

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by Inverclyde Council to review its Policy for Admissions and Pupil Placement in Mainstream Schools.

1. Introduction

This report from Education Scotland has been prepared by HM Inspectors in accordance with the terms of the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010* and the amendments contained in the *Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014*. The purpose of the report is to provide an independent and impartial consideration of Inverclyde Council's proposal to review its Policy for Admissions and Pupil Placement in Mainstream Schools. 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 a copy of 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 legislative 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.

1.1 HM Inspectors considered:

- the likely effects of the proposal for children and young people of Inverclyde Council 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.

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

- attendance at the public meeting held at Inverclyde Academy on Thursday 26 October 2016 at 6.30 pm 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;

- visits to the sites of St. Mary's Primary School, Whinhill Primary School, Clydevie Academy and Notre Dame High School, including discussion with relevant consultees; and
- a meeting with the Roman Catholic Church representative.

2. Consultation Process

2.1 Inverclyde Council undertook the consultation on its proposal(s) with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010* and the amendments in the *Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014*.

2.2 The formal consultation began on Monday 19 September and ended on Monday 7 November 2016. Public meetings were held on Wednesday 26 October and Thursday 27 October 2016. Notice of the proposal's publication was placed in the Greenock Telegraph. A copy of the proposal was published on the council website and an online survey was created to allow ease of access and to promote engagement by the community. Copies of the proposal document were also available at all educational establishments, libraries and the council's Customer Services. In the drafting of the proposal the council has taken into consideration the reasons given by parents who have made placing requests in the past, the decisions made by the Education Appeals Committee and similar policies for other local authorities.

2.3 In total 12 people attended the public meetings. A meeting was also held with Church representatives. There were in total 196 responses to the consultation through the online survey. Other written responses were received by letter or email format and included those from several Pupil and Parent Councils and the Diocese of Paisley.

2.4 The majority, 53%, of those who responded were parents or carers of children at primary school while 16% and 7% were from parents of secondary young people and nursery children respectively. Most respondents (78%) welcomed the addition of criterion number 3, which prioritised children who had attended the associated primary school for the longest period of time because it allowed for continuity of friendships. This therefore minimised the potential for any disruption and associated anxiety for children at the point of transition to secondary school. Of the minority who did not support the change, respondents considered that pupils should be referred automatically if they attended the associated primary school and that they should not have to submit an additional placing request when transitioning to secondary school. Some respondents had a concern for the knock on effect of the policy on the future rolls of both denominational and non-denominational schools. The majority of respondents (56%) supported the addition of criterion 4 in giving priority to those young people who are baptised into the Catholic faith. They considered that they were more likely to be supportive of the school's values and ethos. Of those who did not support the addition of this particular criterion they considered that the catchment area the young person comes from should be given more of a priority than the faith of the young person or their family. Overall the majority of respondents (58%) supported the order of priority for the allocation of placing requests although again some respondents considered that catchment area

should take priority over faith. In response to the question of what happens should the denominational school be oversubscribed, again the majority (56%) of respondents were in favour of the order for the allocation of places should this eventuality arise. Those who disagreed again did so on the basis that they did not consider the need for the faith of the young person or their family to be given priority.

2.5 The formal written responses that were received from Pupil Councils and Parent Councils varied in their degree of support for the proposal. Overall they recognise the need for change and thought the steps proposed were long overdue and sensible. Some considered the proposal unfair and that the priority should be for young people to attend their nearest school, given the complex arrangements in travelling to and from schools located at a distance from some communities. Pupils and parents thought there would be an inevitable impact on school rolls and demand for places, should proposals on changes to qualifying for free transport be approved. Pupils supported a reordering of the priorities where more significance was given to those attending the associated school and less to those who could demonstrate an affinity to the Catholic faith. A few respondents thought that young people should demonstrate a broader commitment to the Catholic faith than a certificate of baptism and that the proposal was unfair on young people who had only recently joined an associated school who might not be able to access their preferred choice of secondary school. A few Parent Councils were concerned about the impact on school rolls should this proposal and the transport proposal changes both be accepted.

