

ANGUS COUNCIL

EDUCATION COMMITTEE

6 JUNE 2000

ST VIGEANS PRIMARY SCHOOL

REPORT BY THE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

ABSTRACT

This report provides feedback on the preliminary consultation exercise which has been taking place on the possibility of closing St Vigeans Primary School in June 2001. It identifies the main factors which require to be taken into consideration should closure of the school be seen as appropriate, and recommends a formal consultation exercise on possible closure.

1 RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Education Committee:

- i commends the staff of St Vigeans Primary School for their unstinting efforts to provide a high quality of education for pupils in the school
- ii acknowledges the strong support voiced by parents of pupils in St Vigeans Primary School for the work of the school
- iii agrees that any decision about closure must be taken only after carefully weighing up the economic, educational and community implications
- iv authorises a statutory consultation exercise on the undernoted proposals:

- A St Vigeans Primary School should be closed on 28 June 2001, and its entire delineated area transferred into the delineated area of Warddykes Primary School

OR

- B St Vigeans Primary School should be closed on 28 June 2001, and its delineated area transferred into the delineated area of Warddykes Primary School, with the exception of any one, or any two, or all three of the undernoted areas:

- B1 the area which includes all addresses on the A92, and the whole of the settlement of Marywell (see map – Appendix 1), which should be transferred to the delineated area of Inverkeilor Primary School

AND/OR

- B2 the Northernmost part of the area bounded by the unclassified road running North-East from the fork in that road at Cut-the-Wind to Mains of Parkhill, and by a line running due West from that fork to the current boundary of the delineated area of Colliston Primary School (see map – Appendix 2) - which should be transferred to the delineated of Colliston Primary School.

AND/OR

- B3 a narrow strip of land to the West of the area, bounded by an unclassified road (which runs North West from a fork in the road just South of the school) the railway line, the current boundary line between the St Vigeans Primary School and the Inverbrothock Primary School delineated areas, and a line running due West from the fork in the road just South of the school to the boundary line of the current delineated area of St Vigeans Primary School (see map – Appendix 3), which should be transferred to the delineated area of Inverbrothock Primary School.
- v authorises me to undertake the statutory consultation exercise this summer and to report back to the Education Committee early in school session 2000/2001.

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Reference is made to the meeting of the Education Committee on 25 April 2000 when the Committee considered Report No 449/00 and instructed me to undertake a preliminary consultation exercise with staff and parents of St Vigeans Primary School on the possibility of closing that school in June 2001 (Article 4 of the minute of the meeting refers).
- 2.2 The conditions of the St Vigeans school building are such as to require a significant capital spend, with a minimum of £250,000 having been identified as being required (insufficient to address all the shortcomings of the current building), or – more likely - £400,000 to undertake a major extension/upgrading of the school.
- 2.3 The best current estimate of the total capital expenditure needed to bring all Angus schools up to the high standard now expected is £30 million. As members of the Committee will be aware, this situation arises for a range of reasons, most important of which are the very tight financial constraints which have been placed on local Councils for many years now, and certainly from the late 1970s onwards.
- 2.4 Unlike most other Angus schools, the entire pupil roll of St Vigeans Primary School could be accommodated within neighbouring schools in close proximity – the closest of which is 0.6 of a mile away.
- 2.5 Given the Council's statutory obligation to secure economy, effectiveness and efficiency and given the range of deserving projects competing for scarce capital resources it seems reasonable to ask the question:

“Is it justifiable to spend a significant capital sum in upgrading a school building when alternative educational provision can readily be provided in a nearby school?”

- 2.6 In attempting to answer this question, both short-term and long-term perspectives need to be adopted. Furthermore, the economic arguments need to be balanced carefully with the educational arguments and also with any factors which affect the local community.

3 PRELIMINARY CONSULTATION

- 3.1 In accordance with the Committee's instructions, I have engaged in a preliminary consultation exercise with staff and parents of the school.

