

Consultation proposal by Comhairle nan Eilean Siar

Report by Education Scotland, addressing educational aspects of the proposal to close Carinish, Lochmaddy and Paible Schools on 26 June 2015 and to establish a new North Uist Primary School on the existing school site at Paible from 13 August 2015.

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 a school, 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 Comhairle nan Eilean Siar proposes to close Carinish, Lochmaddy and Paible Primary Schools on 26 June 2015 and to establish a new North Uist Primary School on the existing school site at Paible from 13 August 2015.

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:

- consideration of all relevant documentation provided by the council in relation to the proposal, specifically the educational benefits statement and related consultation documents, and written and oral submissions from parents and others;
- consideration of further information on all schools affected; and

- visits to Carinish, Lochmaddy and Paible Primary Schools, including discussion with relevant consultees.

1.4 HM Inspectors considered:

- the likely effects of the proposal for children and young people of the three schools; 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 a rural school 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 Carinish, Lochmaddy and Paible Primary Schools;
- 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 Comhairle nan Eilean Siar undertook the initial consultation on its proposals with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*. The consultation included three public meetings and invitations to submit written submissions. A few parents from all three schools did not feel that they were able to present their views accurately as they felt intimidated by the large numbers of officials sitting at the front of the meeting. The public meetings were well attended and the council received a large number of written responses.

2.2 Children attending all three schools, Carinish, Lochmaddy and Paible were, on the whole, in favour of a new North Uist Primary School. Almost all were positive about the wider range of contacts and opportunities they thought would be available in a larger school. Most thought that learning with others of the same stage and age would help them, especially at the P7/S1 transition, when everyone moves on to the same secondary school. However, almost all children attending Carinish and Lochmaddy schools expressed concern about the proposed location at Paible. They felt that the school should be more central, around Clachan, and that the journey

times would be too long, especially for the younger children. Almost all the children attending Paible School were very positive about all aspects of the proposal.

2.3 Nearly all of the parents of children attending Lochmaddy and Carinish Schools regretted the loss of their school, but were in favour of creating a new North Uist Primary School. However, they were strongly opposed to the preferred site at Paible. Their main concerns were that the site was not central and that this would result in longer journey times for their children. They also felt that the single track road was in poor condition, the Paible site was liable to flooding and that their views on a central location, expressed at a meeting in January, had been ignored. They voiced concerns about the transport arrangements during severe weather and during peak tourist periods, especially if children had to use public transport to get to school. Some parents from Lochmaddy wished their school to remain open, as the loss of the school would seriously affect the future of the village. They pointed to the increase in the school roll over the past three years and felt that families would no longer wish to move into Lochmaddy if there was no local school. A few parents expressed doubt about the costs and felt that other sites and their associated costs should be further explored. Parents of children attending Paible School were overwhelmingly in favour of the proposal, including the location, and disagreed that Clachan was a better site. In their opinion the site at Paible was the best choice as it was off the main road and would allow the children greater ease of access to the surrounding area, including the Machair and the beach.

2.4 Parents of pre-school children from all catchment areas expressed great concern about the future of the 0-5 Saoghal Beag nursery provision, run by Urachadh Uibhisat. Many parents rely on this nursery for childcare and were clear that without this type of provision they would be unable to continue with their employment, putting their future on North Uist at risk. The council's proposal includes provision for statutory pre-school education. However, the minutes of the public meetings state that the current design includes 0-3 provision. This had been incorporated because parents and members of the community expressed a strong view in favour of this. Parents still expressed concern about the lack of detail on opening times, after school and holiday care, the number of weeks the service would be available and if it would continue to be run by Urachadh Uibhisat, in partnership with the council. They were clear that the service should be at least as good as was currently provided at Saoghal Beag Nursery.

2.5 Overall, staff in all three schools were in favour of the council's proposal and identified several advantages, including an improved environment for learning, improved access to Gaelic Medium Education, greater flexibility in organising classes and more opportunities for collegiate working and professional dialogue. A few staff were concerned and their deployment if the proposal went ahead, although they were clear about the decision-making process.

2.6 Members of the wider community of Lochmaddy and Carinish have access to nearby community halls. The Paible community can use the current school building for community activities. Therefore, it is unlikely that community activities would be seriously affected by the closure of the schools. However, members of the Lochmaddy and Carinish communities regretted the loss of the schools and expressed some concern over the future use of the buildings. A few members of the

Lochmaddy community felt that the school should be retained, or the new school established there, as Lochmaddy is the port and the natural hub in North Uist.

3. Educational aspects of the proposal

3.1 The roll of Carinish Primary School has decreased from 28 in 2006 to 12 in the current session. The roll of Lochmaddy Primary School has increased from eight in 2006 to 22 in the current session. The roll of Paible Primary School has decreased from 51 in 2006 to 39 in the current school session. If the proposal for closure of all three schools is taken forward the roll of the new primary school is expected to be 73 in August 2015.

