**Consultation proposal by Aberdeen City Council**

**Report by HM Inspectors, Education Scotland, addressing educational aspects of the proposal to close Glashieburn and Middleton Park Schools and establish an amalgamated school within the existing Glashieburn building and campus from August 2014 and to vary the delineated catchment area of Middleton Park, Brimmond School and Bucksburn Academy.**

## 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. As the council is proposing to close a school, it will need to follow all legislative obligations set out in the 2010 Act, including notifying Ministers within six working days of making its final decision and explaining the opportunity for representations to be made to Ministers.

## 1. Introduction

1.1 The report from HM Inspectors 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.

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

- attendance at the public meeting held on 1 October 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;
- consideration of further representations made directly to HM Inspectors on relevant educational aspects of the proposal;
- consideration of further information on all schools affected; and

- visits to the sites of Middleton Park School and Glashieburn School, including discussion with relevant consultees.

1.3 HM Inspectors considered:

- the likely effects of the proposal for children and young people 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

- 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 Aberdeen City Council undertook the initial consultation on its proposals with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*. The consultation included four public meetings held in September and October 2013 and invitations to submit written responses, by email or to complete a pro-forma. The consultation period ran from 26 August to 11 October 2013. The council received a large number of responses to its proposal. This included a petition which was signed by 2040 people. None of the responses supported the proposal. A member of staff from the council undertook a consultation exercise with children in attendance at both schools involved in the proposal. Officers of the council also met with staff and parent representatives of both schools to discuss the proposal.

2.2 Parent Councils in both schools submitted detailed documents, along with a joint document, against the proposals. Parents in both schools expressed concern in relation to the capacity of Glashieburn School to accommodate the expected number of children within the primary school, nursery classes and Additional Support Needs (ASN) base. They were also concerned about the significant loss of outdoor space, the lack of time and facilities for physical education and whole school events, and the arrangements for lunchtimes. Parents were concerned about the potential impact of increased class sizes on their children's progress. Parents at Middleton Park School value the very positive ethos which they believe their school provides. They are pleased with their children's progress and the learning experiences which the school provides. Parents do not feel that the proposal, if implemented, would be of educational benefit to their children. Parents and other stakeholders expressed concern about potential difficulties in relation to traffic management at Glashieburn School and the possible adverse impact on children's safety. Parents expressed concern regarding the lack of any clear plans for the proposed new layout of the school which did not appear until late into the consultation. Parents expressed concern about the timescales of the proposal, particularly given any building work which would have to take place. Parents expressed concern that the figures which

the council provided for school roll forecasts and house building forecasts were inaccurate.

2.3 Almost all children consulted disagreed with the proposal. They are concerned about the possibility of being in larger classes and that there would not be enough space in the school for everyone. They had concerns that they would all be cramped. They believed that they would have access to less outdoor space, particularly the current Middleton Park School pupils. They are concerned that there would not be enough hall space for everyone to have physical education, whole school assemblies or shows, and they may not have enough time to eat at lunchtime. Children at Middleton Park School are particularly concerned about the loss of their eco garden and their large grounds. Children are concerned that they might be split up from friends and siblings, along with the fact that they will not have as many opportunities to be captains or leaders in a larger school.

2.4 Staff in both schools expressed concerns over the proposal, submitting responses from each school. Middleton Park School staff were strongly opposed to the proposal. They did not feel the proposal would bring educational benefit to the children. Staff from both schools were concerned at the lack of space indoors and outdoors, the negative effect on delivery of the health and wellbeing programme and the limitations of use of hall time for other activities such as assemblies, parental events and physical education. Middleton Park staff expressed concerns that nursery provision would be negatively impacted upon, with an increase from 20 to the proposed nursery class of 60 children altogether with very limited opportunity for free-flow learning indoors and outdoors. Middleton Park staff felt the proposal implied that they were currently not collaborating, sharing learning and offering innovative experiences to the children. Middleton Park staff expressed concern about the period of consultation. They felt they had not been fully involved, consulted or informed throughout. Staff from both schools expressed concern and anxiety at the timescale of the proposal, particularly as building work may need to be done; time will be needed for the recruitment of a new headteacher; and time would be needed for planning and for organising the transition of children. Staff from both schools also expressed concern over job security.

