

Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by The Highland Council to discontinue education provision at Gergask Primary School and re-assign the catchment area to Newtonmore Primary School.

November 2023

1. Introduction

1.1 This report from Education Scotland has been prepared by His 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 The Highland Council's proposal to discontinue education provision at Gergask Primary School and re-assign the catchment area to Newtonmore 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 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.

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

- attendance at the public meeting held on 3 October 2023 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;
- consideration of further information on all schools affected; and
- visits to the site of Newtonmore Primary School and Kingussie High 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 Gergask 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(s) with reference to the [Schools \(Consultation\) \(Scotland\) Act 2010](#).

2.2 Between 18 September and 10 November 2023, the council carried out a public consultation on the proposal to permanently close the school and reassign the catchment area to Newtonmore Primary School. Copies of the proposal paper were available online and at Newtonmore Primary School. The proposal document was sent to relevant stakeholders including parents and carers within the Gergask Primary School and Newtonmore Primary School catchment areas; Laggan and Newtonmore Community Councils; staff at Newtonmore Primary School and local MSPs and MPs. A public meeting was held on 3 October 2023 attended by eight local residents. The council received four email submissions from local residents, none of which were in favour of the proposal. The council also surveyed 11 children from Newtonmore Primary School.

2.3 Attendees at the public meeting and local residents who emailed the council are concerned that the proposal to close the school permanently will make the area less attractive to families. A few members at the meeting, thought that it was not viable to have the school open for only two children. It was noted that there are more children in the catchment area, however, they are being home-schooled or attending other schools due to placing requests. Should the proposal go ahead, local residents wish to have further discussions with the council about the future use of the building for the community. One email respondent wished to see the mothballing continue at the moment.

2.4 Most children, responding to the survey, wished to see a delay to permanent closure of the school. They like the school building and the surrounding area. However, they also recognise that only having a few children at the school is not good for socialising and making friends.

3. Educational aspects of proposal

3.1 HM Inspectors agree that the council has clearly outlined a range of educational benefits in the proposal. The current school roll has fallen to two pupils and the building has been mothballed since September 2022. Future school roll projections for the area do not show a significant increase. Parents are already choosing home-schooling or placing requests to other primary schools such as Newtonmore Primary School. With a small roll, there are less opportunities for peer group learning, socialisation, work with partners and group activities such as team sports. Newtonmore Primary School has the capacity and the resources to meet the learning needs of the children from the Gergask Primary School catchment area. This includes provision for additional support needs and Gaelic Medium Education. Newtonmore Primary School also offers a range of out of school opportunities, including sport and music. Transport for children in the Laggan area to Newtonmore Primary School will continue to be provided by the council and is within the 30 minute guideline.

3.2 Almost all stakeholders who engaged with HM Inspectors said that they think the current roll is too small to reopen the school. Community members are reluctant to see the village of Laggan lose an important resource but accept that there are not enough children currently who wish to attend. Parents and staff who spoke with HM Inspectors, do not think operating from Gergask Primary School, offers the best learning experience. Children may miss out on group activities, team sports, peer group learning and important socialisation and relationship building skills. A few school staff would like consideration given to using the school for children with additional support needs. They feel that this is a need within the area and the school environment could be suitable.

3.3 The majority of children and young people who met with inspectors do not think that the school should open with the current roll of two. A few would like to see it become a school again with more children attending. They think that a delay to closure to see if more children would attend would be helpful. Children and young people see advantages of a very small class including time with the teacher. They are positive about the outdoor environment at Gergask Primary School. However, they do not think that these advantages outweigh the benefits of a larger school like Newtonmore Primary School. This includes, more resources, more staff to approach for help and opportunities to make friends. Children and young people would like to see the building used for the benefit of children and young people in the area.

3.4 As the proposal will lead to the closure of a rural school, HM Inspectors took account of the council's consideration of the factors to which it should have special regard. In preparing this proposal, the council considered three options; to continue mothballing the school; to reopen with the existing catchment area or to reopen with a wider catchment area. The council states that further mothballing is not necessary as the roll is unlikely to change significantly in the future. A continued period of mothballing makes the future of the building unclear and could delay the development of proposals for future use. The council states that reopening the school with the current catchment would not make the school viable. If the Gergask Primary School were open, the journey time would be shorter than to Newtonmore Primary School. However, there is no impact for the current cohort of children, as they already attend Newtonmore Primary School. Transport is in place and this will continue if the proposal goes ahead. The council also states that an expanded catchment area would not increase the school roll. Therefore, the preferred option of the council is to re-assign the Gergask Primary School catchment area to Newtonmore Primary School.

4. Summary

HM Inspectors agree with the educational benefits in this proposal. The school roll is not predicted to change in the near future. Children from the Laggan area are already benefiting from the educational opportunities available at Newtonmore Primary School. Newtonmore Primary School has the capacity and resources to meet the needs of the proposed wider catchment area. The majority of stakeholders are concerned that should this proposal go ahead, the area would be less attractive as a place for families to live. Stakeholders, including children and young people, would like to see the building used for the benefit of the community if the school is closed. If this proposal is approved, the council should continue to engage with the community to discuss future options for the use of the building.

HM Inspectors
November 2023