

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by The Highland Council to discontinue education provision at Achfary Primary School, reassigning its catchment area to that of Kinlochbervie Primary School.

1. Introduction

This report from Education Scotland has been prepared by HM Inspectors in accordance with the terms of the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010* and the amendments contained in the *Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014*. The purpose of the report is to provide an independent and impartial consideration of The Highland Council's proposal to discontinue education provision at Achfary Primary School, reassigning its catchment area to that of Kinlochbervie 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' 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, 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 final consultation report three weeks before it takes its final decision. Where a council is proposing to close a school, it needs 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 to consultees the opportunity they have to make representations to Ministers.

1.1 HM Inspectors considered:

- the likely effects of the proposal for children and young people of the 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
- the educational benefits the council believes will result from implementation of the proposal, and the council's reasons for coming to these beliefs.

1.2 In preparing this report, HM Inspectors undertook the following activities:

- attendance at the public meeting held on 26 April 2016 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 including a meeting with Scourie and District Community Council; and
- visits to the site of Achfary Primary School, Kinlochbervie Primary School, Kinlochbervie Nursery, Scourie Primary School and Scourie Nursery including discussion with relevant consultees.

1.3 As the proposal will lead to the closure of a rural school, HM Inspectors also took account of the council's consideration of any reasonable alternatives to the closure of Achfary 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 The Highland Council undertook the consultation on its proposal with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010* and the amendments in the *Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014*.

2.2 The Highland Council undertook the consultation between 11 April and 24 May 2016. A public meeting held at Achfary Primary School on 26 April 2016 was attended by nine members of the public. Children at Scourie and Kinlochbervie Primary Schools were given the opportunity to discuss the proposal and have their views recorded at separate meetings held in their schools. Those who attended the public meeting and those who made written responses were not opposed to the closure of Achfary Primary School. They were concerned that the proposal could result in a rezoning of the Achfary catchment area to Kinlochbervie Primary School rather than Scourie Primary School. The Highland Council received three written responses to the consultation, including a petition from Scourie Parent Council signed by 82 people opposing the proposed reassignment of the Achfary school catchment area to Kinlochbervie Primary School.

3. Educational Aspects of Proposal

3.1 Achfary Primary School is a rural school accommodated within Achfary Village Hall. The building is leased from Reay Forest Estate by The Highland Council. No children have attended Achfary Primary School since 2011/12. A single pupil residing in the Achfary catchment area currently attends Kinlochbervie Primary School. School roll forecasts indicate a maximum roll of two pupils by 2019/20.

3.2 The Highland Council provides a clear and persuasive set of educational benefits in its proposal to close the school. By attending another school, children will be able to learn with a group of their peers. It would be difficult to offer only one or two children a full experience of the curriculum including a wider range of learning activities such as sport, drama and music in Achfary Primary School. Children would benefit from improved opportunities for social interaction and to learn skills through working together. This would not be possible with the current and forecasted pupil

roll numbers at Achfary Primary School. The building has significant limitations for use as a modern school. The council gave appropriate consideration of any reasonable alternatives to closing the school. These included re-opening Achfary Primary School either with its current or an extended catchment area or to continue with the current mothballing arrangement. Population forecasts for the area do not make the alternatives viable or cost effective.

3.3 Parents, children and staff who spoke with HM Inspectors in both Kinlochbervie Primary School and Scourie Primary School accepted the need to close the school. Whilst regretting the loss of a local school, they saw merit in the educational benefits presented in The Highland Council's consultation document. However, stakeholders in Scourie Primary School disagreed with The Highland Council's proposal to reassign the Achfary catchment to Kinlochbervie Primary School. They were of the view that Achfary has more natural area links to Scourie including employment links through Reay Forest Estate and Loch Duart fish farm. They were concerned about the area's population decline and the falling school roll in Scourie. They felt that The Highland Council's proposal could make it more difficult to attract families to the area and could therefore make Scourie Primary School more vulnerable in the future. Achfary Primary School is located within the Scourie and District Community Council area. Members of the community council were working with others on initiatives to develop the local economy and address population decline. Members who spoke with HM Inspectors felt strongly that Achfary should be zoned to Scourie Primary School.

3.4 The Highland Council includes detailed information on catchment areas in its proposal paper. Achfary Primary School is marginally closer to Scourie Primary School than Kinlochbervie Primary School. However, the school building at Kinlochbervie currently offers a better standard of accommodation than Scourie Primary School. It is categorised as condition B whilst Scourie Primary School is classified as condition C. Scourie currently has limitations regarding disabled access which need to be addressed through the council's capital and maintenance programmes. Kinlochbervie Primary School currently has 24 children on the roll, a larger roll than Scourie Primary School which has nine children, thus affording more opportunities for children to learn in age appropriate peer groups.

3.5 The council's consultation document specifically seeks the community's views on the best way to reassign the catchment area of Achfary Primary School. Almost all stakeholders in Scourie who responded to the consultation in writing and those who spoke with HM Inspectors were strongly of the view that the Achfary Primary School catchment should be reassigned to Scourie Primary School. The Highland Council will need to consider these views carefully when taking forward its final proposal document. In the longer term, the educational benefits between assigning the Achfary Primary School catchment to either Kinlochbervie Primary School or Scourie Primary School are evenly balanced. The roll of Scourie Primary School is set to rise to 20 by 2023 and Kinlochbervie roll is projected to fall to 17 in the same period. The Highland Council will need to carry out necessary works to bring the standard of accommodation in Scourie Primary School to category B regardless of

the decision on the reassignment of Achfary Primary School catchment area. Both schools already work together along with Durness Primary School within the Kinlochbervie High School cluster including extending opportunities for peer groups to learn together.

4. Summary

4.1 The Highland Council's proposal to discontinue education provision at Achfary Primary School, reassigning its catchment area to that of Kinlochbervie Primary School, has clear educational benefits. The proposal will enable the few children from Achfary to learn with their peers and benefit from social interaction. They could access a more appropriate range of opportunities within the curriculum than would be the case at Achfary Primary School.

4.2 The Highland Council will need to consider the views provided by stakeholders at Scourie Primary School that Achfary Primary School catchment should be reassigned to Scourie Primary School.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
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