Consultation proposal by Dumfries and Galloway Council

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal to build a new Langholm Primary School attached to the current Langholm Academy, close the existing Langholm Primary School building and establish a 3-18 learning community of Langholm Academy, Langholm Primary School and Canonbie Primary School, managed by a newly appointed headteacher for the cluster of three schools.

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.

Introduction

1.1 Dumfries and Galloway Council proposes to build a new Langholm Primary School attached to the current Langholm Academy, close the existing Langholm Primary building and create a 3-18 learning community of Langholm Academy, Langholm Primary School and Canonbie Primary School, led and managed by a newly appointed headteacher for the cluster of three schools.

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 meeting held on 26 September 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 information on all schools affected; and

- visits to the site of Langholm Academy, the existing Langholm Primary School, and Canonbie Primary School. In Langholm Academy, meetings were held with staff, including the newly appointed cluster headteacher, the current acting headteacher and acting depute headteacher, a group of staff including principal teachers and union representatives, a group of S3 and S4 pupils and the chairperson of the Parent Council. Meetings were held in Langholm Primary School with the acting headteacher, in Canonbie Primary School with the headteacher; and in both schools with almost all staff, and the chairpersons of the Parent Councils. In all three schools, a 'drop in' session was held to allow any staff to make comment. In addition a tour was made of the current accommodation in all schools and the partly-completed new Langholm Primary School, as well as the surrounding grounds and play areas.

HM Inspectors considered:

- the likely effects of the proposal for children and young people of the three schools involved; 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 Dumfries and Galloway Council undertook the initial consultation on its proposals with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*.

2.2 At the public meeting, and in both oral and written submissions by Parent Councils, there was a high level of support from parents and carers for a new purpose-built primary school to replace the current Langholm Primary School. Parents also expressed strong support for a joint 3-18 learning community, believing it offered significant advantages to their children. Parents of primary school children were positive about the possibilities for joint working, and were pleased that their children would have better access to specialised resources and specialist subject staff.

2.3 During the initial consultation period, parents had the opportunity to see architects' drawings, meet council staff, ask questions and meet staff from the Moffat schools cluster who already operate this 3-18 model.

2.4 While parents welcomed more ‘joined up working’, they were keen that each school retained its own identity. Primary school parents wanted reassurance that they would still have a promoted member of staff in each primary school to lead and manage learning and teaching, and as a regular point of contact for parents.

2.5 All Parent Council members were very positive about their involvement in the appointment of the new headteacher. They felt they had been consulted, fully involved and that their ideas were listened to and acted upon. They believed the recruitment process had been rigorous, fair and transparent.

2.6 Staff in Langholm Primary School were extremely positive about a new school building. They believed there would be benefits from an extended and enhanced curriculum being delivered in a 21st century learning environment. They were looking forward to working jointly with staff in other schools and were eager to relocate and work with the newly appointed cluster headteacher.

2.7 All staff welcomed the possibility of increased opportunities for professional development that working with a larger staff with a wider range of skills may bring, and saw the possibilities for developing new approaches to learning and teaching. Staff in Canonbie Primary School felt particularly pleased at the opportunities they would have to liaise with their stage partners in Langholm Primary School as they felt isolated at times.

2.8 Staff in Langholm Academy were generally positive about the proposal, although a few expressed concern at what they perceived to be a lack of consultation, and a feeling that meetings had been more focused on informing or updating staff, rather than consulting with them. Staff could see the potential for improved transitions and better continuity in learning as children move from stage to stage. However, a number of principal teachers were concerned about possible changes to their roles and remits, for example in comparison with principal teachers in schools which were not part of a 3-18 learning community. The new headteacher and the education authority will need to work with staff to clarify the roles and responsibilities of staff, particularly principal teachers whose new role might include acting as consultants or curricular specialists in the primary schools. While secondary staff were generally positive about the possibility of working with primary aged children, they were unclear how time would be found to facilitate this. This change of role for some secondary staff will need to be explored further and clarified.

2.9 Several secondary staff expressed concern at the loss of some secondary school accommodation including office space and music rehearsal studios, to create space for a new dining facility to be shared by both Langholm Academy and Langholm Primary School. This issue should be considered as part of the next building phase, to ensure secondary pupils are not disadvantaged. In addition, the newly-built Langholm Primary School building is located on a former secondary school playing field space. Physical education staff feel other arrangements will need to be made to ensure no reduction in sports activities. The council is actively investigating funding for a new all-weather pitch to address this issue.