3.2 All three schools have rolls well below their capacity. Carinish has a capacity for 50 and is currently 16%; Lochmaddy has a capacity of 73 and is currently 44%; Paible has a capacity of 199 and is currently 20%. The Schools Estates Survey (2013) assessed all three buildings as condition B. None of the schools are compliant with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 2005(DDA). The proposed new school will be fully compliant.

3.3 The council has set out in its proposal a good range of educational benefits for the children of North Uist, if the proposal goes ahead. In particular, it highlights the advantages of learning in the new build North Uist Primary School, a modern building, designed for the delivery of a 21st century curriculum. All children would have access to Gaelic Medium Education throughout their school career. The new school would also provide children with improved outside spaces for learning, play and sport, up-to-date information and communications technology (ICT) facilities, a dedicated library, a general purpose room, a modern equipped gym hall and enhanced facilities to cater for the needs of all children, including those with additional support needs. However, given the substantial level of concern over the choice of site, the council needs to clarify why the Paible site was chosen in preference to others, which most parents view as more central. The council also needs to provide clearer information on the costs and potential savings of the different site options.

3.4 The new school would provide an environment for learning where children would have increased opportunities to interact and learn alongside others of the same age and stage. A larger pupil population will create greater flexibility in grouping children for learning and teaching and enable them to move on to secondary school with others at the same stage.

3.5 All staff welcomed the possibility of increased opportunities for collegiate working, joint planning, sharing practice and professional dialogue. Staff in the new school will also benefit from greater flexibility in planning pupil groups to meet learning needs. There is also scope for improved staff development as teachers share their respective skills and expertise. As they move forward with their plans, the council needs to continue their dialogue with staff on their plans for staffing and possible redeployment.

3.6 The proposal includes statutory pre-school education provision which does not exist in any of the three schools. The proposal to have nursery education within the new school is educationally advantageous as it supports effective transitions into

school and brings greater coherence to the delivery of the early stages of Curriculum for Excellence. Parents highly value the nursery provision at Saoghal Beag Nursery and Croileagan Dhunsgealair and are concerned that they may not have the same level of nursery education and childcare currently on offer at Saoghal Beag Nursery. The council needs to consult further with parents and Urachadh Uibhisat to ensure that their reasonable concerns are fully addressed.

3.7 As this 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 viable alternatives to the closure of the schools. The council has examined alternatives well and it argues reasonably that upgrading the schools and maintaining the status quo would not increase the school rolls, be cost effective or provide the improved class groupings which would enrich learning experiences for children.

3.8 Members of the Lochmaddy community believe that the loss of the school, whose roll has increased since 2006, will have a negative impact on the future population of the village as families with young children may be reluctant to settle in a community with no local school. Members of both the Lochmaddy and Carinish communities have some concerns about the future use of the buildings. However the council's policy sets out its procedures for disposing of buildings surplus to requirements. The impact on community activities would be minimal through the availability of the nearby community halls.

3.9 The council's policy on travelling arrangements for primary pupils limits all journeys to no more than 40 minutes. A number of parents felt that this would not be achievable for their children and location. The council, in its review of transport for the proposed new school, needs to assess carefully the impact of its travel arrangements for very young children when making its final decision about this proposal. It should also address the parents' concerns over severe weather travel arrangements and the use of public transport.

4. Summary

4.1 The proposal from Comhairle nan Eilean Siar to close Carinish, Lochmaddy and Paible Primary Schools on 26 June 2015 and to establish a new North Uist Primary School on the existing school site at Paible from 13 August 2015 will bring educational benefit for the children of North Uist. They should have significantly enhanced learning experiences in a modern and well-resourced building. They would all have access to Gaelic Medium Education and increased interaction with others of the same age and stage. They may have access to a wider range of extra-curricular opportunities, although participation may be restricted by travel arrangements. Staff would benefit from more opportunities to work and plan together. The council would be able to make more efficient and effective use of its resources to the benefit of all learners throughout its area. However, the financial case needs to be set out more clearly, including any potential impact of implementation of the proposal on the council's budget through the General Revenue Grant.

4.2 The council has consulted with a wide range of stakeholders and has received many responses to its proposal. In taking forward the proposal, it needs to address a number of issues raised by these stakeholders. In order to alleviate growing anxiety amongst some members of the different communities, it needs to outline as soon as possible how it will continue to inform and engage with all stakeholders. In particular, the council needs to clarify further why the Paible site was chosen in preference to other sites and provide more detail on the various costings and potential savings of the different options. It also needs to assess carefully the arrangements for transporting children, especially the very young. In particular, it needs to consider the sharing of transport with fare paying passengers, the journey times for individual children and severe weather arrangements. In taking forward the proposal, the council needs to engage further with the parents of pre-school children and nursery providers to address their very reasonable concerns over nursery provision and childcare arrangements. In doing so, it needs to provide greater detail and clarity on the exact nature of the proposed nursery provision.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
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