

APPENDIX 4

REPORT BY HM INSPECTORATE OF EDUCATION (HMIE) ON THE EDUCATIONAL ASPECTS OF THE PROPOSAL BY THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL TO CHANGE PROVISION OF EDUCATION IN THE EAST CAITHNESS AREA, THROUGH THE PROVISION OF A NEW SCHOOL BUILDING FOR WICK HIGH SCHOOL, EITHER ON THE EXISTING WICK HIGH SCHOOL PLAYING FIELDS SITE OR ON THE SITE OF BIGNOLD PARK IN WICK, AND TO DETERMINE WHAT COMMUNITY FACILITIES SHOULD BE INCLUDED WITHIN THE NEW SCHOOL CAMPUS.

1. Introduction

1.1 The Highland Council proposes to change provision of education in the East Caithness area, through providing a new school building for Wick High School, either on the existing Wick High School playing fields or on the site of Bignold Park in Wick. It is proposed that work on this change of provision should commence in September 2012 and be completed by 2014. At the time of the consultation, the council had given broad indications that the proposals would include a 250-seat performance venue, a community library and a 25-metre, six-lane swimming pool. There were no specific details of the nature and size of the broader educational facilities which would be available.

1.2 This report has been prepared by HMIE in accordance with the terms of the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*.

1.3 HM Inspectors' role is to report on the educational aspects of the proposal. HMIE undertook the following activities:

- scrutiny of all relevant documentation provided by the council in relation to the proposal, including the original proposal, and the consultation documents;
- consideration of written and oral representations including from the public meeting required by the Act, and the council's own report on the outcomes of the consultation; and
- scrutiny of further information on all establishments affected.

1.4 HMIE considered:

- the likely effects for any other users of the school buildings, for children likely to become pupils, and for pupils of any other schools in the local authority 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 Overall, the council carried out the consultation with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*. The consultation included an invitation for written submissions and a public meeting, held in September 2010. The proceedings at the public meeting were recorded using audio equipment and written transcripts were submitted as part of the consultation process. Due to difficulties with the audio equipment not all of the proceedings during the public meeting were fully annotated.

2.2 The public meeting provided an appropriate forum for the expression of views. The council had identified a number of benefits and aspects of concern for both of the proposed options. For both sites the council stated that the benefits would be an improved fit-for-purpose facility and the creation of a community hub. For the Bignold Park site additional benefits were stated by the council to be the possibility of future expansion and the lack of disruption to the school while the new facilities were being built. For the proposed site on the existing playing fields, areas of concern were stated to be the limited land available with lack of space for future expansion, the loss of use of the playing fields while the new facilities were being built and difficulties with access and parking. For the Bignold Park site areas of concern were the issues regarding land ownership, the longer consultation period and the fact that the site grounds may contain unknown difficulties.

2.3 At the public meeting, and in subsequent correspondence received by the council as part of the consultation process, almost all of those consulted welcomed the provision of a new school building. There was considerable opposition to the option to build the new Wick High School on the Bignold Park site. These concerns related to a number of factors, including the loss of amenities for the town of Wick, problems with drainage on the chosen site and, principally, the lack of clarity as to the legality of any proposal to build on the Bignold Park site. Other concerns related to the nature of the community facilities, including a new swimming pool, community library and performance venue, which were to be incorporated within the proposed new building. Many at the public meeting and in subsequent correspondence expressed concern about these community facilities duplicating existing facilities within Wick, leading to the closure of these public buildings in Wick, with consequent detrimental effect for the young people presently in school and for the wider community.

2.4 The council's papers submitted as part of the consultation process offered a range of information related to the costs of the two options under consideration. The information included some apparent anomalies which were noted by some of those who responded to the consultation process and which were related to the projected rolls within schools in East Caithness and to the associated demolition costs within the two options.

