



## MINUTES

## A&B - Public

**Special Education and Families Committee**  
**Council Chamber, Town Hall, Lerwick**  
**Thursday 10 October 2013 at 10.00am**

**Present:**

Councillors:

V Wishart	G Smith
P Campbell	G Cleaver
B Fox	A Manson
F Robertson	G Robinson
D Sandison	M Stout

Religious Representatives:

T Macintyre	R MacKay
M Tregonning	

Also:

M Burgess	A Cooper
R Henderson	T Smith

**Apologies:**

None

**In Attendance:**

H Budge, Director of Children's Services  
J Gray, Executive Manager – Finance  
C Anderson, Senior Communications Officer  
K Johnston, Solicitor  
S Laurenson, Consultant Advisor  
J Thomason, Management Accountant  
A Cogle, Team Leader - Administration  
L Geddes, Committee Officer

**Chairperson**

Ms Wishart, Chair of the Committee, presided.

**Circular**

The circular calling the meeting was held as read.

The Chair ruled that she was changing the order of the agenda so that Agenda Item 1 "Blueprint for Education - Decision on Olnafirth Primary School" would be considered first. Following consideration of this item, the meeting would then be adjourned and there would be no debate on the remaining agenda item "Blueprint for Education – Decision on Skerries School Secondary Department" at today's meeting.

## **Declarations of Interest**

None

40/13

### **Blueprint for Education** **Decision on Olnafirth Primary School**

The Committee considered a report by the Director of Children's Services (Report No: CS-48-13-F), which presented the Consultation Report on the proposed closure of Olnafirth Primary School.

The Director of Children's Services summarised the main terms of the report, advising that it was her responsibility to ensure that the Council provided high quality education for every child of school age across Shetland in order to enable them to reach their full potential. She also had a duty to deliver a service which met the criteria for Best Value in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, economy and equal opportunities. Whilst the Council could demonstrate that it delivered a good quality service overall, as evidenced through good attainment and achievement results and Education Scotland inspections, the current model could not demonstrate equality of opportunity or efficiency in delivery. In June 2010, the Council had agreed a key policy change for the Schools Service that involved considering the primary school estate. Primary schools in Shetland were operating at less than half capacity, with only 47% of the available places used. In August 2013, there were 25 pupils who could attend Olnafirth Primary School but the roll was only eight. So 68% of pupils who could attend the school attended other schools in Shetland due to placing requests submitted by their parents.

She went on to say that with this background in mind, the proposals before the Committee attempted to address issues around equality of provision for all pupils in Shetland, and presented a more efficient, cost effective and sustainable model of delivery. The mechanisms through which the proposals came before Committee were very prescriptive and laid down in legislation. This process was detailed in the report, and Legal Services had confirmed that the requirements of the Schools Consultation Scotland Act 2010 had been complied with. She outlined the proposal in the report, and advised that an analysis of the responses received was outlined in paragraph 3.8 of the report. She thanked pupils, staff, parents and others who had responded through the consultation process, and acknowledged that it was a difficult situation for everyone concerned.

She continued by saying that it was her professional view that the proposal in the report offered educational benefits to the pupils currently attending Olnafirth Primary School. This assessment had been confirmed by Education Scotland in their response to the Proposal Paper, where it was recognised that there were some potential benefits to the children directly affected by the proposal. The children would have better opportunities for learning together, for social interaction with others of similar ages, more regular access to specialist classes and staff, and transition arrangements would have the potential to contribute to the Council's efforts in securing best value within the context of the Council's school estate. It was also her professional opinion that the proposal provided the best possible arrangements for better opportunities for the most of the children of Voe to learn together. In reaching that conclusion, she had listened to and read carefully the issues and concerns raised through the consultation process and it was her professional view, as laid out in detail in the Consultation Report, that all the concerns and issues raised could be addressed.

With regard to the financial implications, the proposal would save £97,239 per annum, predominantly on staffing and operating costs. These calculations had been prepared by Finance Services and had been certified as correct. The Council had asked Children's Services to identify proposals to save 15%, over a three-year period, and the full range of Education Blueprint proposals would achieve that. The proposal in this report would add to the overall savings target and make an ongoing annual contribution to the savings target without impacting on service quality.

She concluded by saying that the proposal met the Council's legal obligations on statutory service provision, as well as the policy direction set with regard to the principles of the Educational Blueprint. It also provided an opportunity to deliver a more effective and sustainable education service in a more efficient way, within the current financial policy framework.

