

## **Consultation proposal by Aberdeenshire Council**

**Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal to discontinue provision at the existing Ellon Academy with effect from 3 July 2015 and that pupils of the existing Ellon Academy and future pupils from the Ellon Academy catchment area should continue their education at a new Ellon Academy Community Campus located at Cromleybank from 18 August 2015.**

### **1. Introduction**

1.1 Aberdeenshire Council proposes to discontinue provision at the existing Ellon Academy with effect from 3 July 2015 and that pupils of the existing Ellon Academy and future pupils from the Ellon Academy catchment area should continue their education at a new Ellon Academy Community Campus located at Cromleybank from 18 August 2015.

1.2 The report from Education Scotland is required under the terms of the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*. It has been prepared by HM Inspectors in accordance with the terms of the Act.

1.3 HM Inspectors undertook the following activities in considering the educational aspects of the proposal:

- attendance at the public meeting held on 13 September 2011 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;
- visit to the existing site of Ellon Academy including discussion with relevant consultees;
- visit to the proposed site for the new community campus, including scrutiny of travel routes to that site; and
- meetings with officers of the council with responsibility for information, communications and records; school travel planning; architectural services and property services.

1.4 HM Inspectors considered:

- the likely effects of the proposal for children and young people 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
- benefits which the council believes will result from implementation of the proposal, and the council's reasons for coming to these beliefs.

## **2. Consultation process**

2.1 Aberdeenshire Council undertook the initial consultation on its proposals with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*.

2.2 The council has recognised a factual error in paragraph 1.5 of its proposal document. The paragraph suggests that Balmedie Primary School is an associated primary school of Ellon Academy when in fact it is zoned for Bridge of Don Academy in the City of Aberdeen. However, paragraph 3.2 of the proposal document indicates that the catchment area for Ellon Academy will not change with the new location. The situation was clarified by an officer of the council at the public consultation meeting that took place on 13 September 2011. It is the council's view that it is appropriate for Balmedie Primary School to be included in the consultation process as the school forms part of Ellon Children's Services network and Ellon Academy receives a significant number of placing requests from parents of children attending Balmedie Primary School. The council will amend the wording of the paragraph in subsequent documents.

2.3 The council has consulted extensively on its proposal. The proposal document was circulated widely, including the parents of children currently attending zoned primary and nursery schools and other pre-school provision. The council has established consultative stakeholder groups representing a wide range of interests within the local community. It has drawn on evidence arising from earlier consultations on the council's draft Local Plan. Officers of the council have consulted regularly and effectively with other stakeholders including young people, school staff, parents, representatives of a college of further education and the wider local community. The headteacher has been very effective in involving young people, staff and parents in preparing plans and proposals for the new facility. Stakeholders were invited to attend a public meeting on 13 September 2011 at which elected members and officers of the council were present. The council has created a dedicated space for the proposed Ellon Community Campus on its website to keep stakeholders informed about ongoing developments. Stakeholders who met with HM Inspectors were generally very satisfied with the consultation process so far.

2.4 Some parents who attended the public meeting expressed concerns about the choice of site for the proposed community campus. They felt that it is too far from the town centre and that there could be safety issues for children travelling to the proposed facility. They made specific reference to busy roads, narrow pavements, an increased volume of traffic and the proximity of the River Ythan to some of the routes that would be taken by children on their way to and from school. These issues were reflected in some of the written responses received by the council as

part of its consultation process. Some parents of children attending Auchterellon Primary School were particularly concerned about the additional distance and associated safety issues arising from the proposed location of the new facility. However, other written responses from parents in the same area were strongly in favour of the proposed site. In general, parents who submitted written responses and those who met with HM Inspectors believed that the proposal represents a major improvement in the quality of educational provision for their children. Parents were particularly positive about the elimination of the current split site arrangement and the location of sports facilities adjacent to the proposed campus.

2.5 Children and young people who had been consulted were very positive about the proposal. Children attending zoned primary schools responded to four questions about their hopes and concerns for the new facility. In general children's responses were very positive and almost all were excited about the proposed facilities. They were concerned about the distance from the town centre and how they would travel to the proposed campus. Some were concerned that the canteen facility would be too small to accommodate all the young people who may wish to use it. Young people currently attending Ellon Academy were positive about the proposal although some felt that their current travel time to school would be doubled. Their other concerns included toilet provision, canteen facilities and the provision of lockers.

2.6 Staff who met with HM Inspectors felt that they are being consulted very effectively by the headteacher and by the council's officers. They felt that their views and suggestions are being addressed where feasible. For example staff representations had resulted in the proposed fixed staging being removed from the plans for the proposed performance area. Staff felt that officers had provided them with sound reasons when suggestions could not be accepted. In general staff feel that the current accommodation, particularly the split site, limits the range of experiences that can be provided for young people. They believe the proposed campus will raise the morale of young people and staff and provide a modern, high quality learning environment. Some staff expressed regret that there are no plans to provide an all weather games surface at the campus and young people will continue to access a nearby public facility.

2.7 Members of the wider community, who met with HM Inspectors and those who responded in to the council's consultation document, were generally positive about the educational benefits described in the council's proposal document. However members of the community, including the Community Council, continue to express reservations about the chosen site. Some believe that the proposed campus will be isolated from the town until developments contained in the Local Plan take place. The Community Council has raised concerns about transport implications arising from the proposal and has requested that Aberdeenshire Council carry out an impact assessment of the travel implications for children and families. Other representations received from members of the wider community expressed concern about the impact of the proposal on businesses in the centre of town. Users of current community facilities seek reassurance that there will be continuing access to similar facilities at the proposed campus.

### **3. Educational aspects of the proposal**

3.1 This proposal by Aberdeenshire Council would offer significant educational benefits for young people attending the proposed new facility.

