Consultation proposal by East Ayrshire Council

Report by Education Scotland, addressing educational aspects of the proposal to close St John's Primary School with effect from Friday 28 June 2013, or as soon as possible thereafter and transfer the children to St Patrick's Primary School in Auchinleck which would have a new and enlarged, delineated area. This new delineated area would be the result of joining the present St John's Primary School and St Patrick's Primary School.

1. Introduction

1.1 East Ayrshire Council proposes to close St John's Primary School in Cumnock. The children would transfer to St Patrick's Primary School in Auchinleck. This proposal also has implications for the users of the Barshare IFE building in Cumnock which shares the same campus as St John's Primary School.

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:

- attendance at the public meetings held on 8 and 9 January 2013 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;
- visits to the sites of St John's Primary School and St Patrick's Primary School, including discussion with relevant consultees.

1.4 HM Inspectors considered:

- the likely effects of the proposal for children attending each of the 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 Ayrshire Council undertook the initial consultation on its proposals with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*. The consultation included two public meetings and invitations to submit written submissions or to complete a response pro-forma. The consultation period ran from 30 November 2012 until 25 January 2013. Independent consultants were employed by the council to undertake a consultation exercise with children in attendance at the schools involved in the proposal. The council received in excess of 1300 responses from a wide range of groups and individuals. A significant number of these were signed copies of a generic letter, the origin of which was not clear. Almost all responses did not support the council's proposal. A significant number of the total responses came from well outwith the immediate areas of both schools. These responses were from non-stakeholders. There were a number of duplicate responses made by respondents.

2.2 Representatives of the local Roman Catholic Diocese did not support the proposal. They commented on the need for a wider review of primary education to be undertaken by the council. The Parent Councils of both schools made separate submissions on the proposal. In their submissions, they raised a number of concerns. The response submitted by St John's Primary School's Parent Council strongly opposed the proposal. This response stated that the Parent Council wished to retain both schools. Parents felt that the council should carry out a wider review of early years and primary education in the area. The Parent Council of St Patrick's Primary School also submitted a response but were not able to reach a consensus on the proposal. Both Parent Councils asked the council to review the timescales set by the council should the proposal go ahead. A response from a group calling themselves, 'the Friends, Parents and Residents of St John's Primary School' strongly opposed the proposal. Parents in both schools understood the council's need to make efficient use of available resources in the current economic climate.

2.3 Some parents of children attending St John's Primary School expressed significant concern at the potential closure of their school. They felt the school had a very good reputation within the community. They had a strong and very positive view about the quality of education and care provided by the headteacher and staff. They highlighted the benefits of working closely with children from Hillside School and the regular use of the Barshare IFE building by children and families for out of school activities and events. Given the timescale proposed for the closure, they were concerned about the negative impact on their children and that this would unsettle their children. Parents were deeply unhappy with what they saw as the narrowness of the proposal. They wanted the council to carry out a wider review of the Cumnock area to include non-denominational schools and early years provision. Parents voiced strongly their concerns about the length of time their children, particularly the very youngest, would spend on the school bus each day should the proposal go ahead. They felt that East Ayrshire Council had developed early years education solely in non-denominational schools and this has compounded the

situation regarding falling pupil rolls in denominational primary schools in the areas of Cumnock and Auchinleck.

2.4 The parents of children attending St Patrick's Primary School had mixed views about the proposal. While some agreed with the proposal, many felt the narrowness of the proposal had created a rift between the two school communities who now felt they were pitted against each other. A number of parents could see the advantages of combining the two schools as a way of ensuring the continuation of Catholic education in the area which they felt has been eroded in recent years. Parents were very unhappy with the timing of the consultation and the pressure on them to provide a well-considered response to the proposal over the festive period. They were also concerned about the intended date for the closure of St John's Primary School and the negative impact such a timeline would have on all children.

2.5 In St John's Primary School, most children consulted were in favour of retaining both schools. Their main concerns were about what would happen to their teachers, leaving behind friends from Hillside School and the increased journey time to get to St Patrick's Primary School. The majority of children at St Patrick's Primary School were in favour of the proposal and cited the making of new friends from St John's Primary School as a benefit.

2.6 The headteacher of both schools and staff from both schools understood the general budgetary challenges faced by the council. They shared the concern raised by parents about the timescales detailed in the proposal and the lack of time to ensure smooth and effective transitions for all children. They commented positively on the existing partnerships which involve children from both schools in for example, residential trips. Staff also jointly develop curriculum programmes and resources.

3. Educational aspects of the proposal

3.1 The *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010* sets out clearly the duties of a council with regard to its educational benefits statement. The main educational benefit the council sets out in its proposal is to increase the roll of St Patrick's Primary School once the proposal is implemented. The council states that the presence of a greater number of children in the school, and at its individual year stages will improve children's learning opportunities. They also state there will be more efficient use of resources and that children would benefit from a broader staff expertise and teaching approaches. It is clear that the staff in both schools already work well together and that some teaching staff work for at least part of the week in both schools. Teaching staff meet regularly to develop aspects of the curriculum and children also benefit from shared learning activities throughout the year.

