

ANGUS COUNCIL

EDUCATION COMMITTEE

20 NOVEMBER 2001

REVIEW OF PRIMARY SCHOOL PROVISION – SMALL PRIMARY SCHOOLS

REPORT BY THE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

ABSTRACT

This report updates the Committee on current provision in the Council's smaller primary schools. It seeks a re-affirmation from the Committee of the continuing need to maintain Glenisla, Lethnot and Tarfside Schools, and recommends further consideration about the future of Kilry Primary School.

1 RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Education Committee:

- a commends staff for their unstinting efforts in maintaining high standards of education in all the Council's schools
- b notes the viability of the overwhelming majority of the Council's schools
- c re-affirms the criteria agreed in 1997 when considering the viability of particularly small schools
- d re-affirms also its belief that Glenisla, Lethnot and Tarfside Schools each serve communities so remote that no one of these schools should be considered for closure other than in the event of it having to cater for an exceptionally small pupil roll
- e notes that – other than Lethnot (18 primary pupils) and Tarfside (16 primary pupils) – there are only two schools in the current school session (2001/2002) with primary rolls of less than 20 pupils, namely Kilry and Pitkenney Primary Schools
- f notes that Pitkenney Primary School is currently undergoing a formal inspection and in these circumstances it would be unreasonable to consider (however tentatively) its viability, but rather that viability should be confirmed in the short term
- g notes the current roll (13 pupils) in Kilry Primary School and authorises me to enter into discussions with the whole school community of Kilry Primary School about future roll projections and possible future options
- h instructs me to report back to the Committee on these discussions as soon as possible

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Reference is made firstly to meetings of the Education Committee in 1997 and 1998 when the viability of small schools was last considered in general terms, specifically the Committee meeting of 14 October 1997 (Article 11 of the minute of the meeting refers), the Committee meeting of 25 November 1997 (Article 10 of the minute of the meeting

refers), and the Committee meeting of 10 March 1998 (Article 8 of the minute of the meeting refers).

- 2.2 Reference is made secondly to the meeting of Angus Council on 17 May 2001 (Article 6 of the minute of the meeting refers) when the Council noted the likelihood of having to undertake budget savings exercises in 2002/2003 and 2003/2004.
- 2.3 Reference is made thirdly to the meeting of the Education Committee on 21 August 2001 when the Committee approved the Improvement Plan arising from a recently completed Best Value Service Review of Primary Education in Angus (Article 2 of the minute of the meeting refers) That Improvement Plan included a recommendation that the geographical pattern of school provision should be kept under continuous review, and that the viability of small rural schools should be monitored against the criteria agreed in 1997.

3 OUTLINE OF CURRENT SPREAD OF PRIMARY SCHOOL PROVISION

- 3.1 For the purposes of analysis, this report categorises primary schools as “burgh schools” or “non-burgh schools.” Members should note that this classification is intended simply to offer what it is hoped will be a helpful way of describing current primary school provision in Angus.

3.2 Burgh Primary Schools

3.2.1 Within the seven largest burghs of Angus there are 23 primary schools. There is also one medium sized primary school in each of five smaller burghs – Birkhill, Ferryden, Friockheim, Hillside and Letham. Other than St Margaret’s RC Primary School (Roll 32 pupils) and St Thomas’ RC Primary School (Roll 122 pupils) the rolls of these burgh schools are all between 140 and 460 primary pupils.

3.2.2 Taken in total the primary pupil roll in these 28 burgh schools is 7878 pupils, representing 82.1% of the total primary capacity of these 28 schools. (Total capacity of all 28 burgh schools is 9,601 primary pupils; total capacity of all Angus primary schools is 11,949 primary pupils). An analysis of the pupil roll of each of these 28 burgh schools is provided in Appendix 1.

