

Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by Scottish Borders Council to close Eccles Leitholm Primary School.

May 2019

1. Introduction

1.1 This report from Education Scotland has been prepared by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education (HM Inspectors) in accordance with the terms of the [Schools \(Consultation\) \(Scotland\) Act 2010](#) ("the 2010 Act"). The purpose of the report is to provide an independent and impartial consideration of Scottish Borders Council's proposal to close Eccles Leitholm Primary School and re-delineate the catchment zone. 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 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 statutory 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 and the special provisions that apply to proposals to close a rural school.

1.2 HM Inspectors considered:

- the likely effects of the proposal for children of the catchment area; 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.

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

- 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; and
- visits to the sites of Coldstream Primary School and Swinton Primary School, and discussions with relevant parents, children and staff. A visit to the mothballed Eccles Leitholm Primary School.

1.4 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 closure of Eccles Leitholm 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 Scottish Borders Council undertook the consultation on its proposal(s) with reference to the [Schools \(Consultation\) \(Scotland\) Act 2010](#).

2.2 In 2016 Scottish Borders Council conducted a pre-consultation process that focused on the school estate across the area. As part of this process they communicated with families, school user groups, Community Councils and elected members. This resulted in the mothballing of Eccles Leitholm Primary School due to its falling roll. As the school has now been closed for almost three years, Scottish Borders Council set out their consultation period from 14 March to 10 May 2019 in order to consider future options. They consulted with a range of stakeholders including parents. A public meeting attended by 14 people was held on Thursday 25 April 2019. The council received 22 written responses to the consultation and a letter from the headteacher at Swinton Primary School. Of the responses, 16 agreed with the proposal to close the school permanently, two disagreed and five either did not know or did not answer the question.

3. Educational aspects of proposal

3.1 The council gave due consideration to the educational aspects of the proposal to close the school permanently and re-zone the catchment area accordingly. Prior to the closure, numbers in the school had dwindled to five children and there have been no enrolment requests since 2016. There has also been a decline in the population. The council's own mapping of postcodes has shown that there are no children in the neighbouring catchments living closer to Eccles Leitholm than their current catchment school.

3.2 The council considers that re-opening the school will have no educational benefit. Children from the two villages now attend a range of other primary schools although most are at either Coldstream or Swinton. The larger peer groups in these two schools was cited by the council as being beneficial to children's learning in terms of experiencing a variety of learning and teaching experiences. They also cite the importance of children developing social skills and interaction in line with the aspirations of Developing Scotland's Young Workforce. The council also argues that very small schools can restrict opportunities for team sports and other recreational activities.

3.3 There was no early learning and childcare provision at Eccles Leitholm Primary School. However, there is currently one at Coldstream Primary School and a new provision is being developed at Swinton Primary School. The council believes that this will help children make the transition in to primary school more easily.

3.4 Staff recruitment and retention can be more challenging in a very small school. The council considers that there is greater benefit for staff being part of a larger group in terms of working collaboratively and sharing resources.

3.5 The council believes that the closure of the school will have little effect in terms of the impact on the local community. Prior to mothballing, the school was not used by community groups or organisations.

3.6 Overall, feedback from stakeholders supports the council's plan to close the school permanently. Parents in the two villages are unlikely to send their children to Eccles Leitholm Primary School should it be re-opened. Several parents stated that they were happy with the current arrangements despite the travel involved. Even if Eccles Leitholm Primary School was re-instated, elements of the curriculum would need to be delivered at Coldstream Primary School. Several of those who responded to the consultation recognise that the school is not viable and is unlikely to be so for the foreseeable future. Parents, children and staff from Coldstream and Swinton Primaries overwhelmingly supported the proposal by the council to close Eccles Leitholm Primary School. Whilst some had fond memories of being in a small school, they recognise the challenges of maintaining a rounded education in that setting.

3.7 A few of those who responded to the consultation raised the issue about the future of the building. This was also raised at the public meeting. However, a few local residents thought that the school had already been permanently closed and that it made sense to make a final decision about the school's future. It was suggested at the public meeting that the closure could be an opportunity, under the auspices of the Community Empowerment Act, for the building to be used for community activity. It was agreed that a period of six months should be allowed for any interested parties to develop a business plan.

3.8 As the proposal will lead to the closure of a rural school, HM Inspectors also took account of the council's consideration of the factors to which it should have special regard. The council identified the reasons for the closure of the school and gave due consideration to the alternatives. They took account of the local, social and economic impact of the closure and concluded that it was unlikely that any of these would have an adverse impact on the area. Because the school has been mothballed for some time, the local community are keen that a decision is made about its future. The council recognise that the re-zoning of the catchment area of Eccles Leitholm may result in some changes to travelling arrangements, although at this stage the numbers are unknown. Transport is currently provided for children attending Coldstream Primary School. The Council have consulted with parents to establish which school they consider that the Eccles Leitholm catchment should be permanently re-zoned to (Coldstream or Swinton). Transport will be provided to the permanent catchment school and existing transport arrangements to Coldstream will continue to be honoured for current pupils and their siblings, in the event that the catchment is to be permanently re-zoned to Swinton Primary School. Children from the current catchment also attend a range of different schools in line with parental choice. The council's analysis of postcodes for school-age children indicates that there is not a significant demand for places at a re-opened Eccles Leitholm Primary School.

4. Summary

HM Inspectors consider that there is no educational benefit in re-opening Eccles Leitholm Primary School. Children from the current catchment already attend a number of other schools in line with parental choice and this is unlikely to change. The current arrangement where children are experiencing a variety of learning and teaching experiences may not be possible in a school with very low numbers. The continued mothballing will result in further deterioration of the building. This could lead to the council spending monies unnecessarily in terms of keeping it wind and watertight. The move to permanent closure of the school will allow other options for use by the community to be explored.

**HM Inspectors
May 2019**