

Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by Falkirk Council to permanently close Blackness Primary School and extend the catchment area of Grange Primary School to include the existing catchment area of Blackness Primary School.

November 2024

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 a proposal by Falkirk Council to permanently close Blackness Primary School and extend the catchment area of Grange Primary School to include the existing catchment area of Blackness 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' view. Upon receipt of this report, the Act requires the council to consider it alongside any relevant considerations the council received and then prepare its consultation report. The council's 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 consultation report at least three weeks before it takes its final decision. With all proposals the council needs to follow all statutory obligations set out in the 2010 Act. Where a council is proposing to close a school, there are specific additional obligations. These include notifying Ministers within six working days of making its final decision and explaining to consultees the opportunity they have to make representations to Ministers. There are special provisions that apply to close a rural school.

1.2 HM Inspectors considered:

- the likely effects of the proposal for children 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 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 online public meeting held on 10 October 2024 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
- visits to the site of Blackness Primary School and Grange Primary School, including discussion with relevant consultees.

1.4 As the proposal, if implemented, 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 Blackness 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 Falkirk Council undertook the consultation on its proposal(s) with reference to the [Schools \(Consultation\) \(Scotland\) Act 2010](#).

2.2 The consultation ran from 16 September to 8 November 2024. The council published the proposal paper on its website and provided a copy to relevant key stakeholders. The council held a public meeting on 1 October 2024 at Blackness School/Community Hall and an online meeting on 10 October 2024. In total, around 70 people attended the two meetings, including approximately 20 Blackness Primary School current or prospective parents/carers. The council received a total of 134 responses to an online survey and three written responses. Most respondents (79%) disagree with the proposal and a minority (21%) agree.

2.3 A number of points were raised at the public meetings and in the consultation responses. Stakeholders from the Blackness Primary School catchment area are concerned about the potential impact on both children and the local community from closing the village school. They questioned how all of the proposed savings would be achieved. They are uncertain about the capacity of Grange Primary School to accommodate increases to the school roll in the next few years. Parents from the area are concerned about the potential impact on their child of moving to a bigger school with larger classes. They also worry that their children will receive less personalised teaching and support. Stakeholders from the Grange Primary School catchment area are largely in favour of the proposed closure, citing that this may provide best value for education across the wider area.

2.4 Children at Blackness Primary School and Primary 5, 6 and 7 pupils at Grange Primary School were given the opportunity to complete a short survey. In total, 106 responses were received. Council staff also visited Blackness Primary School to hear from the children directly. All of the children who completed the survey from Blackness Primary School do not agree with closing the school. Children from Grange Primary School had mixed views, with 39% agreeing that it should close, 21% disagreeing, and 40% not knowing whether it should close or not. In the survey and in the discussion, the children from Blackness Primary School highlighted a few worries. This includes being split up from their friends, noise levels in a larger school, and not being able to walk or cycle to school.

3. Educational aspects of proposal

3.1 The council's detailed proposal includes a comprehensive statement on the educational benefits that they believe will be realised if the proposal is implemented. In summary: the ability for children to participate in a broad range of experiences; the headteacher taking forward improvements in learning and teaching across one campus; and the ability to meet the educational, social and emotional needs of the children. HM Inspectors agree that there are potential education benefits that children can experience if the proposal goes ahead. For example, children would have the opportunity to socialise, learn and play with a wider group of children of a similar age and stage. Children would also have access to a broader range of experiences, such as team sports, and a wider group of teaching and support staff. However, HM Inspectors recognise that some children and families value highly the learning and teaching experiences offered within a small rural school setting. These settings offer educational benefits within a different context for learning. At the online public meeting, the council committed to ensuring that Blackness Primary School's "strengths would be clearly represented in the final report". HM Inspectors agree that this would be helpful to ensure that the council has considered fully the impact of closing the school when making a final decision.

3.2 HM Inspectors met with children, parents and staff from Blackness Primary School and Grange Primary School. There are clear differences between the views of those who would be most directly impacted by the proposed closure and other stakeholders. All of the staff, parents and children at Blackness Primary School who met with HM Inspectors do not think the school should be closed. The children enjoy attending Blackness Primary School. They value the experience of being in a small class, having strong relationships with staff and feel well-connected to the village community. A few children enjoy walking or cycling to school. Parents of children at Blackness Primary School highlighted concerns about negative impacts on their child if the school closes. They do not agree with the council's assessment that their child will benefit significantly from moving to Grange Primary School.

3.3 All of the staff and parents at Grange Primary School who met with HM Inspectors think that closing Blackness Primary School makes sense financially. They agree with the potential educational benefits set out by the council. The children who met with HM Inspectors like being able to make friends within a wide group of peers and participating in after-school activities and clubs. Almost all of them think that children from Blackness Primary School would enjoy the benefits of coming to their school. However, a few understood why they might be worried or sad if their school closes. If the proposal is approved, the council will need to ensure that children and families are well-supported in their transition to Grange Primary School.

3.4 As the proposal, if implemented, 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. Before deciding that closing Blackness Primary School represents the best value for educational purposes, the council considered five other alternative options: opening nursery provision in the school; increasing occupancy through rezoning and extending the catchment area; reallocating available capacity in the school for other purposes; mothballing the school; and keeping the school open. HM Inspectors agree that the council has given the alternative options due consideration. Around a quarter of respondents to the consultation thought that extending the catchment area was a viable alternative to closure. They believe that the current catchment school roll may increase above the projection of 13 pupils in 2027-28. Taking local geography and demographics, and parental choice into consideration, HM Inspectors are less confident that this would happen. If this proposal is approved, the council may need to consider a wider review of catchment areas in the future, particularly if the school roll of Grange Primary School continues to rise beyond its capacity.

3.5 Stakeholders who met with HM Inspectors are concerned about the impact on the community of closing the school, which is now the only council service still operating within the village. They stated that the public toilets and the church have also closed. The adjacent community hall is leased from its Management Committee by Blackness Primary School for some activities, events and school meals. The council's view is that closing the school will not adversely affect the sustainability of the village community. However, parents and representatives of Blackness Community Council are concerned that the loss of income from the school may affect the viability of the community hall. If the proposal is approved, it is important that the council continue to work with the local community around future use of the community hall, the school building and its grounds.

3.6 The council states that the main adverse effect of closing Blackness Primary School would be the length of journey to Grange Primary School for children who live in the Blackness catchment area. HM Inspectors agree that the additional journey time is reasonable in comparison to the arrangements for children who currently travel by bus to school. For example, an increase from 15 minutes to 25 minutes for some children. However, children who currently live close enough to walk or cycle would instead spend up to 50 minutes each day travelling to and from their new school. Parents who met with HM Inspectors are currently unclear on exactly what the

home to school transport arrangements will be. It would be helpful for the council to provide more detail on the travel plans in their consultation report so that the impact can be fully understood.

4. Summary

HM Inspectors agree that there are potential education benefits that children can experience if the proposal goes ahead. HM Inspectors also recognise that the context for learning in Blackness Primary School provides experiences that the children who attend and their parents value. In coming to a final decision, the council should consider fully its justification of the educational benefits of one context for learning over another. The stakeholders who will be affected most by a decision to close Blackness Primary School all oppose the proposal. However, a minority of stakeholders who responded to the consultation agree that the proposal represents the best value for educational purposes. Parents and children at Blackness Primary School are concerned about the potential negative impacts on their child if the school closes. If the proposal is approved, the council will need to ensure that children and families are well-supported in their transition to Grange Primary School.

**HM Inspectors
November 2024**