3.2.3 The Committee will recall that it has authorised a feasibility study to be carried out on a possible Public Private Partnership (Ppp) initiative (Article 11 of the minute of the Committee’s meeting on 5 June 2001 refers). That feasibility study is examining specifically primary school provision in the burghs of Carnoustie and Forfar, and proposals are being brought forward for the Committee’s consideration relating to these two burghs.

3.2.4 Other than any proposals which may arise from Ppp initiatives, no major amendments to the pattern of primary schooling within the Council’s burghs are being considered.

3.3 Rural (ie “Non-burgh”) Primary Schools

3.3.1 Outwith the main burghs, the Council manages no less than 32 other primary schools with rolls ranging from 13 primary pupils to 101 primary pupils

3.3.2 The total primary pupil roll in these 32 schools is 1419 pupils, representing 60.4% of the total primary capacity (2,348 pupils) of these schools.

3.2.3 Clearly, the significant shifts in population which have taken place over several decades have resulted in a totally different pattern of population distribution than was the case when all these schools were first built (27 of them date from the 19th Century). An analysis of the current rolls of each of the 32 “non-burgh” schools is provided in Appendix 2, from which it can be seen that 14 of these schools are operating at less than 51% of their respective (Primary) capacities.

However, recent developments in pre-school education have resulted in each of 23 of these 32 schools now housing its own nursery class – thereby making good use of some of the surplus accommodation in these schools, whenever such an arrangement is feasible and sustainable.

4 STRATEGIC APPROACH

4.1 When the Education Committee considered this matter at its meeting on 14 October 1997, Report No 1044/97 proposed the following key elements in the Council's strategic approach:

- agreement of viability criteria
- maintenance of regular overview of school provision and potential for rationalisation
- consideration of overall capacity on an area by area basis
- establishment of appropriate consultative mechanisms to discuss any rationalisation proposed

Comments are offered below on each of these key elements.

4.2 Viability Criteria

4.2.1 The viability criteria for small schools, agreed by the Committee in 1997, relate to:

- cognitive development of pupils
- personal and social development of pupils
- alternative arrangements (ie capacity available at sufficiently closely situated neighbouring schools)
- community related factors
- value for money/value for effort (NB – this criterion would perhaps now be expressed in the context of “Best Value”)

4.2.2 These criteria were seen as having the potential to be applied to any individual situation, and – as such – they did not lead to a fixed pupil roll as a threshold between viability and non-viability. In 1997, I suggested that application of the first two criteria may tend to suggest that any school with fewer than three or four children at any stage may not be as viable as would be ideal, and that in turn suggested that the Council “ought to focus on schools with around 20 pupils or fewer in any regular review of this aspect of its educational provision” (Report No 1044/97). I was then authorised by the Committee to engage in informal discussions with staff and parents in the Council's smallest schools; these discussions duly took place with 11 whole school communities (each of which at that time had a primary pupil roll of less than 25 pupils).

4.2.3 At the time of the annual school census (September 2001), only four of the Council's schools had fewer than 20 enrolled primary pupils, namely:

- Kilry (13 pupils)
- Lethnot (18 pupils)
- Pitkenedy (16 pupils)
- Tarfside (16 pupils)

- 4.2.4 Two of the schools listed above (Lethnot and Tarfside) have already been identified by the Council as serving exceptionally remote areas. The Council took the view in 1997/98 that the “alternative arrangements” criterion – if applied to these two schools – would mean that some children would have an unacceptably long home-to-school journey.
- 4.2.5 Of the two remaining schools on the above list (Kilry and Pitkenney), each has an excellent track record of making good provision for pupils. However, it is possible that future roll projections may call their viability into question. In these circumstances, it would be preferable to be proactive in identifying possible future difficulties before they become a reality (see also paragraph 4.3.5 below).
- 4.2.6 The value-for-money criterion in assessing school viability has to be seen in the context of the Council’s overall financial position. The indicative budget arrangements for 2002/2003 and 2003/2004 (Angus Council – 17 May 2001) suggest that efficiency savings in services of the order of 1½% are likely to have to be made in each of these financial years. The BV Review of Primary Education highlights a number of possible options which could be adopted in order to make savings of that magnitude from the current budget for Primary Education. Of all these options, that of school closures/mergers is by far the most logical to adopt (see also para 4.3.5 below).