3.2 There are significant weaknesses in the buildings currently occupied by Ellon Academy. The school occupies a split site and young people must cross a busy road when travelling from one building to another. This loses valuable time for learning and teaching and creates road safety issues. Approximately 40% of classrooms are in temporary accommodation of variable quality and suitability. Young people are taken by bus to outdoor physical education facilities resulting in further loss of time for teaching and learning. Social area space is very limited for the school roll of approximately 1100. The school lacks suitable spaces to bring larger groups of young people together for assemblies and performances. Some faculties are spread over several parts of the school making it difficult for staff to collaborate effectively to develop and deliver a coherent curriculum. Classroom layout in many areas is inflexible and reduces the effectiveness of group activities and use of information and communications technology (ICT). The council's School Estate Management Plan rates the present building as B (satisfactory) for condition but D (bad) for suitability. The two buildings are partially compliant with the requirements of disability discrimination legislation. The headteacher estimates that approximately one to two days, or part days, are lost each year due to building failures such as gas leaks and water ingress. HM Inspectors' report on Ellon Academy, published in February 2008, noted that the separation of the two buildings presented a potential road safety hazard and lengthened time taken to move between classes. The report made reference to congestion arising from narrow corridors and the lack of indoor social areas for young people.

3.3 The council's proposal would do much to address the restrictions imposed by the current building. Issues arising from the split site would be removed. Young people would learn in purpose built accommodation and would benefit from modern facilities and resources including ICT. The internal design of the building would group departments together in faculty areas helping teachers to plan and work collaboratively and help young people make connections between different parts of their learning. The provision of outdoor sports facilities as part of the proposed campus would reduce time lost to travel. However young people would continue to lose learning time to travel to use the all weather surface at the Meadows sports facility. The building design would enable the school to operate a house system that would provide all young people with a home area with easy access to guidance and support. Young people would benefit from large and attractive spaces where they could meet and socialise. Large flexible areas on the ground floor would provide spaces large enough to bring large groups of young people together for assemblies and performances. The community would benefit from access to those areas. Large flexible areas in other parts of the building would enable the school to respond to future changes in the curriculum or in school roll. The imaginative design would incorporate high quality community facilities and provide outreach accommodation for a college of further education. Both would bring significant educational benefits for young people and the wider community. The building would be built to meet the most demanding environmental and sustainability targets.

3.4 Some parents and other stakeholders, while accepting the need for the improved campus, feel that the proposed site is not the best option. They believe that the proposed site is distant and isolated from the current town centre. Some are concerned about the increased distances some young people, particularly those from the Auchterellon zone, would have to travel to school. Others feel that certain routes to the proposed campus could expose young people to risks such as heavy traffic and the nearby River Ythan. The council has examined and evaluated carefully all possible sites for the proposed campus. It has taken account of the Local Development Plan. In the council's opinion the Cromleybank site is the only feasible option for the proposed development. The council is aware of stakeholders' concerns and is working to address them. Its plans for the proposed campus include improved traffic management arrangements and measures to provide young people with safe routes to school. These include improved pavement provision on South Road and a new pedestrian bridge over the River Ythan adjacent to the Meadows sports facility. It plans to address issues arising from the narrow pavement on Castle Road and to install a pedestrian crossing at the junction with Meadows Way. Traffic on the access road to the proposed campus would be strictly regulated. The council will liaise with its Public Transport Unit to consider transport issues associated with the development of the proposed campus. Some stakeholders have responded that the council has not assessed fully the transport implications of its proposal for young people, their parents and the wider community. It has yet to ascertain whether more or fewer young people will be entitled to free transport to school.

3.5 The council has undertaken a lengthy and robust examination of possible sites for the proposed community campus. That process has identified the proposed site as the only viable option. The council now needs to work closely with stakeholders to address fully their safety and transport concerns. It needs to involve children currently attending zoned primary schools in that process so that they are able to travel safely when they transfer to secondary school. The council also needs to quantify how many children and families will be affected by changes to transport entitlement arising from the proposed new location for secondary education. The council needs to work with community groups to ensure that users of facilities such as the present swimming pool are not disadvantaged by the more distant provision.

#### **4. Summary**

4.1 There are significant weaknesses in the quality and suitability of the existing Ellon Academy building. In particular the split site leads to additional time being taken by young people moving between buildings. They have to cross a busy road to do so. Time is lost in transporting young people to local all weather sports and games facilities. The school has a relatively high proportion of temporary classrooms. Much of the school's accommodation is inflexible and not easily adapted to the requirements of a modern curriculum. Social space for young people to meet and interact informally is very limited. There are very few suitable spaces to bring larger groups of young people together, for example for assemblies or performances. Corridors are generally narrow and congested. Days, or part days, are lost each year due to building or plant failures. There are environmental concerns and complaints that some areas are too warm or too cold.

4.2 The council's proposal would significantly improve the quality of educational provision for young people and the wider Ellon community from August 2015. Learning and teaching time would be increased through the provision of a single integrated facility with an adjacent outdoor sports and games area. Young people and the community would benefit from the imaginative design that incorporates high quality facilities for further education and community education. The generous and flexible use of space would enhance the delivery of a modern curriculum supported by a range of up-to-date resources including ICT. The flexible nature of the accommodation would ensure that the school is well placed to respond effectively to future changes and demands.

4.3 The council has done much to consult with a wide range of stakeholders and will continue to do so. However some parents and members of the community remain unconvinced that the council has selected the correct site for the proposed campus. They have particular concerns about travel and road safety issues and the distance of the proposed campus from the town centre. The council needs to take account of those concerns and to continue to work with all stakeholders to identify and address the full range of transport and access issues.

**HM Inspectors  
Education Scotland  
December 2011**