3. Educational Aspects of Proposal

3.1 The proposal has a number of potential educational benefits for children and young people. In changing the policy on admission to schools, where an establishment is oversubscribed, the authority is reducing the risk of very high occupancy levels which will restrict curricular, achievement and social opportunities available for children and young people. Pressure on facilities will most likely be reduced providing greater flexibility for schools to better meet the needs of all children and young people. The needs of young people with additional support needs will continue to be prioritised in decisions made regarding placing requests. The proposal continues to ensure that priority is given to family members being educated within the same establishment where possible thus supporting family learning. The proposal has the potential to further strengthen the transition arrangements across associated school groupings and reduce the likelihood of appeals following placing request decisions and the corresponding delays and anxiety for children, young people, families, staff and schools, associated with such decisions. Children and young people are more likely to transfer to secondary school with their preferred friendship and social groupings from primary schools which will enhance their wellbeing. Intakes to denominational schools will, where there is an oversubscription, prioritise the requests of those who demonstrate an affinity to the Catholic faith as evidenced by a certificate of baptism. The proposal if implemented will help the council to manage its school estate more effectively and efficiently ensuring best value in the delivery of its services. It will help the council in continuing to meet its legislative requirements in relation to denominational education.

3.2 Most stakeholders from denominational and non-denominational schools who met with HM Inspectors were supportive of the proposal and recognised the benefit of providing greater clarity to the qualification criteria. They thought the changes were reasonable and they liked the priority being given to children who had attended the associated primary school for the longest period of time. They recognised the need to provide greater clarity over the qualifying criteria. Most parents recognise the need to reduce the number of appeals and to provide greater continuity of experience for children from associated school groupings. More than a few parents were concerned about distance of travel and safe walking routes to the associated non-denominational school should a placing request for the nearest school not be accepted. The majority agreed with the request for a baptismal certificate to demonstrate affinity with Catholic values and ethos although more than a few disagreed over the same point. A few staff thought the priority given to siblings was unfair on those young people without siblings and on families with only one child. A few staff were concerned about the impact of the proposal on the future rolls of the catchment schools for Inverclyde Academy, Notre Dame and St Columba's High School in particular. The council needs to provide more information about projected rolls and current capacity of schools affected by the proposals, current and projected waiting lists for denominational schools as well as any impact of the proposal on non-denominational schools.

3.3 Children and young people from denominational and non-denominational schools who met with HM Inspectors varied in their support of the proposal. The majority considered it was helpful for young people from associated schools to be given priority to ensure friendship groupings were maintained on into secondary school. They liked the priority being given to ensure siblings were educated in the same establishment. A few young people did not consider that faith should be a priority in deciding placing requests. They considered it was unfair on young people of other faiths or none, including migrants, asylum seekers and 'New Scots', who moved into the area but would not be able to provide a certificate of baptism. They thought this would limit the opportunities for children of other faiths or none to attend a denominational school.

3.4 The Diocese of Paisley is supportive of the proposal. While it did not request or desire any modification to the Placing Request Policy, it welcomes the attempt to provide fair qualifying criteria to enable and clarify the decision making process where there is an insufficient number of places available in Roman Catholic Schools to meet the level of demand from young people and their parents. It recognised the importance of denominational schools being open to all young people. In its written submission it provided a helpful suggestion that Catholic pupils from out with the catchment area should not be given priority in terms of placing requests over those young people from within the catchment area even where a baptismal certificate is provided. Therefore it proposed that the words 'and who live within the catchment area of the school' should be added to the qualifying criterion 4. They did not support or think it necessary to ask for a qualifying letter as part of the admissions policy.

4. Summary

Inverclyde Council's proposal is of educational benefit. The majority of stakeholders who submitted responses or expressed a view are in favour of the proposal. In providing a clear and fair set of guidelines which can be understood by all stakeholders, the proposal has the potential to reduce both the risk of schools becoming oversubscribed and the number of appeals submitted following placing request decisions. Should the proposal be adopted it will further help to ensure that it is more likely for young people to remain with existing friendship groupings in the move to secondary school thus supporting their wellbeing. It should in addition ensure that school places remain available for young people and their families who wish for them to be educated in a Roman Catholic faith establishment. By helping to reduce pressure on existing school accommodation, resources and facilities, it will also enable the council to demonstrate best value through making most effective use of its existing school estate, in providing all young people with the most appropriate curricular pathway and opportunities to achieve. In taking forward the proposal the council should consider how it will address the concerns raised during the proposal including ensuring that placing request decisions are made at the earliest opportunity to ensure all young people, particularly those with additional support needs, are given the highest quality of support in transitioning to secondary school. The council also needs to outline more clearly how it will address the potential implications on schools likely to be most affected by the proposal, and any increase in demand, should it arise, in the associated primary establishments of Notre Dame High School should the proposal be accepted.

In finalising the proposal the council should adopt the suggested additional wording from the Diocese of Paisley in respect of qualifying criterion 4 to further improve, ensure equity and bring greater clarity to the proposal. It should also take steps to remove the reference to 'qualifying letter' as outlined in the admission policy, paragraph 1.11.

**HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
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