

## **Consultation proposal by Aberdeenshire Council**

**Report by Education Scotland, addressing educational aspects of the proposal to close Ardallie School and alter the Ardallie School zone in line with one of eight options identified.**

### **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 Aberdeenshire Council proposes to close Ardallie School and rezone the Ardallie School catchment area in line with one of eight options identified.

1.2 The 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.

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

- 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 Stuartfield, Hatton (Cruden) and Arnage schools including meetings with consultees and a visit to Ardallie School to view the site and the external condition of the building.

#### 1.4 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.

#### 1.5 As the proposal will lead to the closure of a rural school as defined in the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*, HM Inspectors also took account of the council's consideration of:

- viable alternatives to the closure of Ardallie School;
- the likely effect on the local community with regard to sustainability and on the community's access to the buildings, grounds and facilities if the school were to close; and
- the likely effect of different travelling arrangements on the environment and on children and young people and other school users occasioned by the closure.

## 2. Consultation process

2.1 Aberdeenshire Council undertook the initial consultation on its proposals with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*.

2.2 Since September 2012 there have been no children attending Ardallie School and it has been 'mothballed'. All children had previously transferred from Ardallie School to other local primary schools such as Hatton (Cruden) School through placing requests. All children interviewed expressed positive views of the proposal. All children felt larger schools provided better opportunities to make friends. Older children felt the proposal allowed them better opportunities to develop a peer group that would be supportive when moving into secondary school. All children felt the proposal would improve their education due to increased opportunities and greater staffing stability. Children from all the potential receiving schools would welcome Ardallie children at their school. Children expressed some concern about future Ardallie pupils being split up from their friends outwith school. They were firmly of the view that where possible children should go to the school nearest to home. They also expressed concerns about the length of time Ardallie children spent travelling and any possible extension to journey times of existing pupils.

2.3 Parents of children who had been attending Ardallie School and those of children who had always attended Hatton (Cruden), Arnage and Stuartfield schools

support the proposal. They all felt the children would gain from being part of a bigger and wider-ranging group. Parents of children from Ardallie understood the need for the council to rationalise their schools to gain best value for council tax payers. Both Hatton (Cruden) and Arnage parents felt the proposal would help stabilise their respective school roll and secure the long-term future of their school for their children and future families in both communities. Parents, including former Ardallie residents, expressed a firm view that as there was already strong links with Ellon, any rezoning should be within the Ellon Academy catchment area. Ardallie parents expressed a strong preference for either option three or eight. Parents were concerned that any proposed changes to the zoning of Ellon Academy and Mintlaw Academy may result in siblings attending different secondary schools.

2.4 Staff across all the potential catchment schools support the proposal. The staff team in Hatton (Cruden) School included staff who had moved to Hatton (Cruden) from Ardallie. Staff were unanimous that the children were benefiting from having more children to work and develop relationships with. Staff who knew the children in Ardallie felt they were happily settled at Hatton (Cruden) School. They felt the children enjoyed a wider range of educational opportunities and a more stable learning environment.

2.5 Use of Ardallie School by the local community is infrequent. However Ardallie Women's Rural Institute (WRI) has continued to have access to the school building for monthly meetings. The group is concerned that the proposed closure may result in their group folding. Aberdeenshire Council should seek to provide alternative accommodation locally.

### **3. Educational aspects of the proposal**

3.1 Given that all the children attending Ardallie School were relocated as a result of placing requests to other local schools of their choice in 2012, settling into a new learning environment is not an issue.

3.2 Children within the Ardallie zone currently experience quality learning educational experiences at other schools in the area. The hall within Ardallie School was small and carpeted. As a result the delivery of Physical Education was restricted. The proposition put forward by Aberdeenshire Council that children will benefit from learning in more age appropriate groups, be more able to participate in group and team activities and have more opportunities to develop their social skills is acknowledged by the children themselves. They have access to a wider range of opportunities and this will continue should the proposal be approved.

3.3 All children who live outwith two miles of their zoned primary school are eligible for free transport to their new school from Ardallie. The authority needs to make arrangements to minimise the travel time for each pupil.

3.4 Closing Ardallie School improves the prospects of Hatton (Cruden) School and Arnage School having a more viable future. The arrangements for nursery provision are not affected by the proposal so transition from nursery into primary will continue as before. Transition to secondary is dependent on which option the

authority agrees on. Parents' preference would be that their children continue to progress to Ellon Academy.

3.5 Projections for school rolls for the proposed catchment schools suggest that there will be ample spare capacity particularly at Hatton (Cruden) and Arnage schools for potential families moving into the Ardallie area to enrol should the proposal be taken forward.

3.6 As the proposal will lead to the closure of a rural school as defined in the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*, HM Inspectors also took account of the council's consideration of the factors to which it should have special regard. The Council's proposition that closing Ardallie School will help to ensure a long-term future for other local primary schools and rural education in this area is sound. Keeping Ardallie School open would not secure its future as currently there are no pupils. The arrangements and cost of transporting a small number of children the short distance between Ardallie and other schools identified within the proposal are acceptable in the context of securing rural education in the area and making significant savings overall from closure and rezoning. Previous community use of the school out of hours was infrequent. Alternative accommodation arrangements are available at Hatton (Cruden) or Arnage School. There is concern in Ardallie regarding the intended future use of the school building. Aberdeenshire Council needs to provide further reassurance to the Ardallie community regarding the school site.

#### **4. Summary**

Aberdeenshire Council's proposal to close Ardallie School and rezone the catchment area is of overall educational benefit. The council makes a strong case for the closure of Ardallie School and for rezoning the Ardallie catchment area. The proposal substantiates the de facto position which has been successful and effective. In the time since Ardallie School was 'mothballed', the proposed benefits for children have begun to be realised in practice. These include access for the children to a wider group of children and peers as well as a broader range of learning opportunities. The proposal will also support the council in its efforts to secure best value in the use of its resources. The proposal has almost unanimous support across all communities as it will help the council secure sustainable local rural education for this part of Aberdeenshire. Parents are clear that they wish to remain within the Ellon Academy catchment area.

For the villagers of Ardallie, Aberdeenshire Council now needs to provide further assurance regarding the future use of the school building and agree alternative accommodation for Ardallie WRI.

**HM Inspectors  
Education Scotland  
February 2014**