- 3.2 In consulting with staff I have been at pains to stress the quality of education which they are seen to be providing : the level of parental support is testament to this, but it is also abundantly clear that a high degree of commitment and professionalism is in evidence in St Vigeans Primary School – notwithstanding the relatively poor quality of the school buildings.
- 3.3 I have also been at pains to reassure staff about continuing future employment on existing terms and conditions of service. It is not surprising that staff are anxious about the future, but it is hoped that sufficient reassurance has been given. Certainly in the event of closure of the school, meaningful and professionally stimulating redeployment will be arranged in full consultation with individual members of staff (and their representatives if requested).
- 3.4 Parents too are naturally anxious about the possibility of the school being closed, and their initial reaction to possible closure has been understandably hostile. I attended a meeting of parents in the St Vigeans Church Hall on 16 May 2000. Parents asked a number of questions and raised several issues. These are outlined below, together with a brief comment on each.
- the distance from the school to the hall (used for gym) is not “approximately half a mile” as stated in the Asset Management Plan, but is in fact 311 yards
(Agreed: The distance from the main vehicular entrance to the hall is probably closer to a quarter of a mile, but the precise distance is not a critical issue. What is important is that a class (or classes) of children require to undertake a walk lasting several minutes in order to undertake indoors PE activity.)
 - the Asset Management Plan has been selective when looking at school running costs
(The Asset Management Plan is being compiled for all schools on precisely the same basis. The school running costs are not the major issue which has initiated this consultation exercise.)
 - the statement in the Asset Management Plan that “all gym activities take place in the local hall” is inaccurate : in suitable weather conditions, outdoor PE activities take place in the field adjoining the school
(Agreed: The use of the word “gym” is perhaps insufficiently precise. The intention in the Asset Management Plan seems clearly to refer however to PE activities of the type which can take place in a gymnasium, or similar building.)
 - the school capacity of 50 pupils is inaccurate
(The Council set the school capacity of 50 pupils in January 1997. The school has 2 classrooms each of which could accommodate a composite class of 25 pupils. The capacity quoted is therefore accurate.)
 - Committee Report 449/00 makes no reference to the fact that it is largely due to the success of the school that 28 pupils are enrolled in the school as a result of parental placing requests
(Agreed: In common with many primary schools, St Vigeans operates with a significant number of pupils attending from outwith its delineated area as a result of parental placing requests (28 at present) and an equally significant number of pupils who reside within its delineated area but who attend other schools (18 at present).
 - no mention is made in Report 449/00 (or in the Asset Management Plan) of the figure of £40,000 to £50,000 quoted by a senior officer of the Council in 1997 as the sum then estimated as being required to extend the existing accommodation
(see 6.3 below)

- there is no surplus capacity in St Vigeans Primary School
(See fourth bullet point above – however the percentage occupancy rate of St Vigeans is not an argument being used in favour of closure.)
- there are concerns about comments attributed to senior representatives of the Council to the effect that “the status quo is not an option”
(Given the contents of both the HMI report and the Asset Management Plan, it seems self evident that some change will be needed and that the status quo cannot be maintained.)
- the problems of sound transmission between classrooms, reported in the Asset Management Plan, are not problems which had previously been drawn to parents’ attention
(Noted)
- why have the toilets not been upgraded before now, and what other areas of school buildings have been given higher priority by Angus Council?
(Prioritisation of capital projects is a difficult challenge; Angus Council inherited a number of long standing and much needed projects, and has attempted to address as many of these as possible. The Asset Management Plan itself is intended to become the vehicle by which future prioritisation can be undertaken.)
- other capital projects being considered (or being undertaken) in the Council’s schools have a higher cost per pupil than the proposed St Vigeans project
(But none of these projects are being undertaken for schools which could easily be accommodated in alternative schools sufficiently close at hand.)
- the closest school to St Vigeans (Warddkyes) also makes use of temporary accommodation and pupils in any class making use of that temporary accommodation require to go to the main building for toilet facilities
(The Council is presently working towards a position whereby no school is required to make use of temporary accommodation.)
- there are concerns that more modern school buildings may in fact have a more limited life expectancy than the current St Vigeans building
(The important point is that the St Vigeans building is barely fit for its current purpose, which is not true of more modern school buildings.)
- there are concerns about the implications for the local community if the school is closed
(See section 5 below)
- there are concerns that demographic projections may not have been adequately considered
(There are no demographic projections which would suggest that the total capacity of primary schools in the Arbroath area will be unable to meet the anticipated overall demand for the foreseeable future.)
- are other rural schools under threat?
(No)
- some parents have a negative perception of alternative schools, believing in particular that bullying may be a more common feature of these schools than it is in St Vigeans
(See 4.6 below)
- if it is likely that the Council is to take steps to close the school, parents should be told that as soon as possible (as several parents in these circumstances have indicated that they would transfer their children to other schools with effect from August 2000).
(Noted)

3.5 The concerns of parents are understandable and every effort has been made to offer as much information and reassurance as possible. However, none of the above issues raised by parents address the critical question posed above in paragraph 2.5.

4 EDUCATIONAL FACTORS

4.1 The quality of teaching is high; staff are to be commended for their unstinting efforts and for the high degree of professionalism and expertise with which they have discharged their duties.