2.10 Staff were unsure what arrangements would be put in place for providing cooked lunches to Langholm Primary School pupils as the new building has no dedicated dining facility. The second building phase for the cluster involves creating a dining and kitchen facility within Langholm Academy to be shared by both schools. However, this work has not yet begun. The council recognises the need to work with the schools to put suitable arrangements in place for an interim period.

2.11 Staff in both Langholm Academy and Langholm Primary School expressed concern about the proposal for a shared depute headteacher post to cover P5-S3. There was a view that this particular post had a particularly demanding workload, which might tend to be weighted more heavily towards secondary pupils. The new headteacher, in consultation with the council, will need to agree remits which meet the needs of all the relevant children with equal priority.

2.12 Pupils in both the secondary and primary schools were very positive about the proposal. Langholm Primary School children were very enthusiastic about their improved accommodation. Children in Canonbie Primary School were eager to work in partnership with children from other cluster schools on shared topics and projects. Secondary pupils welcomed a larger roll and a wider age range on site. A few pupils believed that the council needed to consider the safety implications of an increased number of buses on Thomas Telford Road, and the possibility of more primary pupils having to cross a busy road, particularly those from the Holmwood area of Langholm.

2.13 Senior managers were very positive about the new proposal. The newly appointed headteacher has a very clear vision for the future development of the three schools and is keen to share this with staff when he takes up his new post in early December 2013. The current management staff in all three schools are enthusiastic about future changes which they believe will result in improved outcomes for pupils. They accept that there will be necessary changes to remits and timetables to make the proposal successful. The new headteacher is aware of the need to work in partnership with all stakeholders to ensure staff understand their roles and responsibilities within the learning community as a whole.

2.14 Administrative and support staff expressed some concern about their job security and possible changes to their remits, if the cluster moves to centralised support rather than three separate teams in each school. No decisions have been taken on the range and level of support and this will be agreed when the new headteacher takes up his post.

3. Educational aspects of the proposal

3.1 In 2011, a decision was made by Dumfries and Galloway Council's Education Services to set aside £5.5m for a new Langholm Primary School to be built on the existing Langholm Academy site. At a later stage the council agreed to pursue consultation on a 3-18 learning community with a shared headteacher for Langholm Academy, Langholm Primary School and Canonbie Primary School. The new headteacher has been appointed and takes up post on 6 December 2013.

3.2 Dumfries and Galloway Council has set out, in its proposal, a range of educational benefits for children and young people in the Langholm and Canonbie cluster. The council has drawn on its experience of a similar project which is well established in the town of Moffat. In particular the council highlights how joint working across pre-school, primary and secondary stages can help improve attainment and achievement, whilst also helping to improve the quality of young peoples' learning experiences in many areas. The proposal sets out the ways in which the learning community will strengthen the curriculum, arrangements for meeting learners' needs, the ethos and leadership. The proposal will provide an improved school environment for Langholm Primary School children in a new purpose built school.

3.3 The council believes Langholm Primary School is in a poor state of repair and unsuitable for 21st century education. The building suffers from severe water ingress, damaged ceilings and flooring, and poor heating often resulting in unacceptably low temperatures. The current accommodation does not meet the demands of modern day education.

3.4 The creation of a 3-18 learning community, involving the three schools, has potential to provide a wide range of educational benefits for children and young people. There are opportunities to build on already good collaboration to develop the curriculum and ensure a seamless transition from pre-school through to S6. With the opportunity for more consistent approaches to assessment and tracking across all schools, staff can share standards, moderate levels of achievement and improve attainment. A larger pool of staff skills and expertise has the potential to improve learning experiences by providing greater personalisation and choice and sharing subject knowledge and teaching approaches across sectors. The council's proposal highlights the enhanced opportunities for social development between younger and older children, for example, to develop leadership skills in older pupils. There is also considerable scope for improved staff development as teachers share their respective skills and expertise.

3.5 There is the potential for the proposal to achieve a significantly positive impact on provision for children with additional support needs. The 3-18 learning community will support integrated working, ensuring external support services and learning support staff are better placed to plan coherently across sectors with one extended staff team. This would allow staff to be deployed where the need is greatest and intervene to address barriers to learning at an early stage, with the potential to improve attainment.

