjoining grounds to be repurposed for community use.

4. Summary

HM Inspectors agree that there are potential educational benefits for children arising from the council's proposal to close Achaleven Primary School. For example, that there maybe more opportunities for them to learn, develop and socialise with a wider group of their peers. The proposed alignment to Lochnell Primary School, an alternative alignment to Dunbeg Primary School, or a split between the two schools offers similar educational benefits. The council should consider the alternative views on the school catchment alignment put forward during the consultation before reaching a final decision. The council should also work with the local community, including children and young people, to consider any future use for the school and grounds should the proposal to close be agreed.

HM Inspectors
November 2023