4.2 The numbers of pupils in the school make it perfectly viable; there is a sufficiently large peer group to provide appropriate stimulation and challenge for all pupils

4.3 There are some concerns about the impact which the current school building may have on learning and teaching, including:

- the disruption to learning (and the concerns about pupil safety) caused by children having to go outside the main building to get to the toilet, the barely adequate state of the toilet blocks themselves (HMI report that some pupils are reluctant to use the toilets), and the need for children returning to the school to gain entry by pressing the security buzzer
- the lack of indoor PE facilities within the main school campus, with pupils undertaking gym in a hall some several hundred yards distant from the school
- the limited space to accommodate children having lunch in school
- the lack of storage space which in turn contributes to a more cramped learning environment than is ideal
- the lack of space for confidential discussions (particularly with parents, but also with pupils and a range of support agencies)

4.4 In addition to the above major concerns, the building has a number of shortfalls, each of which may appear to be relatively minor on its own but the cumulative effect of which may well have a detrimental effect on learning and teaching. These shortfalls include:

- inadequate office accommodation
- extremely limited facilities for staff
- poor heating in some areas of the school
- lack of "wet areas" in classrooms
- limited floor area in each classroom
- poor acoustics
- lack of a physical barrier between the play area and the road

4.5 There would appear to be agreement in principle with parents that the current building is far from ideal. The building certainly limits the potential for improving the quality of learning and teaching.

4.6 The school has a good ethos and is well supported by parents. However, all other Angus schools have an equally good ethos with equally supportive parents. The St Vigeans parents rightly point to the recently published HMI report which highlights several key educational strengths, but all recent HMI reports on other Angus schools have been extremely positive also. (Work currently being undertaken as part of the ongoing Best Value Service Review of Primary Education suggests that Angus primary schools have been awarded a very high proportion of "very good" and "good" ratings in performance indicators applied by HMI.) There is therefore every reason to believe that children currently in St Vigeans would receive an equally good education were they to be enrolled in any other Angus primary school.

- 4.7 If the school does close in June 2001 some children presently in attendance (those currently in P1 to P5) would have to transfer to another school. This would present a short-term disruption to these children's education and clearly is a real issue to be considered. However many children move school during the course of the 7 years while they are of primary school age and often find that – after the initial period of uncertainty – they are as happy in their new school as they were previously. There is certainly no evidence that children who do transfer from one school to another suffer any educational or social disadvantage.
- 4.8 There are therefore some educational factors (related to the school building) which suggest that closure may be a sensible option. Equally, however, there are no educational factors which suggest that education in an alternative school would be in any way inferior to that currently provided in St Vigeans.
- 4.9 Looking at the Angus education service in the round, the educational factors cannot be separated from the economic factors: spending money on unnecessary buildings is not the best way to protect the education service as a whole from the harsh constraints of the prevailing economic climate.

5 COMMUNITY FACTORS

- 5.1 As well as housing 28 children from outwith its delineated area, the school currently caters for 14 children from within its delineated area. There are also at present 18 primary school children resident within the St Vigeans delineated area who are enrolled in other Angus schools.
- 5.2 The school lies near the Southern edge of its (sparsely populated) delineated area, an area which stretches from the burgh of Arbroath in the South along a stretch of land around 1½ miles wide (from East to West) and a little over 2 miles long (from North to South). A small corner in the South East of the area (including the small settlement of Marywell) lies next to, or just East of the main A92 Arbroath to Montrose road; some of the residences in the North West corner of the area are quite close to Letham Grange, and a small strip of land in the Western section of the area is close to Inverbrothock Primary School.
- 5.3 Although the staff and parents of the school have worked well together in partnership, it is possibly fair to say that the delineated area as a whole does not form a natural or easily identified single community.
- 5.4 The proximity of the school to the burgh of Arbroath is an important feature in determining the centrality of the school to community life in the area.
- 5.5 Other than the school PTA, there are no community groups which make use of the school building for lets outwith school hours.
- 5.6 The centrality of schools to community life is recognised, but – given the geography of the area and the location of the current school building – it is difficult to argue that St Vigeans Primary School is a focal point for community life in this area.

6 ECONOMIC FACTORS

- 6.1 Both the recently published HMI report on the school and the recently completed Asset Management Plan have identified shortfalls in the current school building.
- 6.2 To address these shortfalls would require the Council to allocate approximately £250,000 within its financial plan (with a capital project of this scale still not fully addressing all the identified shortfalls in the current school building), or to allocate £400,000 (to adequately address all aspects of the building which require upgrading). Even this latter level of expenditure would leave unresolved the adequacy of the play area around the school.