4.3 Overview

4.3.1 Since 1997, there has been some fluctuation in the roll of each and every one of the Council’s smaller schools. None of these rolls has dipped significantly since 1997, although in the case of one of these schools (Kilry) the current primary roll is now at a very low point, with the possibility of further roll reductions in the near future.

4.3.2 The Best Value Review of Primary Education, completed in July 2001 and reported to Committee on 21 August 2001, provides a comprehensive and up-to-date overview of primary schooling across Angus. Its conclusions include the following:

- *“ the provision of primary education in Angus stands very favourably in comparison with that being offered in any other area”*
- *“the very positive assessments of the quality of primary education in Angus being made by HMI attest to the sterling work being done by teachers in schools”*

4.3.3 The Best Value Report went on to identify seven possible ways in which efficiency savings could be made were this to be necessary : five of these ways would involve staff reductions in all schools of one sort or another, one would involve a reduction in the funding available to all schools to purchase supplies and services and one would involve a school closure. This last option is described in general terms within the BV Report, which includes the following comment:

“In principle, it is right and proper that the Council should review the geographical pattern of school provision in its area and – provided full regard is paid to the viability criteria already agreed for reviewing the existence of any small rural school – it is possible that a school closure (or merger of two small schools) may prove to be a sensible and prudent course of action which would allow the Council to maintain a high quality of service across all its schools in the long term.”

- 4.3.4 The BV Review lists three schools as “meriting closer scrutiny” – Dun, Kilry and Pitkenney. The roll of Dun Primary School in fact is now 23 pupils and the age profile of its pupils would now suggest that it is likely to stay at or around that mark for the next year or two. In these circumstances, no specific proposals are currently being brought forward for a review of the feasibility of Dun Primary School.
- 4.3.5 On 13 September 2001, notification was received from Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education that a public inspection of Pitkenney Primary School would be taking place in October 2001. This is part of a well established rolling programme of school inspections and is quite independent of the Council’s BV Review. However, a public inspection is a major event in the life of any school, generating an enormous amount of work and no little tension for the staff of the school. In these circumstances, it would be very difficult to enter into the kind of discussions with the whole-school community which took place in 1997. There is no urgency about reviewing the viability of Pitkenney and its current roll profile does not give any major causes for concern. It is therefore proposed that the viability of Pitkenney School be confirmed in the short term although this position should be kept under review.
- 4.3.6 As well as the BV Review which looked at primary education in the round, considerable work has been undertaken since 1997 in preparing Asset Management Plans for all schools. These plans are helpful in prioritising the repairs and maintenance needs of school buildings, as well as identifying fitness for purpose of each of our school buildings in the context of the educational needs of pupils in the 21st Century. The Asset Management Plans can also highlight ways in which better value-for-money may be attained by careful consideration of future building improvements.
- 4.3.7 Interestingly, since 1997, a huge expansion in nursery education has taken place, with nursery classes now functioning in 51 schools – compared with only 30 in September 1997. One additional issue, therefore, which should perhaps feature in any review of small schools in future is the capacity of the school building to accommodate a nursery class.