## 3. Educational aspects of the proposal

3.1 The proposal sets out Aberdeen City Council's view that implementation of the proposal will improve the educational experiences of learners and will improve the life chances of young people. The main educational benefits the council claims for the proposal are children will benefit from access to the amalgamated and larger school and that this will provide an improved learning environment for children and a better working environment for staff. The council's proposal also states that additional benefits will result from having a larger staff with a broader range of experience and expertise. At present, this case is not convincing. The overall educational benefits set out in the proposal are too general. In taking forward the proposal, the council needs to set out the specific benefits for the children that will accrue from implementation of the proposal and how these will be achieved. In particular, the council needs to explain more specifically how the proposal will

improve the environment for learning and improve arrangements for meeting children's learning needs.

3.2 Both Middleton Park and Glashieburn Schools are operating under capacity. Implementation of this proposal will help the council address this issue and enable it to deliver its duty to secure best value through the provision of adequate and efficient provision of school education as set out in the *Education (Scotland) Act 1980*. The roll at Middleton Park is 168 (plus 20/20 nursery) with a capacity of 240. The roll at Glashieburn is 261 (plus 40/20 nursery) with a capacity of 420. In both schools, a significant proportion of children (36% in Middleton Park and 43% in Glashieburn) attend through placing requests from parents who live outwith the school catchment area. The combined roll of the proposed amalgamated school may exceed the capacity of the Glashieburn campus.

3.3 The council's proposal asserts that the amalgamation would provide more opportunities for extra-curricular activities and experiences for more children. These include providing increased opportunities, particularly in the upper stages, for children to take more responsibility and experience leadership opportunities. However, the proposal does not set out sufficiently clearly how the amalgamation will result in this outcome. Children in both schools currently benefit from a range of extra-curricular activities and experiences and take on responsibilities such as leadership roles, supporting others, acting as committee members and representing their school in the wider community.

3.4 The proposal states that the combined school will provide a greater range of more flexible areas where the available space can be used for investigative work and active learning. However, the proposal does not contain layouts for the amalgamated school. The council have stated that details of an implementation strategy will be developed and communicated to parents/carers and staff if the proposal is approved. The council shared a number of possible layouts of the Glashieburn campus towards the end of the consultation period. Both schools currently provide a range of flexible areas and space. On the available evidence, it is difficult to justify the council's view that implementation of the proposal will provide increased access to flexible areas in the amalgamated school.

3.5 Children at Middleton Park School currently have access to extensive outdoor areas. These are larger than those on the Glashieburn campus. The proposal would see a major loss in outdoor space. Under the proposal, the nursery classes in Middleton Park School which are currently for 20 children in the morning and afternoon will become for 60 children in the morning and 40 in the afternoon on the Glashieburn campus. These children will have reduced access to outdoor play areas and will be in a class of a much increased size. There is also a risk that pressures of accommodation in the Glashieburn campus will reduce opportunities for children across the primary stages to benefit from two hours high quality physical education a week.

3.6 Glashieburn School is the current location of the base for children with ASN for the Oldmachar Academy Associated Schools Group. Although the council claims that the proposal for the larger amalgamated school, including adaptations to the

ASN base, will make it easier to provide the support individual children require, the proposal does not currently set out sufficiently clearly how implementation of the proposal will improve arrangements for meeting the needs of these leaners.

3.7 The Act requires the council to include an analysis of how the authority intends to minimise or avoid any adverse effects that may arise from the proposal. The proposal does not sufficiently assess the effects of the proposal on the impact of the children in the nursery classes in either school, or on the children in the ASN base in Glashieburn School.

3.8 Middleton Park School and Glashieburn School both benefit from productive links with Oldmachar Academy. At P7, children from Middleton Park and Glashieburn Schools transfer to Oldmachar Academy. Both schools also work closely together currently and with other primary schools and Oldmachar Academy as part of the Associated Schools Group, in developing the curriculum in line with Curriculum for Excellence. The adoption of the proposal would therefore have no impact on transfer arrangements, and curricular liaison.

