

Consultation proposal by Shetland Islands Council

Report by Education Scotland, addressing educational aspects of the proposal to close North Roe Primary School, Urafirth Primary and Nursery School, to relocate all school-aged children to Ollaberry Primary School, and to open a new nursery in Ollaberry Primary School.

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. As the council is proposing to close schools, it will need to follow all legislative obligations set out in the 2010 Act, including notifying Ministers within six working days of making its final decision and explaining the opportunity for representations to be made to Ministers.

1. Introduction

1.1 Shetland Islands Council proposes to close North Roe Primary School and Urafirth Primary and Nursery School and to relocate all school-aged children to Ollaberry Primary School. They also propose to close Urafirth Nursery School and to open a new nursery in Ollaberry 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 North Roe public meeting held on 5 May 2014 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; and
- visits to the site of North Roe Primary School, Urafirth Primary and Nursery School and Ollaberry Primary School including discussion with relevant consultees.

1.4 HM Inspectors considered:

- the likely effects of the proposal for children and young people of North Roe Primary School, Ollaberry Primary School and Urafirth Primary and Nursery School; 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.

1.5 As the proposal will lead to the closure of rural schools as defined in the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*, HM Inspectors also took account of the council's consideration of:

- viable alternatives to the closure of North Roe Primary School, and Urafirth Primary and Nursery School;
- the likely effect on the local community with regard to sustainability and on the community's access to the buildings, grounds and facilities if the school were to close; and
- the likely effect of different travelling arrangements on the environment and on children and young people and other school users occasioned by the closure.

2. Consultation process

2.1 Shetland Islands Council undertook the initial consultation on its proposals with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*. Three public meetings were held for the communities of North Roe, Urafirth and Ollaberry. The public meetings were very well attended in all three schools. Over 200 written responses were made to the consultation. Of these, almost all were against the proposal. The total response represents a significant number given the population of Northmavine. In addition to the large number of respondents, Urafirth Parent Council submitted written evidence refuting many of the statements made in the council's proposal. They also submitted a further document which sets out alleged errors and omissions that they claim are included in Appendix A5 of the council's proposal document.

2.2 Almost all parents and many members of the North Roe and Urafirth local communities are strongly opposed to the proposal to close their schools. They do not feel that there are any educational benefits in the proposal. Parents value the existing high quality education experienced by the children, including the small class size. They do not feel that the proposal is of educational benefit for their children. Almost all parents and staff in North Roe Primary School and Urafirth Primary and Nursery School felt that there were very good opportunities for staff to work collaboratively in clusters and with visiting specialists which helped to ensure continuous improvement.

2.3 Almost all parents from Urafirth Primary and Nursery School and North Roe Primary School are concerned about the proposed travel arrangements and the use of designated pick-up points during the winter months. They have also provided information which they believe demonstrates the negative impact on children's learning when travelling long distances to school.

2.4 The local community of both North Roe and Urafirth are concerned that the closure of the schools will have a detrimental impact on the regeneration of the area and its attractiveness to new families.

2.5 The council has consulted with children drawn from P6 and P7. Children in the school from P4 are aware of the proposals. Almost all the children are concerned at having to spend time on the bus and walking to, and waiting at, the pick-up points, especially in the winter. Many of the children are concerned that the bus journey will reduce the time for leisure activities after school. They already know most of the children from Ollaberry Primary School through shared sporting activities, but a few children thought the move to Ollaberry Primary School would provide more opportunities for making friends. Children have a strong sense of identity with their local community.

2.6 Staff from North Roe Primary School and Urafirth Primary and Nursery School held similar views to the parents and community representatives. They are concerned about the impact of the proposals on their future employment. Almost all parents from the three schools considered the number of consultations and reviews since 2001 to have been challenging for the schools and Northmavine Community. The staff are keen that the current consultation will reach a final decision on the future of the schools.

2.7 A few parents, the majority of whom are from Ollaberry Primary School, support the proposal. They feel the school provides a positive learning experience for their children. Their view is that the school has the space and facilities to accommodate the increased number of children.