3.6 Approaches to improving attainment of secondary pupils will require further attention. Currently Langholm Academy performs above its comparator schools in some whole school measures, particularly at S5 and S6. However, the school's performance in English and mathematics at Level 3 by S4 is significantly below the national average. A number of S4 and S5 measures have declined over the past five years. The new headteacher will need to work with all staff to ensure improvements. There is potential to enhance partnerships with other agencies and services to develop a coherent approach to support the most vulnerable young people and those at risk of missing out across all sectors. The council's proposal

highlights the need for improvements in attainment and outlines a range of general benefits with that aim. The council needs to state more explicitly how these improvements will be achieved.

3.7 Both primary schools have thriving nursery classes. The proposal will allow joint training and shared approaches across both of these classes. Staff welcome the collaboration which will be possible and feel children will benefit from a wider range of skills, knowledge and resources. Improved accommodation in the new Langholm Primary School will allow nursery children better opportunities for outdoor learning as the nursery will have direct access from the playroom to the outdoor areas.

3.8 For those children transferring from P7 to secondary school, suitably rigorous tracking and monitoring across the cluster should ensure that children's learning builds effectively on their prior experience. This can improve the pace and challenge of their learning and has the potential to improve attainment. Children will be more familiar with the building and with staff. Primary children will have access to specialised accommodation such as science laboratories and home economics facilities.

3.9 The new headteacher has been appointed and new depute headteachers will shortly take up post in both primary schools. Additional management time has been allocated across the learning community to facilitate joint working. Staff, parents and young people will be able to work with the new teaching team, more fully involved in the development of the new learning community and its ethos. The new headteacher has a very clear vision for the future development of all schools and is keen to develop a collegiate approach. This will help to motivate and inspire the new school community and act as a sound platform on which to base continuing improvement.

3.10 The council has phased the developments to ensure minimum disruption to children, parents and staff. The new headteacher will be in place before the end of 2013 to manage any accommodation moves, at least five months before the primary pupils move in. The new depute headteacher at Canonbie Primary School should be appointed before Christmas 2013. The current acting headteacher will continue at Langholm Primary School in the interim. This means that the management team will be fully in place to make key decisions about the way forward for the joint school learning community.

4. Summary

4.1 The council has provided a sound case for the proposed learning community of Langholm Academy, Langholm Primary School and Canonbie Primary School. Langholm Primary School needs to be replaced as it is in a poor state of repair and not suitable for modern education. Dumfries and Galloway Council has taken account of good practice in Scottish Education by planning for all children in this cluster to have better access to improved accommodation, skills, expertise and resources. The proposal for a 3-18 learning community provides for better continuity and progression in children's learning.

4.2 The proposed 3-18 joint working will benefit children and young people who will have access to a larger complement of staff expertise, improved facilities and increased resources. The increased allocation of management time will support collaboration and joined up working.

4.3 In taking forward this proposal the council will need to give further consideration to how the strengths of each school might be built upon, and staff expertise shared within the 3-18 cluster. Approaches to ensure improved achievement and attainment within the secondary school will need to be carefully planned by the new headteacher. There is scope for the council to explore options to ensure that there is no reduction in sport facilities, for example, by installing an all-weather pitch. The council has acknowledged the importance of joint planning to ensure efficient curriculum delivery and staff management across all three schools. Staff will need to work together as a team to evaluate the quality of provision in order to plan effectively for improvement.

4.4 While Langholm Primary School parents and children are very positive about the proposed move, there remain some concerns about school lunch arrangements, and about more school buses using Thomas Telford Road with the increased risk to children crossing a busier road. As there is currently no school crossing patrol, the council will need to provide an early indication of how safe routes to school and issues of traffic management will be addressed. Parents will also need reassurance about road safety if primary pupils have to travel back to the old Langholm Primary School for lunches each day until the new dining facility is open.

4.5 The new school campus can provide flexible accommodation for community use. The council will need to consult with users of the facility in order to build capacity within the community to develop lifelong learning.

4.6 Taken together, the preceding paragraphs in this summary confirm that, overall, the council's proposal will result in important enhancements to the educational experience of children and young people in Langholm and Canonbie.

HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
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