

Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010

Report by HM Inspectors of Education addressing educational aspects of the proposal by The Highland Council to discontinue education provision at Roy Bridge Primary School, re-assigning its catchment area to that of Spean Bridge Primary School.

February 2022

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 Roy Bridge Primary School, re-assigning its catchment area to that of Spean Bridge 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 2010 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; 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:

- attendance at the virtual public meeting held on 12 January 2022 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; and
- a virtual visit to the site of Spean Bridge 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 Roy Bridge 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 The formal consultation process commenced on 24 November 2021 and concluded on 21 January 2022. The consultation proposal paper was made available to members of the public, stakeholders and staff. Announcements were placed in the local press and published on the council's website and social media page. Copies of the consultation document were made available at Fort William Public Library and Spean Bridge Primary School. Due to public health concerns and to follow national guidance, a virtual public meeting was held on 12 January 2022. This was attended by 14 members of the public. At the meeting, attendees expressed the view that the decision to close Roy Bridge Primary School was a foregone conclusion. Concerns were shared by attendees surrounding the potential future use of the school building and perceived failures to inform the wider community of the consultation process. Alternative suggestions were offered by attendees to use the school for Gaelic Medium Education.

2.3 The Highland Council took the decision to mothball Roy Bridge Primary School in 2017 when the roll fell to two children. The school has remained mothballed since that time. Prior to commencing this statutory consultation, the council sought the views of parents and the local community informally. The council met with Spean Bridge Primary School's Parent Council in May 2019 (just under ten attendees) with parents indicating their opposition to closure. A well-attended meeting with the Community Council took place in September 2019. Despite opposition to the closure of Roy Bridge Primary School, very few parents were prepared to commit to sending their child to the school should it reopen. Further meetings with the Parent Council were held in March 2020 (with six attendees) and September 2021 (with three attendees) by which time parents felt closure was inevitable.

2.4 The council received five written responses to the consultation. These included concerns about the perceived lack of engagement with the wider community in advance of the formal consultation process. HM Inspectors have not found grounds to support these points. A few responders requested additional time to consider the proposal. A request to consider Gaelic Medium Education prior to reaching a conclusion was also made.

2.5 The council sought the views of children currently attending Spean Bridge Primary School. In total, 31 children provided their views about the proposal. Most children thought the council should continue to mothball the school. A few children agreed with the proposal to close the school and a few thought that Roy Bridge Primary School should reopen. Children expressed concern that existing friendships at Spean Bridge Primary School could potentially be affected should Roy Bridge Primary School reopen. They value being able to continue to play in Roy Bridge Primary School's playground.

3. Educational aspects of proposal

3.1 The Highland Council sets out a number of potential educational benefits in the proposal to permanently close Roy Bridge Primary School. The council gathered information informally from stakeholders. This information indicates that should Roy Bridge Primary School reopen enrolment would remain very low. Positive benefits have derived from the operational merger of Roy Bridge Primary School and Spean Bridge Primary Schools since Roy Bridge Primary School was mothballed in 2017. Children work regularly in cooperative learning groups of various sizes. Being part of an age-appropriate peer group of sufficient size allows children to participate in a range of social interactions and a broad range of curriculum activities. Their development of skills for learning, life and work benefits from discussions and dialogue with peers of the same age and stage. The opportunity to participate in sporting, musical and artistic activities is enhanced. The current arrangements allow for smooth transition for children moving from the nursery class into P1. When compared to the current Roy Bridge Primary School premises the accommodation at Spean Bridge Primary School has the potential to provide a better learning environment. This includes access to facilities such as a large sports pitch. HM Inspectors agree that there are

potential educational benefits if the council's proposal goes ahead. The proposal supports the council's duty to ensure best value.

3.2 The few parents who spoke with HM Inspectors indicated their sadness at the potential loss of a school within the village of Roy Bridge. They expressed concern about the safety of school transport with children being picked up and dropped off near a busy road in Roy Bridge. There were mixed views as to whether they would enrol their child at Roy Bridge Primary School should it reopen. The children who spoke with HM Inspectors spoke positively about their experience at Spean Bridge Primary School. They identified the importance of maintaining friendships already established there. Children described the benefits of having access to a range of lunchtime activities and clubs. They particularly enjoy using the school's large sports pitch. Both parents and children spoke of the positive benefits of having access to Roy Bridge Primary School's grounds for leisure activity use. They believe that this provides a vital safe area in which children can play, skate and cycle, particularly as there is no safe cycle route between Roy Bridge and Spean Bridge.

3.3 Staff who spoke with HM Inspectors support the proposal to close Roy Bridge Primary School. They recognise the impact of the declining roll and feel that reopening the school would be unsustainable. Children attending Spean Bridge Primary School for their nursery provision settle well, with parents choosing to maintain this through transition into P1. Staff identified that around half of the children within the Roy Bridge Primary School catchment would still require school transport should the school remain open. They felt that the additional travel time of five to six minutes was not excessive.

3.4 As the proposal will lead to the closure of a rural school, HM Inspectors took account of the council's consideration of the factors to which it should have special regard. The council has identified clearly its reasons for formulating the proposal. In doing so, it considered a number of alternatives to closure of the school before it consulted on the proposal. The alternatives included continuing with the current mothballing arrangement, reopening with the current catchment area, or reopening with an expanded catchment area. The council concluded that none of the alternatives will bring greater benefits. Low parental interest in committing to sending their child to Roy Bridge Primary School to enable it to reopen, demonstrated that reopening the school is not viable.

3.5 In relation to transport, the likely effect on the environment and on children will be very limited. The council acknowledges that there is no safe walking or cycling route between Roy Bridge and Spean Bridge. The drive between Roy Bridge Primary School and Spean Bridge Primary School is about five to six minutes. Travel arrangements in place since mothballing in 2017 would remain unchanged. The local community are very interested in the future use of the Roy Bridge Primary School building should the proposal go ahead. Local residents would like the building to remain as a community asset.

3.6 This proposed closure is of an English medium school whose catchment area overlaps with that for Gaelic Medium Education at Bun-sgoil Ghàidhlig Loch Abar and Lochaber High School. The council has clarified that, should there be sufficient future demand for Gaelic Medium Education, that they would follow legislation to determine the need for a local provision. The council's final report should include this clarification and details of how they will promote Gaelic Medium Education with parents. This is a statutory duty.

3.7 During the consultation period consultees identified alleged inaccuracies or omissions in the proposal. The council need to ensure that it takes the necessary steps to respond to these alleged inaccuracies or omissions. In its final consultation report, the council will need to set out the actions it has taken to address any alleged inaccuracies and omissions notified to it.

4. Summary

HM Inspectors believe that The Highland Council's proposal has the potential to deliver overall educational benefits. Its attempt to secure the commitment of a sufficient number of parents to send their child to Roy Bridge Primary School enabling it to reopen have been unsuccessful. The proposal provides clarity for parents and the community with regard to future education provision in the area. There are potential educational benefits to children socially and educationally. Children will be working closely with a larger peer group closely aligned to their age and stage. They will have increased opportunities to develop skills in a range of activities otherwise not readily available at the current site. They will have greater opportunities to participate in sporting, musical and artistic activities and clubs.

Should the proposal go ahead, the council should work with the community to explore how to make best use of the former Roy Bridge Primary School. It should explore with the community their wish to ensure continued access to the safe play space provided by the school grounds. The proposal will assist the council to deliver 'Best Value' through making more efficient and effective use of its resources. In its final consultation report, the council will need to set out the actions it has taken to address any alleged inaccuracies and omissions notified to it.

**HM Inspectors
February 2022**