2.8 Almost all of the parents from Ollaberry Primary School are happy for the nursery to move. A few parents, all from Ollaberry Primary School, feel that the larger numbers of children resulting from the proposal will be beneficial for social interaction, providing a better mix of age and gender.

2.9 Almost all the children from Ollaberry Primary School are in support of attracting more children to their school and having more friends. Most children felt

that it will take time to get used to having a bigger school, especially one with nursery children.

3. Educational aspects of the proposal

3.1 Currently Northmavine has three primary schools, Ollaberry Primary School, North Roe Primary School and Urafirth Primary and Nursery School. There is also a Nursery Class based in Urafirth Primary School. The Nursery Class provides nursery education for all of the children in the North Roe, Urafirth and Ollaberry catchment areas. It has 15 children who attend in the morning. The children in the Nursery Class move into P1 in one of the three primary schools, entailing one transition for those children attending Ollaberry Primary School and North Roe Primary School. All children in the Northmavine area move from P7 to Brae High School. Urafirth Primary and Nursery School is a non-denominational school and serves the communities of Eshaness, Hillswick, Heylor, Urafirth and Hamar. The roll of Urafirth Primary School is nine pupils. This is predicted to rise to 21 pupils by 2018/19. Ollaberry Primary School is a non-denominational primary school and also has nine pupils. It serves the community of Ollaberry from Collafirth, including Swinister, Ronas, Voe, Gluss and Bardister and the surrounding area. The roll is predicted to rise to 18 by 2018/19. North Roe Primary School is also a non-denominational primary school serving the villages of North Roe, Lochend, and the surrounding area as far south as the Collafirth Pier. The current roll of the school is eight children and the roll is projected to fall over the next three years before rising to nine children in 2018/19. Currently each school has a teaching headteacher and a number of additional visiting teachers. The combined costs of providing education in Urafirth Primary and Nursery School and North Roe Primary School is £296,925.

3.2 The council has provided an extensive proposal paper where it has outlined the educational benefits, best value and possible impact on the local and wider community of the proposal. It has provided an objective assessment of the performance of the three schools in the main body of the report using common criteria. For example, the council applied a rating of one, two, or three to each school for criteria such as, the suitability of the buildings, energy savings/costs, physical space, savings, out-of-school learning and educational benefits. When the rating scale is applied, Ollaberry Primary School scores the highest number of points. As such, the council has given reasonable attention to assessing its reasons for proposing the closure of the schools. However, many of the parents and community members do not feel that the ratings reflect their knowledge of the schools. They feel the council has favoured Ollaberry when applying the criteria.

3.3 In the proposal, the council provides detailed analysis of a number of possible educational benefits from their proposal. These have been challenged by both North Roe and Urafirth communities. The educational benefits include an improved learning environment with a reasonable travel time and more opportunities for social interaction. All three schools have the same building condition core-fact rating of B. In addition, all schools have access to outdoor play and learning areas. The learning environments are therefore similar in all three schools and capable of delivering high-quality outdoor learning and ample space for play and recreation. In the council's final consultation report it will be important to explain further, why the learning environment is better in Ollaberry Primary School.

3.4 In the proposal, children currently attending North Roe Primary School and Urafirth Primary and Nursery School will travel by bus to Ollaberry Primary School from designated pick-up points. The council anticipates that no single bus journey to school will exceed 40 minutes. Almost all parents consider the journey could take longer in inclement weather. They have reasonable concerns about the conditions of the roads in winter weather and the consequent safety for their children. In taking forward its proposals, the council needs to consider fully parents' concerns over the safety of the proposed walking routes to the designated pick-up points and the effect of inclement weather on journey times and road conditions. Parents from North Roe Primary School and Urafirth Primary and Nursery School are also concerned that traveling to school reduces the time available for other forms of social activity, and may exclude children from attending after school activities. In taking forward its proposal, the council needs to set out what it will do to minimise the impact of this concern.

