

Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by Scottish Borders Council to close Hobkirk 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 Hobkirk 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; any other users; children likely to become pupils within two years of the date of publication of the proposal paper; and other children 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 Denholm Primary School and Hobkirk 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 Hobkirk 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 with reference to the [Schools \(Consultation\) \(Scotland\) Act 2010](#).

2.2 The council undertook the consultation between 7 March and 2 May 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 William Laidlaw Memorial Hall, Bonchester on 16 April 2019

was attended by eight people. A total of five people responded to the consultation of whom two agreed and three disagreed with the proposal to close Hobkirk Primary School.

3. Educational aspects of proposal

3.1 Scottish Borders Council's proposal has the potential to be of educational benefit. Hobkirk Primary School has been mothballed since 2015 when the school roll dropped to seven children. Since then, pupils have been zoned to Denholm Primary School. A majority of the parents of the 24 children living in the catchment area of Hobkirk Primary School had made placing requests to other schools, mostly to Denholm Primary School which was paired with Hobkirk Primary School for shared headship and other arrangements. Denholm Primary School is a larger school with capacity for 125 children and a current roll of 105. It is a modern, well designed and well equipped building providing a positive learning environment including good physical education facilities. Hobkirk Primary School is a much older building and is currently in a poor condition. In addition to benefitting from a better learning environment, children attending Denholm Primary School would benefit from a broader range of opportunities to learn with their peers and engage in collaborative learning. Children would be able to learn from each other and share experiences and skills. Children would have potentially more opportunities to develop confidence and social skills and to learn to take responsibility through working with others across a wider range of ages. Children would benefit from more opportunities to engage in team sports and games and to take part in musical and artistic performances.

3.2 Scottish Borders Council's proposal is consistent with its statutory responsibility to secure best value in its use of resources. The estimated cost of bringing the Hobkirk Primary School building to a basic standard for reopening would be difficult to justify since there is no clear prospect of a significant increase in the school 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. Parents reported that they would continue to send their children to Denholm Primary School even if Hobkirk Primary School were to reopen. Children valued their learning experience and other opportunities at Denholm Primary School. They enjoyed learning with their peers and spoke enthusiastically about the learning environment and facilities available at the school. Those who had attended Hobkirk Primary School in the past spoke favourably about the better opportunities available at Denholm Primary School. Children wondered what might happen to the Hobkirk Primary School building should the council implement its proposal and expressed a desire to be part of the discussions the council has undertaken to hold with the community. The council will need to consider this in its final report.

3.4 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.

3.5 The council conducted an options appraisal to assess any reasonable alternatives to the permanent closure of Hobkirk Primary School. It identified three other options. The council considered an option to reopen Hobkirk 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 Hobkirk Primary School and re-delineate its catchment area was not considered reasonable since this would not have any clear educational benefits for children attending neighbouring schools and would involve longer school travel times for more children. The third option to continue mothballing was not considered to be viable or an appropriate use of resources.

3.6 Scottish Borders Council has engaged with the local community prior to and since the mothballing of Hobkirk Primary School. There is limited use of the school building by local community groups, since a village hall is available for community meetings and activities. Stakeholders, including children, have expressed concerns about the future of the empty school building and what will happen to items of significance to the local community such as sporting trophies and photographs. The council will need to consider this in its final paper.

3.7 The council considered the likely effect of different travel arrangements. The distance from Hobkirk Primary School to Denholm Primary School is ten miles. Travel times by school transport for some children in the Hobkirk Primary School catchment area of approximately 20 to 25 minutes duration are in line with arrangements at other schools in Scottish Borders Council. For some children attending Denholm Primary School, the mothballing of Hobkirk Primary School has resulted in reduced travel time. Prior to mothballing paired school arrangements required routine travel by children between the two schools for some aspects of learning including physical education lessons. Overall, the impact of different travel arrangements resulting from the council's proposal is modest.

4. Summary

The Scottish Borders Council's proposal to permanently close Hobkirk Primary School and rezone its catchment area to Denholm Primary School is of potential educational benefit. It will formalise an arrangement that has been in place since Hobkirk Primary School was mothballed in 2015. Children would benefit from a positive learning environment in a modern building with better facilities. Children would have a potentially broader range of learning experiences including better opportunities to learn and socialise with their peers. The council will need to outline how it will continue to engage with the local community on the future of the school building and on the preservation of relevant school artefacts in its final report.

HM Inspectors
May 2019