Consultation proposal by East Dunbartonshire Council

Report by Education Scotland, addressing educational aspects of the proposal to close St Agatha's Primary School and St Flannan's Primary School and replace them with a new school on the St Flannan's site.

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 two schools, 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 East Dunbartonshire Council proposes to build a new denominational primary school on the grounds of St Flannan's Primary School for pupils in the St Agatha's and St Flannan's Primary Schools' catchment areas. The council proposes to subsequently close and demolish St Flannan's Primary School and close St Agatha's Primary School. The new school would have a capacity of approximately 300 pupils. Should the proposal go ahead, the new building would be scheduled for completion in the school session 2016-17.

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;

- consideration of further representations made directly to Education Scotland on relevant educational aspects of the proposal;

- consideration of further information on all schools affected; and

- visits to the sites of St Agatha's Primary School and St Flannan's Primary School, including discussion with children, staff, parents and other interested parties affected by the proposal.

1.4 HM Inspectors considered:

- the likely effects of the proposal for children of both schools, 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 East Dunbartonshire Council undertook the initial consultation on its proposals with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*. The consultation included an invitation for written submissions and two public meetings. An independent consultant was employed by the council to undertake a consultation exercise with children in attendance at both schools affected by the proposal. The council issued 513 proposal packs to statutory consultees and received 105 responses from these. Of the responses, 72 agreed with the proposal.

2.2 Almost all parents and carers of children attending St Flannan's Primary School who responded as part of the consultation, are in agreement with the proposal. They felt that children will benefit from a higher standard of facilities and resources. However, they have expressed a range of concerns. They are not clear about what a few of the educational benefits outlined in the proposal mean for their children. For example, what is meant by a health suite and therefore what benefits can it have for children who require additional support with their learning. They raised concern about health and safety implications if the proposal created any increase in traffic congestion. Parents would like assurance that there will not be overall reduced space in the new school compared to their current provision. They expressed concern that the semi-open plan nature of the school will lead to increased noise and their children may be distracted in their classrooms. Some are unclear if the library areas highlighted as a feature of the new school, will replace a formal library. They feel that a formal library is important to a school. They hoped the council would as stated in the proposal involve all concerned in full consultation on the design, layout, name and uniform of the new school.

2.3 There is significant opposition to the proposal from almost all of the parents of children attending St Agatha's Primary School, who responded to the consultation. Concerns raised through the consultation process and by those who met with HM Inspectors included there being no or very little perceived educational benefit for children of St Agatha's from the proposal. Parents felt that the educational benefits statement in the proposal is too generic and does not reflect the context of St Agatha's. Parents felt that their children already have access to some resources that the council have outlined would be a gain for pupils should the proposal go ahead. For example, access to an all-weather pitch and high-quality information and communication technology (ICT). Parents felt that their children currently have access to high-quality education in a school with a very positive ethos. They were concerned that possible larger classes in a bigger school will result in a dilution in the quality of education that their children will receive. They felt that the area surrounding St Agatha's, which includes a nature park, provides excellent contexts for learning and this will be lost to their children. They also felt that there is close partnership working with Gartconner Primary School which has enhanced children's experiences. This has included children working together productively on projects such as "The Divided City". A number of those who met with HM Inspectors were concerned that the children who would need to be bussed to school as a result of the proposal, would lose the health and wellbeing benefit which they currently have of walking or cycling to school. Many parents felt that the school is the heart of the community and its closure would be detrimental to the community. A number believe that not all viable options have been explored fully. Parents stated that they are unclear about the financial case for this proposal as they have not been given sufficient detail relating specifically to the costings associated with this proposal. Parents expressed the view that there are some inaccuracies in the proposal.

2.4 There were some common concerns raised by parents of both schools. Some noted concern at the larger pupil roll within the proposed new school. In particular, they are concerned that their children will no longer enjoy the close sense of community within existing schools. Some expressed concern about a perceived negative impact of possible increased class sizes on children's education. Parents would like to see safe walking routes developed. They have concerns that the new school with a capacity of 300 will not accommodate children from substantial new housing which may be built in the future. Parents are unclear about the transition arrangements should the proposal go ahead. In both schools, parents stated that although they had viewed a plan of another new primary school development in East Dunbartonshire, they did not feel that the plans in this proposal were detailed and specific enough for them to envisage what the new school would actually be like.

2.5 The Roman Catholic Church is in agreement with the proposal to create a new build school. The church believes that this proposal will benefit denominational education in this area of Kirkintilloch.

2.6 Staff at St Agatha's Primary School had mixed feelings about the proposal. They felt that the proposed new school would give them access to more resources and further specialist support. They felt that they already have productive partnership working with their colleagues at St Flannan's Primary School. They did have some concerns about the proposal. They felt that children get a good start in their education at St Agatha's Primary School. It is a small school and they get to

know the children very well. They feel it has a positive ethos and contributes to a close community spirit. They were concerned that such aspects would be lost by moving to the new school. They were also concerned about losing the close links that they have with the nursery in the neighbouring Gartconner Primary School. They were worried that the semi-open plan nature of the proposed new school would result in increased noise levels. They also had concerns about possible reductions in support staff resource.

2.7 The staff from St Flannan's had mixed feelings about the proposal. Staff were concerned that some of their high-quality outdoor learning facilities would be lost. They were concerned about the size of the classrooms in the new school and were unsure about how the flexible working spaces contributed to this. They did agree they already worked closely with staff in St Agatha's. However, they were unsure whether the new school would have sufficient space to work effectively with partners. There was some concern that there would be a lack of display space due to the large quantity of glass in the proposed new-build design. Staff at both schools had concerns about traffic management at the new school.

