

Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by Argyll and Bute Council to discontinue education provision at Luing Primary School.

October 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 discontinue education provision at Luing 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 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
- 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 September 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;
- consideration of further representations made directly to Education Scotland on relevant educational aspects of the proposal; and
- visits to the sites of Luing Island, Easdale Primary School, 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 Luing Primary School, the likely effect on the local community and the likely effect of any different travelling arrangements due to 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 Luing Primary School is a remote, rural school on an island which is accessible by a short ferry journey. Argyll and Bute Council mothballed Luing Primary School in December 2020 after no children were enrolled in August 2020. The school has remained mothballed since that time. The proposal is to permanently close the school from May 2024, with the catchment area transferring to Easdale Primary School. The council's school roll predication for Luing Primary School shows a small increase, from three in 2023 to six from 2026. Since the school was mothballed, children from the island attend Easdale Primary School, which is on the neighbouring island of Seil. During a pre-consultation in 2022, Argyll and Bute Council considered three options; to re-open, to close or continue to mothball Luing Primary School. At this stage consultations with the community raised a range of issues. These included that the school is a key part of the island community and concerns about the school building deteriorating. In its proposal the council proposes permanent closure of the school and provides several reasons for this conclusion. These are positive educational benefits of Easdale Primary School, the projected low school roll, the challenges in recruiting teaching staff and the considerable expenditure needed to bring the building up to an acceptable standard.

2.3 The statutory consultation for the closure of Luing Primary School ran from 15 June to 13 September 2023. Copies of the proposal were made available to stakeholders, including parents and pupils. A public meeting was held on 4 September 2023 and attended by 25 stakeholders. Thirty-nine stakeholders completed an online survey and/or sent written submissions on the consultation to the council. Of these responses almost all of these were against the proposal to permanently close the school. Every respondent from Luing stated they were against the proposed closure. At the public meeting and in written responses stakeholders raised a range of concerns. These included the potential negative impacts on the island of closure, travel issues, and ensuring children and families are fully part of Easdale school community if the proposal is agreed.

3. Educational aspects of proposal

3.1 HM Inspectors consider that the council have set out a reasonable case for the permanent closure of Luing Primary School in regard to the educational benefits they have stated. Children from Luing are settled at Easdale Primary School and are experiencing opportunities to develop their capacity to work with others and build friendships. The learning environment is pleasant and schemes such as the buddy system support the children to encourage each other's learning and play. There is an early learning centre at Easdale Primary School, this supports the transition from nursery to primary. HM Inspectors also acknowledge the challenges with recruitment that the council has identified.

3.2 Children and young people from Luing who spoke to HM Inspectors, recognise that there are advantages and disadvantages to learning at a small, island school. They think that it can provide a very nurturing experience but that children can miss out on learning alongside peers of their own age that a school with a larger roll can provide. Children like the idea of being able to walk or cycle to school if Luing Primary School re-opened but feel they would miss their friends if they left Easdale Primary School. Practitioners consider that a clear decision being made may help to settle children and make education planning easier. The council are exploring how to improve the very limited internet and phone connections at Easdale Primary School. If this proposal is agreed, or indeed if further mothballing is chosen, it will be important to resolve this.

This would help, for example, parents from Luing to join Parent Council meetings online. It will also be beneficial for the continuation of learning for days when children cannot get to school.

3.3 As Luing is an island, travel is a key issue that all stakeholders who met HM Inspectors raised. Children from Luing currently travel to Easdale Primary School by minibus, ferry and service bus. Both children and young people stated that travelling to school via ferry and public buses can affect attendance, as they are late to school or miss school entirely several times a year. They also spoke how travel issues limit them joining out of school activities and meeting friends. There is a need to address parents' safety concerns about how younger children are supported to use public buses for part of their journey. Parents spoke about the significant time and costs involved in taking their children to nursery and escorting primary age children to school and out of school activities. HM Inspectors would recommend that the council continue to work with parents to mitigate issues associated with travel, whether this proposal is agreed, or the school continues to be mothballed.

3.4 The group of residents of Luing, including parents, who spoke to HM Inspectors are against the permanent closure of the school. All acknowledge that given the current small numbers of primary age children on the island that the arrangements for them to attend Easdale Primary School should continue for now. However, they challenge the council's projected school roll. Community organisations and businesses spoke about their plans to extend housing and employment on the island. They do not consider that the council has taken this sufficiently into their considerations. It will be important that the council continue discussions with the community as the island community impact assessment for this proposal is being developed.

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. Stakeholders from Luing, that HM Inspectors spoke to, would like the council to consider the Luing Primary School building for alternative educational use, with the option to re-open as a school in the future. The Community Council and local Development Trust would welcome further discussions with the council around this possibility. Residents are concerned that the permanent closure of the school would affect the long term sustainability of Luing. A range of stakeholders have identified the challenges in filling essential jobs on Luing. They are concerned that closing the school could exacerbate the difficulty in attracting families to live on the island. Re-opening the school would shorten travel times for the children on the island. However, the energy use in reopening the school would likely offset any environmental benefits.

3.6 During the consultation period consultees identified alleged inaccuracies and omissions in the proposal, including the wider economic impact of any closure on the island. The council has confirmed that it is taking the necessary steps to investigate and as necessary address them in its final consultation report.

4. Summary

Overall, HM Inspectors consider that the council has made a reasonable educational case for the closure of Luing Primary School. Children are settled at Easdale Primary School and enjoy learning alongside their peers. However, as this is a rural island school there are wider considerations that need to be taken into account, including the impact a closure may have on island sustainability. As the planned Island Community Impact Assessment is developed it will be important for the council to engage further with the community organisations on Luing. This will provide an opportunity to explore ways to mitigate any potential negative impacts that could result if this proposal to permanently close the school is agreed. Improving travel arrangements to better support children to attend school and take part in out of school activities may help to address some stakeholder concerns. In its final consultation report, the council will need to set out the actions it has taken to address any alleged inaccuracies or omissions notified to it.

HM Inspectors
October 2023