The Director of Children's Services and Executive Manager – Finance then responded to queries from Members, and Members noted the following:

- The role of Education Scotland was explained fully in Appendix B of the report. Children's Services had to respond to the issues raised as part of this process, as had been detailed in Section 14 of Appendix B. The involvement of Education Scotland concluded at that point. The Commission for Rural Education had picked up on this during its deliberations, and there may be more involvement from Education Scotland in future.
- Education Scotland had indicated that "the proposal would enable efficiencies accruing from the closure to contribute to the overall benefit of children and young people elsewhere in the council's area". This statement was likely to refer to the fact that savings would not have to be found from elsewhere in the budget - thereby other schools' budgets - if the proposal was approved.
- The anticipated savings of £97,239 took into account any additional transport costs that would be required. This included the request that had arisen during the consultation process that the primary children should be bussed back together at the end of the day, rather than waiting to travel on the bus with the secondary school pupils.
- The Council had a number of policies in place for staff when closure proposals were being considered and staff in established contracts would be offered redeployment. Some staff chose to work in other areas of the Council, and others chose to retire. A number of posts over the primary sector had been kept as temporary posts to allow for the movement of staff. There had been some reduction in the number of specialist staff in schools as it was important to ensure that there were no more staff than were required in schools.
- The calculation for the loss of Scottish Government grant-aided expenditure (GAE) figures was outlined in Section 11 of Appendix B, and this had been taken account of when the overall savings figure was being prepared. Whilst having larger schools could mean that there would be a reduction in GAE, this had to be considered in the context of the overall savings that could be achieved.
- The response system for this consultation exercise had worked satisfactorily as responses had been received from all parents in the area with the exception of one. The issue relating to the Skerries consultation exercise had only just come

to light, and Children's Services had been supplied with the names of a number of people who believed their responses had not been received. Therefore additional time was being allowed for the Skerries consultation exercise to allow these responses to be submitted again.

- It was necessary to have certain staffing levels in schools to meet legal obligations. One teacher was required for up to 19 pupils, and support had to be provided to the teacher as they could only teach for 22.5 hours. Shared management had been introduced as a way of trying to share staff better between schools. However, teaching unions had been keen to see a principal teacher in schools to take on some responsibilities, so this model had not achieved the anticipated savings.
- Discussion regarding possible future uses for the building could not be pre-empted as part of the consultation process. However if the building was no longer required for educational purposes, it would be handed over to Asset and Properties so there would not be an ongoing cost for Children's Services. The savings figure of £97,239 included a figure of £6,000 for property costs that may apply between a decision being taken on school closure and a decision being made on the future use of the building. No rates were payable for small schools.
- The consultation process had been undertaken under the terms of current legislation, and would not be at risk from any new legislation that may be introduced as it would not be retrospective.
- It had been acknowledged in a socio-economic study that the current house occupancy in Voe was not as it normally would be due to many houses being occupied by oil workers. However it was still the case that 68% of pupils in the area were being educated elsewhere.

During the discussion that followed, some Members commented that it was always difficult to recommend closing small schools, but that it was necessary to consider the options now that so many pupils were being educated outwith the area and the school was down to single figures. It was noted that the prime consideration was the education of the children, and Education Scotland had also acknowledged the potential educational benefits for the small group of pupils affected of being in a larger peer group that would provide opportunities for them that would be difficult to replicate in a smaller group. Officers were commended for their work they had undertaken to ensure the consultation process was carried out properly, and the high standards of education both in this particular school and across Shetland schools was acknowledged.

Some Members commented that some parents may have removed their children from the school as it had been under threat of closure for a number of years, and that they may return their children to the school if they felt it was no longer under threat. It was pointed out that some parents had also moved out of the area temporarily due to the housing situation at the moment. It was also commented that larger peer groups did not necessarily always offer the best educational experience for children, and that the Council may be running the risk of introducing a two-tier education system if it closed small schools in all areas except those where it would not be geographically possible.

Ms Wishart moved that the Committee approve the recommendation in the report, and Mr G Smith seconded.

Ms Manson moved that the Committee recommend to the Council that Olnafirth Primary School remains open, and Mr Cleaver seconded.

After summing up, voting took place by show of hands and the result was as follows:

Amendment (Ms Manson)	2
Motion (Ms Wishart)	9

**Decision:**

The Committee **RECOMMENDED** that the Council resolve to:

- discontinue education provision at Olnafirth Primary School with effect from 4 July 2014 or as soon as possible thereafter; and
- agree that the pupils of Olnafirth Primary School continue their education at Brae High School Primary Department, from 18 August 2014, or as soon as possible thereafter; and
- agree that the catchment area for Brae High School Primary Department be altered to include the current catchment area for Olnafirth Primary School.

The meeting adjourned at 10.55am.

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Chair