3.9 The proposal states that a new headteacher would be recruited and appointed to lead the amalgamated school. The council will also need to undertake enabling works at Glashieburn in preparation for the amalgamation. Despite the fact that the proposal does not contain layouts for the amalgamated school, the council has indicated that these are likely to be relatively minor and could be completed over the summer holiday period in 2014. Scottish Ministers have the right to call-in decisions to close schools. In taking forward the proposal, the council will need to consider whether its current timeline provides sufficient time for effective consultation and communication with parents, staff and children to alleviate their concerns and ensure effective transitional arrangements for children as they move from both schools to the new amalgamated school at Glashieburn. This is particularly important for children with ASN who are directly affected by this proposal.

3.10 The council's proposal sets out its plan to vary the delineated catchment area of Middleton Park, Brimmond School and Bucksburn Academy. The council has indicated that the current zoning arrangements cannot be sustained as the projected pupil numbers at Middleton Park will exceed capacity by 2018, due to the proposed housing development at Grandhome Estate. The proposal contains roll forecasts for the implications of the housing estate. Staff and parents queried council figures, roll projections and stated that planning permission had yet not been granted for the housing developments. The council has considered other options for re-zoning and believes that this preferred proposal would have advantages for the longer term planning and management of schools in the whole of the north of the city. There is little reference and no education benefits statement relating to the second proposal to vary the delineated catchment area of the schools. The final consultation report needs to provide more detailed explanation of the benefits of this aspect of the proposal.

## 4. Summary

4.1 If the proposal is implemented it has the potential to broaden the staff expertise from both schools as it brings staff together, which may enable the greater sharing of current best practice. However, it is not sufficiently clear how implementation of the proposal in its current form will bring educational benefit to those children directly affected by it. Concerns of parents and staff that the basis of the educational benefits statements overly relies on children's education being enhanced from being in a larger school are valid. In taking forward the proposal the council needs to set out more clearly the specific benefits that implementation of the proposal will bring to the children directly affected by it. In particular, the council needs to set out more specifically how the implementation of the proposal will improve the environment for learning and enable the council to meet children's learning needs more effectively.

4.2 Implementation of the proposal will enable the council to develop a strategy that will enable it to provide suitable and efficient accommodation for children across the north of Aberdeen. The proposal outlines the impact of new housing developments on Middleton Park School. The proposal highlights the need to reduce expenditure on maintaining schools with lower occupancy rates and outlines a plan to address the knock-on effects of developments in adjacent school zones. As such, the proposal has the potential to contribute to the council's efforts to secure best value within the context of addressing over-capacity in the council's school estate. As a result, the council may be able to make more efficient and equitable use of its resources to the benefit of children and young people throughout the wider council area. The council should outline the educational benefits to the wider education community of Aberdeen that will arise from implementation of this proposal.

4.3 During the consultation, the council received a large number of responses from a wide range of people and organisations. Respondees included parents and families, parent councils, children and young people, staff, the local community council, church, and other individuals and groups. All respondees were opposed to the proposal and raised a number of legitimate concerns. These are summarised in this report. The council needs to ensure that it fully addresses these concerns in its final report. In particular, the council needs to clarify any proposed layout and structure for the amalgamated school, showing the teaching and learning spaces.

4.4 The council has set a challenging timescale to take forward the proposal for amalgamation. In taking forward the proposal, the council needs to ensure that it provides sufficient time to consult and communicate effectively with parents, staff and children to alleviate these concerns. Whatever course of action the council chooses to take, it needs to continue to consult with parents, children and staff of both schools and the wider community to engage them fully in the implementation of its proposal.

4.5 Parents have alleged that the proposal document contains misleading statements. Parents claim these include omissions and inaccuracies in roll projections and housing developments. The council has a duty to investigate and

decide what, if any, action is required to correct these alleged omissions and inaccuracies.

4.6 The council's final consultation report needs to give more information about and set out clearly the educational benefits and timescales of the council's plan to vary the delineated catchment area of Middleton Park, Brimmond School and Bucksburn Academy.

**HM Inspectors**
**Education Scotland**
**November 2013**