2.5 At the public meeting and in subsequent correspondence, concern was raised about the consultation process on the basis that there was insufficient detail in the indicative drawings provided about the nature of the plans for the school building. Some respondents felt that there were no clear plans for the future use of community buildings in Wick should wider community facilities be included in Wick High School as a result of these proposals.

3. Educational aspects of the proposal

3.1 Wick High School has a roll of around 800 pupils. Figures provided by Highland Council show that the present school has a capacity to accommodate 972 pupils. In December 2008 HMIE published a report on educational provision in Wick High School. At that time the report stated that the school building was “not yet a welcoming, secure or positive environment for learning.” Of the three main areas for improvement set out by HMIE for the school and education authority, one related to accommodation. The areas for improvement were to:

- make better use of self-evaluation to raise attainment, and ensure that all young people experience learning activities which challenge them appropriately;
- improve communication with parents and involve them more fully in supporting their children’s learning; and
- improve the quality of the school building.

HMIE published a follow-through inspection report in November 2009, evaluating the progress made. While acknowledging improvements in a range of areas, the report stated that there remained “important weaknesses in the quality of the accommodation, including aspects which relate to young people’s health and safety”. Since that inspection, the school canteen has been refurbished and a number of toilets have been upgraded. However, significant improvements to the accommodation are still needed. HMIE remain engaged with the school in relation to the areas for improvement outlined above.

3.2 The council’s papers refer to educational benefits arising from its proposals. These include the use of an improved educational environment and better community facilities. The young people attending Wick High School would benefit from enhanced facilities including a performance venue, a swimming pool and a library. It is not clear from the proposals whether the provision of these proposed new community facilities within the new school building would result in the closure of existing buildings in Wick namely the swimming pool, the Carnegie Library and the Assembly Rooms. The present swimming pool is well situated in the centre of Wick, is under 20 years old and has recently been refurbished. There is considerable opposition in the local community to the possible closure of the swimming pool, the Carnegie Library and the Assembly Rooms. The council has not yet made clear, should such closures be a consequence of the new school proposals, how this represents best value and what the longer term benefits would be for the young

people presently in school and for the community in both the East Caithness area and in the wider Highland Council area.

3.3 The council's proposals are likely to provide improved facilities to young people attending Wick High School and benefit children and young people in the East Caithness area. At present the accommodation in Wick High School has important weaknesses and the present proposals have the potential to address these. There were not sufficiently detailed written plans and designs in place at this stage for the community to judge fully the educational benefits of the proposals or to consider aspects such as traffic management and safe routes to school at the proposed sites.

3.4 The council may wish, in taking forward the plans, to provide further information regarding the legality of the proposed use of Bignold Park, taking account of concerns expressed during the consultation about consequent delay to the building of a new school, should this proposal be subjected to legal challenge, with a detrimental effect on the educational experiences of young people in the East Caithness area.

4. Summary

4.1 The proposal from The Highland Council to change provision of education in the East Caithness area through the provision of a new school building for Wick High School is, on the whole, well judged. It has the rationale of providing, in the longer term, higher-quality school accommodation with the potential to improve the learning experiences of young people in the East Caithness area. It is likely to offer educational benefits to young people directly affected by the proposals and has the potential to address identified weaknesses in the present accommodation. The council's proposal to provide a new school building for Wick High School has been broadly welcomed by almost all parents and other members of the local community in the East Caithness area. The option to build such a new school on the Bignold Park site in Wick has met with considerable opposition from parents and the local community. In taking forward the proposals, the council needs to address aspects which at present are not sufficiently clear, including the legal position regarding the option to build the new school on the Bignold Park site and how the council would mitigate the detrimental educational effects on the young people at present attending Wick High School if the new school building were delayed by consequent legal challenges. The council also needs to state more clearly why this site might offer longer-term benefits to young people and the wider community. The council also needs to offer a clearer rationale as to why the proposals to include a performance venue, swimming pool and community library offer appropriate value for money and the potential to benefit young people attending Wick High School and members of the wider community.