

Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by The Highland Council to discontinue education provision at Stoer Primary School and Nursery, re-assigning its catchment area to that of Lochinver Primary School.

September 2019

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 The Highland Council's proposal to discontinue education provision at Stoer Primary School and Nursery, re-assigning its catchment area to that of Lochinver 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:

- 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 Lochinver Primary School and Stoer Primary 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 closure of Stoer 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 The Highland Council undertook the consultation on its proposal(s) with reference to the [Schools \(Consultation\) \(Scotland\) Act 2010](#).

2.2 Stoer Primary School has been mothballed since July 2016, following a progressive drop in its roll. Since August 2016 children from the area have attended Lochinver Primary School. The potential school roll is low with only four children currently living in the Stoer catchment area. The number of children is not expected to rise beyond six in the next three years. The consultation ran from 4 June to 30 August 2019. Information on the proposal was available at Lochinver Primary School and Far North Mobile Library and a letter was sent to all relevant consultees. Information was placed on the council website, along with an electronic means of responding to the consultation. A public meeting was held on 24 June 2019 in Rhu Stoer Village Hall which was attended by council staff and nine members of the public. The proposal was discussed with children attending Lochinver Primary School and they all completed a simple consultation form. There were five written responses to the consultation from members of the local community. Three responses asked if the mothballing could be extended in the hope that a strategy could be put in place to increase numbers over time.

3. Educational aspects of proposal

3.1 Lochinver Primary School is a small rural school with two classrooms, a general purpose room, a further small general purpose room, library, canteen, office space and staffroom. The school is currently at around 40% capacity and the children benefit from access to different learning environments across the school. Children also benefit from extensive tarred playgrounds and some grass and wildlife areas for outdoor learning. An early learning and childcare centre for two to five year olds is also located within the school grounds and operated as a partner centre. Staff know the children well and support them in their learning. In addition, all of the children are able to access after-school care nearby with local solutions worked out for children travelling to and from Stoer. HM Inspectors agree that Lochinver Primary School is providing a more suitable environment for learning.

3.2 Children who have previously attended Stoer Primary School who spoke to HM Inspectors enjoy coming to Lochinver Primary School and being with friends. They enjoy the opportunity to participate in team sports, such as basketball and football, and enjoy learning and playing together. They like being able to work collaboratively with different groups of children as part of their learning. A few have fond memories of Stoer Primary School but believe that there are not enough children for the school to remain open. They are disappointed that they cannot walk or cycle to Lochinver Primary School and the bus journey can be tiring for the younger children. HM Inspectors note and agree with the positive benefits outlined by the children.

3.3 Staff at Lochinver Primary School all agree with the proposal. They think that children who would previously have been educated at Stoer Primary School have benefited from being part of a larger school and have more opportunities to develop their social skills and build resilience. Staff highlighted that the mothballing of Stoer Primary School was welcomed by some parents as the numbers had become so small.

3.4 HM Inspectors met with a few members of the local community although no parents of children currently attending from the Stoer catchment area were present at the meeting. Stakeholders spoke positively about the quality of the education previously provided at Stoer and the school's place within a small local community. The community do not feel as well-connected to Lochinver Primary School. The community is hopeful that this aspect can be developed further with the new headteacher. A majority of the stakeholders who met with HM Inspectors object to the closure at this time. They feel that a longer period of mothballing would give more opportunity for the community to work with the council to encourage more families to move to the area. However, representatives of the Assynt Community Council did not consider this to be a realistic ambition.

3.5 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.

3.6 The council considered four options, including the proposal: 1. reopening Stoer Primary School with its current catchment area; 2. reopening Stoer Primary School with an extended catchment area; 3. continued mothballing of Stoer Primary School; 4. closing Stoer Primary School and realigning its catchment area to Lochinver Primary School. In considering these options, the council has taken into consideration the effects on school transport, staff and school management arrangements, impact on the local community and financial aspects. The council has concluded that the most appropriate option would be the last of these. The travel time from Stoer Primary School to Lochinver Primary School is approximately 20 minutes although for some children travel to school can be as much as 40 minutes because of where they live. This is not having a significantly adverse effect on learners. If the school were to close, the building has the potential to be used by the community for a different purpose to complement the use of the village hall located nearby.

4. Summary

The Highland Council's proposal to discontinue education provision at Stoer Primary School and Nursery, re-assigning its catchment area to that of Lochinver Primary School has clear educational benefits which are currently being experienced by the children. Children and staff are agreed about the educational benefits of the proposal. A majority of community representatives who have engaged in the consultation have a preference for the continued mothballing of Stoer Primary School. In taking the proposal forward, the council needs to continue to engage with all stakeholders and encourage continued growth in the links between Lochinver Primary School and the community of Stoer.

**HM Inspectors
September 2019**