2.8 St Agatha's Primary School pupils expressed mixed feelings about the new school. The majority of children who spoke to HM Inspectors were against the proposal, although a number commented on the advantages of a new and bigger school. Some pupils had anxieties about making new friends, not knowing people, including concerns over the school name and uniform. All pupils who spoke to HM Inspectors, value the high quality learning experiences at St Agatha's. For example, they had worked hard to get their Eco-Schools Scotland green flag and did not want to lose this status. Those who walked or cycled to school wished to continue with this practice. Some did express concern about the poor condition of St Agatha's, for example the roof of the boys' toilet. Some were anxious about having to experience the transition to a new primary school then having to do so again fairly soon after when moving to secondary school. Some pupils did see positive aspects in the proposal. Some felt it would be good to have more people to mix with and some were positive about having more resources and upgraded facilities in a new school. They also recognised that having their own dining room would be a benefit.

2.9 Pupils at St Flannan's Primary School expressed mixed views about the proposal. Approximately half of the pupils in discussions were in favour of the proposal. Most of the others were undecided. They thought that if the proposal goes ahead they would have access to better resources, technology and sports facilities. The pupils also expressed a number of concerns. They had a number of health and safety concerns including their safety during the period of the new school build and the impact of increased traffic. They were also concerned about what might happen to their 'jungle trail'. The pupils of both schools stated that they enjoy their learning in their current school and are well supported by staff.

2.10 The Parent Council of Gartconner Primary School is not in favour of the proposal. It does not feel that its views have been taken fully on board.

2.11 The 1st Waterside Brownies are based at St Agatha's Primary School. They have been established in that community since 1948. They felt that the proposal

would result in a loss of identity. They do not know where they will be moved to if the proposal goes ahead. They also felt that the close links with Gartconner Primary School celebrates diversity and equality well in their community and this would be lost.

3. Educational aspects of the proposal

3.1 St Agatha's Primary School will require significant maintenance work in the future. At present, children at St Agatha's visit neighbouring Gartconner Primary School if they want to receive a school lunch and to ensure they receive the national expectation of two hours of high-quality physical education. St Flannan's Primary School is described as being "in satisfactory condition but showing signs of deterioration." Neither of the two schools is currently compliant with accessibility legislation. The physical state of both school buildings is such that though currently considered to be safe, they are in need of improvement. The proposal states that the new build will be fully compliant in terms of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) and the Equality Act, will be more energy and carbon efficient, and will have lower running costs.

3.2 Both schools are currently operating under capacity. The current roll of St Agatha's Primary School is 89 pupils with a capacity of 192. It is therefore operating at only 46% of its capacity. St Flannan's Primary School has a current roll of 190 pupils with a capacity of 363. It is therefore operating at only 52% of its capacity. Rolls in both primary schools have fallen significantly in recent years, declining by 42.6% since 1999. However, this downward trend in rolls is not expected to continue. It is predicted that the rolls will now remain steady for the next ten years. The proposed new school should accommodate approximately 300 pupils, so will have the capacity to accommodate pupils from both schools. In taking forward the proposal, the council needs to provide reassurance to children, staff, parents and carers that it will build on the current strengths of both schools in bringing them together.

3.3 The council has set out in its proposal, a number of educational benefits for children should the proposal go ahead. It recognises that a modern, quality schools infrastructure with enhanced opportunities for outdoor activities, has a key role in supporting and enhancing the teaching and learning environment. The benefits for children who would use the new building now or in the future include significantly superior facilities and accommodation in the new building which is likely to help staff to use modern, effective approaches to learning and teaching and to provide an appropriate curriculum. At all stages, children are likely to benefit from improved resources, including wireless connectivity across the school enhancing ICT, within flexible and fit for purpose learning areas. Improved, flexible arrangements for accommodation offer opportunities for staff to meet the needs of children with additional support needs more effectively. Parents however appeared to be unclear about some of the educational benefits. The council therefore needs to work with them to achieve a better shared understanding of what the benefits will be.

3.4 The council has produced an outline transition plan for the move to the new school. It has committed to producing a more detailed plan when appropriate. At P7, children from both primary schools currently transfer to St Ninian's High School.

Both schools also work closely with St Ninian's High School and other associated primary schools and nurseries in developing the curriculum in line with Curriculum for Excellence. The adoption of the proposal will therefore have no impact on transfer arrangements. If the council's proposal was to go ahead, transition arrangements and curricular liaison would be unaffected by the amalgamation. The council states in its proposal that it will work closely with the school and the Church to create a new school community.

3.5 The 1st Waterside Brownies and the Rainbows groups currently use St Agatha's Primary School premises on a weekly basis. The council has given assurances that it will work with these groups to find and support relocation to suitable alternative accommodation.

3.6 St Agatha's Primary School is located 1.4 miles by road from the St Flannan's Primary School site. The council has indicated that children currently attending St Agatha's Primary School will be entitled to transport to the new school on the St Flannan's Primary School site in accordance with council policy. Should the proposal go ahead, the council will need to respond to concerns raised by stakeholders regarding transport arrangements to allow children to continue to participate in the full range of school life and after-school activities and about perceived increased traffic congestion at the start and the end of the school day around the St Flannan's site. The council has stated it proposes to review travel plans and crossing patrols to ensure children's safety.

4. Summary

If implemented, the proposal to establish a new purpose-built school on the site of the existing St Flannan's Primary School site has the potential to bring about some obvious educational benefits for children through the provision of a high-quality learning environment. The proposal addresses the issue of under-capacity in the school estate. It will help the council in its duties to secure best value through efficient and effective use of its resources. In taking forward this proposal the council needs to clarify some aspects of its proposal to ensure a shared understanding of what the educational benefits would be for children. In addition, the council needs to continue to engage and consult with all stakeholders to ensure that the educational benefits of this proposal are fully realised.

HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
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