

# **Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010**

**Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by Scottish Borders Council to close Ettrick 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 Ettrick 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 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 schools; 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 Kirkhope Primary School and Ettrick Primary School, including discussion with relevant consultees.

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 Ettrick 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 The council proposes to permanently close Ettrick Primary School and rezone its catchment area to Kirkhope Primary School. The council undertook the consultation between 4 March 2019 and 28 April 2019. Copies of the proposal document were made available to consultees and an

advertisement was placed in the local press. A public meeting held at Ettrick Village Hall on 26 March 2019 was attended by ten people. The council received a total of 11 online and paper questionnaire responses to the consultation of which five agreed and five disagreed with its proposal to permanently close Ettrick Primary School. One 'don't know' response was returned.

### 3. Educational aspects of proposal

3.1 Scottish Borders Council's proposal has the potential to be of educational benefit. Ettrick Primary School has been mothballed since 2012 when its roll fell to zero. Since then, pupils have been zoned to Kirkhope Primary School. Projected pupil numbers for Ettrick Primary School are not expected to rise significantly. Kirkhope Primary School has a current roll of eight children with an additional nine children attending early learning and childcare provision. One child attending Kirkhope Primary School lives within the catchment area of Ettrick Primary School. Kirkhope Primary School in Ettrickbridge is the geographically closest school to Ettrick Primary School. Children attending Kirkhope Primary School would continue to experience the features of learning in a small rural school within the Ettrick Valley community but would benefit from a potentially broader range of opportunities to learn with their peers and engage in collaborative learning. Children would have potentially more opportunities to develop social skills through working with others across a wider range of ages. Children would be able to learn from each other and share experiences and skills.

3.2 Kirkhope Primary School's roll has also declined. The school has capacity for 50 pupils and a current roll of eight. The council has concluded that the current and projected pupil roll numbers are not sufficient to sustain two primary schools in the Ettrick Valley area. Kirkhope Primary School is paired with Yarrow Primary School under shared headship arrangements. Scottish Borders Council states that it is working with both school communities to sustain those schools. Reopening Ettrick Primary School could cause a further decline in Kirkhope Primary School's roll.

3.3 Parents, children and staff who spoke with HM Inspectors were in agreement with the council's proposal. Whilst they regretted the loss of a small rural school, they could see no reasonable alternative to its permanent closure. Stakeholders reported that they had no expectations that the school would reopen since it was mothballed almost seven years ago. Children valued their learning experience and other opportunities at Kirkhope Primary School. They enjoyed working with their peers and spoke enthusiastically about the many trips the school offers to broaden children's experiences. Parents and staff had wider concerns about sustaining Kirkhope Primary School and Yarrow Primary School as viable small rural schools. They felt that it would not be in the interest of the wider community to reopen Ettrick Primary School. Parents felt that the additional school travel time involved in journeys from more distant parts of Ettrick Valley to Kirkhope Primary School was not unreasonable but that the journey times to school would become unreasonable if Kirkhope Primary School were to close in future. They hoped to receive reassurance that Scottish Borders Council would continue to support the provision of small rural schools within its review of the school estate. The council will need to address this in its final report.

3.4 Stakeholders who responded to the consultation by completing the paper questionnaire pointed to a typographical error resulting in an erroneous reference to Hawick and a repeat of one question. The council will need to address this in its final report.

3.5 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.

3.6 The council conducted an options appraisal to assess any reasonable alternatives to the permanent closure of Ettrick Primary School. It identified three other options. The council

considered an option to reopen Ettrick Primary School with its existing catchment and, on the basis of lack of community demand and projected pupil numbers, reasonably concluded that this was not a viable alternative. A second option to reopen Ettrick Primary School and re-delineate its catchment area was not considered reasonable since this would impact negatively on the viability of other small rural schools and would involve longer school travel journeys for more children. The third option to continue mothballing was not considered to be viable or an appropriate use of resources.

3.7 The council considered the likely effect of its proposal on the local community. Whilst there is regret at the loss of the school within the community, there is limited demand to continue the mothballing arrangement. Members of the Ettrick and Yarrow Community Development Company are in discussions with the council about the future of the school building involving a potential asset transfer arrangement within the terms of the Community Empowerment Act 2015. The building is currently used as exhibition space for a James Hogg museum. The Community Development Company has plans which could result in additional job opportunities in the local area and wishes to make long term use of the building in connection with these plans. Members of the group have expressed concern about a lack of maintenance of the existing school building and fear that its condition could deteriorate further, impacting on their future plans. The council will need to address this concern in its final report.

3.8 The council considered school travel arrangements. There is a distance of 11.4 miles between Ettrick Primary School and Kirkhope Primary School requiring a journey time of approximately 27 minutes. The school journey time could be considerably greater for any children in future who live further into the Ettrick Valley past Ettrick Primary School but not unusual within the context of other existing school travel times within the Scottish Borders Council. Parents and staff who spoke with HM Inspectors expressed some concern about winter travel conditions in the Ettrick Valley and the need for school transport arrangements to be appropriate to adverse weather conditions. The council will need to consider this in its final report.

## 4. Summary

4.1 The Scottish Borders Council's proposal to permanently close Ettrick Primary School and rezone its catchment area to Kirkhope Primary School is of potential educational benefit. It will formalise an arrangement that has been in place since Ettrick Primary School was mothballed in 2012. Children would benefit from a potentially broader range of learning experiences including better opportunities to learn and socialise with their peers. The council will need to provide reassurance to parents of its long term commitment to small rural schools and that it will continue to work with the Kirkhope Primary School and Yarrow Primary School communities to secure a viable future for those schools. It will also need to reassure parents and staff on school transport arrangements during winter conditions.

4.2 The council will need to provide reassurance in its final report that it will continue to engage with the local community on their plans for asset transfer of the Ettrick Primary School building and that the maintenance issues identified will be addressed.

4.3 The council will need to address the inaccuracies identified by stakeholders who completed their questionnaire.

**HM Inspectors  
May 2019**