- 6.3 Although it is true that an earlier rough estimate of £40,000/£50,000 was quoted to parents in 1997, the project envisaged by that estimate would – if undertaken – result in many of the significant problems with the current accommodation remaining unresolved.
- 6.4 When considering Report No 449/00 at its meeting on 25 April 2000, the Committee also approved a Council response to the School Infrastructure Inquiry being undertaken by the Scottish Parliament. That response included an estimate of £30 million as the indicative capital cost of upgrading Angus schools to a reasonable standard.
- 6.5 Notwithstanding the concerns about long-term underfunding of the Scottish education service since the late 1970s, it seems reasonable to assert that there will always be more building needs to be addressed than there is funding available. In these circumstances, it is vital that the geographical pattern of school provision is kept under review; it would be unwise to assume that every single existing school building needs to be maintained no matter the cost or no matter the shift in population which has taken place since the school was first built. At present there is no other Angus school whose entire pupil roll could be readily accommodated in an alternative school within the same proximity as that of Warddykes to St Vigeans.
- 6.6 One major argument, therefore, for closing St Vigeans Primary School is that the capital expenditure required is not justified when all the children currently enrolled in St Vigeans can be readily accommodated in one or other nearby schools (the closest of which is only 0.6 of a mile away).
- 6.7 Other economic factors which may be relevant include:
- the total running cost per pupil is higher than the average cost for all Angus schools (although this is an inevitable feature of small schools, and of course schools which are smaller than St Vigeans generally have a higher running cost per pupil)
 - the likely revenue savings which would accrue to the Council were the school to close are estimated to be £34,000 in 2001/2002 and £51,000 in each full financial year thereafter
- 6.8 All in all, the economic arguments for closing St Vigeans Primary School are very strong indeed. These arguments were put forward in national terms very forcibly by the Accounts Commission in its 1995 publication “Room for Learning.”

7 DELINEATED AREA

- 7.1 If the school were to close, its current delineated area would have to be transferred to the delineated area of one or more neighbouring schools.
- 7.2 A brief description of the St Vigeans delineated area is described above (paragraph 5.2).
- 7.3 Since Warddykes Primary School is the school which is closest to St Vigeans (being no more than 0.6 of a mile away), the most obvious approach is simply to transfer the St Vigeans delineated area into the delineated area of Warkkykes Primary School (Option A).
- 7.4 The A92 Arbroath to Montrose road runs through the South Eastern portion of the delineated area, and this in turn makes for a straightforward and fairly short journey to Inverkeilor Primary School from residences within the St Vigeans delineated area close to or East of the A92. There may be merit therefore in transferring this part of the delineated area into the delineated area of Inverkeilor Primary School. Appendix 1 shows a map of the area in question, and this approach is described in B1 of Option B above.

- 7.5 The Northernmost part of the delineated area is relatively close to Colliston Primary School and there may be merit in transferring this area into the Colliston delineated area. Appendix 2 shows a map of the area in question, and this approach is described in B2 of Option B above.
- 7.6 A narrow strip of land in the West of the area is relatively easy to access from Inverbrothock Primary School, and there may therefore be merit in transferring this area into the Inverbrothock delineated area. This approach is described in B3 of Option B above.

8 CONCLUSIONS

- 8.1 It is clear that St Vigeans Primary School has a committed, caring and highly professional staff who are providing as good a standard of education as they can in a physical environment which is far from ideal.
- 8.2 It is also clear that parents appreciate the work of the staff and that they are supportive of the school as a whole. The efforts of parents in bringing together arguments in support of retention of the school are to be commended.
- 8.3 Looking at the current situation objectively, however, the arguments in favour of closure seem to outweigh quite significantly the arguments for retention. Since the Council is under an obligation to undertake a statutory consultation exercise before effecting the closure of a school, and since that consultation exercise would offer further opportunity to weigh up the arguments for and against closure, it is proposed that such a consultation exercise is now undertaken.
- 8.4 The roll of the school is currently 42 pupils and its capacity is 50 pupils. Since it is operating at more than 80% of its capacity, any formal decision to close the school would have to be referred to ministers of the Scottish Parliament. Given that whole process may take some time, the proposed closure would be envisaged from the end of the 2000/20001 school session – on 28 June 2001.

9 CONSULTATION

- 9.1 Parents and staff of St Vigeans Primary School have been involved in a preliminary consultation exercise which has helped to inform the contents of this report.
- 9.2 In addition, and in accordance with the Standing Orders of the Council, the Chief Executive, the Director of Finance and the Director of Law & Administration have been consulted on the contents of this report. The Director of Property Services has also been consulted.

Jim Anderson
Director of Education

No background papers, as defined by Section 50D of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (other than any containing confidential or exempt information) were relied on to any material extent in preparing the above report.

APPENDICES 3 – TO FOLLOW

JAA/CJ/RB