3.2 The Act requires the council to set out its assessment of the effects of the proposal on the pupils of any affected schools and children who would in the future, but for the implementation of the proposal, be likely to become pupils at the school within two years. It also requires the council to include an analysis of the likely effects of the proposal and how the authority intends to minimise or avoid any adverse effects that may arise from the proposal. Both St John's Primary School and St Patrick's Primary School are currently operating under capacity. The current

roll of St John's Primary School is 31 which gives an occupancy of 13.4%. The current roll of St Patrick's Primary School is 73 which gives an occupancy of 31.6%. Neither school has a nursery class. There are no new entrants due to start at St John's Primary School in August 2013. The proposal does not outline how it will address parental concerns about the lack of early years provision located within a denominational school campus. It does note that the newly enlarged school will require to liaise with a greater number of nurseries than at present. The council needs to reassure parents of pre-school children attending nursery provision, particularly nursery classes in non-denominational schools about transition to primary school by ensuring they have access to relevant information about moving from the pre-school sector to primary school. The proposal outlines clearly how it will support adult and community users currently using the Barshare IFE Building, and St John's Primary School. The council has taken due account of how these community activities could be accommodated within St Patrick's Primary School.

3.3 The proposal sets out other educational benefits. These largely relate to ensuring greater long-term impact on children's learning as a result of more efficient use of strategic support such as the East Ayrshire Support Team and health professionals and greater flexibility in terms of teaching and support staff deployment. The proposal acknowledges that parents will be anxious about the impact on their children of being in a larger school. It rightly claims that regardless of the size of school there is an expectation on schools that staff will ensure children's care and welfare is given a high priority. Parents acknowledged that the headteacher and staff in both schools provide strong pastoral support. Children in both schools benefit from a programme of out-of-school hours experiences and children take on responsibilities such as serving on committees, supporting others and representing their school in the wider community. The council's proposal outlines how every effort will be made to encourage the continuation of these opportunities.

3.4 Scottish Ministers have the right to call-in decisions to close schools. The current timeline of June 2013 for closure of St John's Primary School with the caveat of 'or as soon as possible thereafter' does not give sufficient consideration to the possible impact of this process on the council's plans. In general, the current timescale for the proposal will make it difficult to avoid children being advised, at a late stage in the school year, of the school they will be expected to attend in the following school session. In taking forward the proposal, the council needs to ensure that it provides sufficient time for effective communication with parents, staff and children to alleviate some of their concerns and ensure effective transitions for children from St John's Primary School to St Patrick's Primary School. The proposal outlines a number of helpful measures that it would put in place to support children with the move to St Patrick's Primary School should the proposal be accepted.

3.5 The council's proposal gives reasonable attention to a number of alternatives to its current preferred option. These include the status quo and the closure of St Patrick's Primary School with children transferring to St John's Primary School. The council reasonably rejects these options as being neither practical nor financially viable. The council states that its preferred option meets the stated objectives in relation to the Council's Transformation Strategy as it relates to buildings.

The Schools Estates Management Plan has set an average school occupancy target of 85% for the whole school estate, and if implemented, this proposal would reduce the number of surplus spaces by approximately 200.

3.6 The council sets out that this proposal is the most viable available solution and complies with current legislation. The proposal argues the combined school will result in a school with a pupil roll three times larger than at present in St John's Primary School but will retain the benefits of a small school. Parents value very highly the supportive ethos which they describe as being like 'a big family' and they would wish to retain within a new and enlarged school community. The council has established protocols and procedures to ensure effective consultation takes place with staff, Parent Councils and the community on the implications of the proposal, namely the integration of the children, staffing and school transport. The representatives from the Roman Catholic Church raised concerns about the additional financial cost and the negative impact on families in the current economic climate. These specific concerns need to be carefully considered by the council. The council's proposal is not accepted by almost all respondees, many of whom invite the council to carry out a wider review of the primary school estates in Cumnock, Auchinleck and surrounding areas.

4. Summary

4.1 The proposal by East Ayrshire Council to close St John's Primary School and transfer the pupils to St Patrick's Primary School sets out some educational benefits. These largely relate to the need to reduce expenditure on maintaining 'empty space' because of low occupancy rates allowing the council to redirect resources. Such a move would result in more efficient and effective use of available resources within the education service.

4.2 During the consultation, the council received a large number of responses from a wide range of people and organisations. Respondees included parents and families, parent councils, children and young people, staff, the Catholic Church, East Ayrshire Council, local community groups and other individuals. Respondees raised a number of concerns, including the timing of the consultation, the perceived narrowness of the proposal, school transport issues and the perceived erosion of denominational education in the Cumnock and Auchinleck areas. The council needs to ensure that it fully addresses these concerns in its final consultation report.

4.3 There are likely to be some educational benefits in relation to the broader staff expertise and deployment should the proposal go ahead.

4.4 The council believes that the proposal is the most viable available solution and complies with current legislation. Overall, the council gives reasonable attention to the viability of the two other alternatives which were considered prior to consulting on the recommended option which are outlined in its proposal document. However, some parents, the Catholic Church and other respondees do not feel that the council has fully explored the viability of the alternative option of conducting a wider review of the primary school estates. In taking forward its proposal, the council needs to ensure that it addresses this alternative in its final consultation report.

4.5 The council has set a challenging timeline to take forward the proposal for amalgamation. In taking forward the proposal, the council needs to ensure that it provides sufficient time for effective communication with parents, staff and children to alleviate some of their concerns and ensure effective transitions for children from St John's Primary School to St Patrick's Primary School. Whatever course of action the council chooses to take, it needs to continue to consult with parents, children and staff of both schools and the wider community to engage them fully in the implementation of its proposal.

4.6 Parents are largely unconvinced about the educational benefits arising from the proposal. The council needs to ensure that it addresses these concerns fully in its final consultation report.

HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
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