4.4 Overall Capacity on an Area by Area Basis

- 4.4.1 As indicated above (paras 3.2.2 and 3.3.2), the relationship at present between pupil rolls and pupil capacities is as follows:

	Total Roll	Total Capacity	% Utilisation
Burgh (28 schools)	7878	9601	82.1%
Non-burgh (32 schools)	1419	2348	60.4%
Total (60 schools)	9297	11949	77.8%

4.4.2 These statistics can be further subdivided into seven geographical areas:

	Total Roll	Total Capacity	% Utilisation
<u>Arbroath</u>			
Burgh (8 schools)*	2243	2684	83.6%
Non-burgh (4 schools)	223	350	63.7%
Total	2466	3034	81.3%
 <u>Brechin</u>			
Burgh (2 schools)	728	913	79.7%
Non-burgh (5 schools)	166	242	68.6%
Total	894	1155	77.4%
 <u>Carnoustie</u>			
Burgh (2 schools)	810	948	85.4%
Non-burgh (4 schools)	240	325	73.8%
Total	1050	1273	82.5%
 <u>Forfar</u>			
Burgh (5 schools)*	1343	1533	87.6%
Non-burgh (5 schools)	168	317	53.02%
Total	1511	1850	81.7%
 <u>Monifieth</u>			
Burgh (3 schools)*	915	1110	82.4%
Non-burgh (5 schools)	282	450	62.7%
	1197	1560	76.7%
 <u>Montrose</u>			
Burgh (6 schools)*	1228	1634	75.2%
Non-burgh (1 school)	23	50	46%
	1251	1684	74.3%
 <u>Kirriemuir</u>			
Burgh (2 schools)	611	779	78.4%
Non-burgh (8 schools)	317	614	51.6%
	928	1393	66.6%

* Burgh schools include Birkhill (with Monifieth), Ferryden and Rosemount (with Montrose), Friockheim (with Arbroath) and Letham (with Forfar).

4.4.3 Although the above information is useful in maintaining an overall impression of the utilisation levels of schools, it is of limited value when considering the viability of any individual rural school; in such a case, the capacity of neighbouring schools (in a more localised area) is likely to be of equal importance – and the viability criterion relating to “alternative arrangements” becomes highly relevant.

4.5 Establishment of Consultation Mechanisms

4.5.1 There is a need to undertake a statutory consultation exercise if a firm proposal to close a school is being considered, although legislative guidance on this type of consultation can make it appear exceptionally formal to parents.

4.5.2 The approach used in 1997, whereby I arranged to meet with parents and staff of those schools which may have been considered non-viable, provided a more flexible (and possibly less intimidating) form of initial consultation. Ten of the eleven schools visited in the 1997 exercise remain open, and no formal proposals to close any one of these ten schools were brought forward.

4.5.3 As can be seen from Recommendation (g), similar discussions are now being proposed – this time only with one school (Kilry Primary School). The main disadvantage of this approach, of course, is that it tends to raise parental anxieties, possibly unnecessarily. In these circumstances, only one school is being proposed as meriting these informal discussions, and it is hoped that these discussions will reach relatively speedy conclusions in order to avoid prolonging any unnecessary uncertainty.

5 **CONCLUSIONS**

5.1 The overall occupancy rate of Angus primary schools is 77.8%, the 28 burgh schools are operating at 82.1% of their total capacity, whereas the 32 non-burgh schools are operating at only 60.5% of their total capacity. Percentage utilisation varies from area to area, with no burgh area operating at less than 75% capacity, but with three associated rural areas operating at well under 60% capacity. Fourteen non-burgh schools are each operating at less than 51% of their respective capacities.

5.2 The Best Value Review of Primary Education emphasises the desirability of keeping the geographical pattern of school provision under review. The requirement to identify efficiency savings in 2002/2003 and once again in 2003/04 inevitably means that the viability of a small number of primary schools will have to be considered.

5.3 One school – Kilry Primary School – presently merits closer scrutiny, and some preliminary discussion with key stakeholders in that school is therefore proposed.

6 **HUMAN RIGHTS**

6.1 There are no Human Rights issues arising as a direct result of approving the recommendations contained within this report.

7 **CONSULTATION**

7.1 In accordance with the Standing Orders of the Council, the report has been the subject of consultation with the Chief Executive, the Director of Finance and the Director of Law & Administration.

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

JAA/CJ