3.5 The council claims that the proposal will allow children more opportunities for social interaction. If the proposal goes ahead, the larger numbers of children has the potential to provide a better mix of age and stage within classes to facilitate collaborative learning and a better gender mix for social interaction. However, children already enjoy opportunities to socially interact by participating in team games, cultural events and national competitions across Northmavine and Shetland as a whole. As such, this benefit may not be entirely realised.

3.6 The proposal suggests that children will benefit from a broader range of learning and teaching. There are a number of specialist staff who regularly visit all three schools thereby providing opportunities for children to experience a range of teaching approaches currently. Parents from Urafirth Primary and Nursery School also claim that by 2017/18, they would have a two teacher school with a nursery because of the projected school roll. This would provide Urafirth Primary and Nursery School similar opportunities to provide a range of learning approaches as outlined in the council's report, if the proposal goes ahead. However, this would incur additional staffing costs for the council and may not represent best value.

3.7 Another benefit outlined by the council is the improved opportunities to build capacity for improvement because of the larger number of school staff which will result from combining all three schools into one. The headteachers in all three schools currently work together as a Northmavine cluster to develop the curriculum and moderate standards, thereby helping to build capacity for improvement across the local cluster. This may be enhanced by reducing the challenges involved in working across all three schools. It has also been identified by HM Inspectors (2013) that Ollaberry Primary School has an excellent capacity for improvement. If the proposal goes ahead, the children will therefore be moving to a school which provides an excellent education.

3.8 The elimination of one transition point for children who currently move from Urafirth Nursery Class to Ollaberry Primary School and North Roe Primary School will be a benefit of the proposal, reducing the need for such detailed transition planning.

3.9 As a result of the proposal, the council will be able to make more efficient and equitable use of the resources allocated to school education within the area of Northmavine. The council estimates that if the proposal goes ahead then the total on-going annual savings will be £190,594. In this respect the council has presented robust evidence outlining the projected savings from the proposal, thereby achieving best value for current and future children in Northmavine and Shetland.

3.10 The council has outlined in detail how it will minimise any adverse effects that may arise from the proposal, such as supporting transitions and the re-deployment/transfer of staff. In the final consultation report, the council will need to indicate how it will support the community of Northmavine which is perceived as having been divided by the proposal. It will be important for the council to come to a timely and definitive decision on this proposal and to take account of the uncertainty within the community that has resulted from frequent similar school closure proposals in the area.

3.11 As the proposal will lead to the closure of a rural school as defined in the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*, HM Inspectors also took account of the council's consideration of the factors to which it should have special regard. The council has considered fully the viability of alternatives to the closure of North Roe Primary School and Urafirth Primary and Nursery School. Each alternative was not felt to provide the same educational benefits, including best value, as that outlined in the current proposal.

3.12 The council also considered the likely effect on the local community with regard to sustainability and on the community's access to the buildings, grounds and facilities if the schools were to close. The council is also committed to commissioning an independent socio-economic study to assess the potential impacts on the communities of North Roe and Urafirth if the proposal goes ahead. The council may wish to give consideration to the outcome of this study before proceeding to a final decision in relation to the proposal.

4. Summary

Shetland Islands Council has made a reasonable case for the overall educational benefit of the proposal. This includes its duty to secure best value in the delivery of its services, a consideration of the viability of other options and the immediate and longer-term impact on the local community. Ollaberry Primary School provides a very high quality of education as identified in the HM Inspectors' report of November 2013. If the proposal goes ahead then children moving to Ollaberry Primary School will benefit from the high-quality learning and teaching currently provided. The proposal will help the council meet its duty to secure best value in the delivery of its services, making substantial on going savings if it closes two primary schools and a nursery. Almost all parents have a range of concerns that are set out in Section 2 of this report. The communities of North Roe and Urafirth are also concerned about the economic impact on the local and surrounding communities of Urafirth Primary and Nursery School and North Roe Primary School. In taking forward the proposal, the council needs to work closely with parents, staff, children and the wider community in addressing their concerns. This includes addressing the alleged errors and omissions that the Parent Council at Urafirth Primary School

claims are included in Appendix 5 of the report. The council also needs to take account of the outcomes from, and recommendations of, the independent socio-economic study which it proposes to commission.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
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