

Proposal to close Ae Primary School from July 2018

Submission from Joan McAlpine MSP

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1. Introduction

- 1.1. I am one of the regional MSPs for the south of Scotland and have held this position since 2011. Most of my work is focussed on the Dumfries and Galloway region, where I live.
- 1.2. Throughout the last parliamentary term, I was a member of the Education Committee, which scrutinised the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, part 15 thereof whose purpose was to amend the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 in order to strengthen the protection for rural schools, as it was felt that the spirit behind the Act was not being met, as it did not provide a legislative 'presumption against rural school closures,' despite the Scottish Government's intention.
- 1.3. The spirit behind such a policy was outlined back in 2008: *"to achieve a situation in which a decision to close a rural school would always be a decision of last resort; one which would not be taken until all possible alternatives have been explored and all the likely adverse implications have been identified and actions planned to minimise their impact"* (Scottish Government 2008).
- 1.4. The amendments bring in the requirement that there must be a clear educational benefit in closure, and, that closure must be the most appropriate solution to the problems that have been identified. I do not believe that these requirements have been met in the case of the proposal to close Ae Primary School.

2. Educational Benefits Statement

- 2.1. I appreciate that in accordance with the 2010 Act, Dumfries and Galloway Council have prepared an educational benefits statement in their proposal document. However, I would have to disagree with some of the points made therein, and would contend that it does not make a sufficient case in favour of closure.
- 2.2. The educational benefits statement revolves around the allegation that the children's social and emotional development needs are not being met (see section 5.12) and a need to widen challenge and deepen thinking through wider friendship groups. However, school is not the only opportunity for pupils to widen their friendship groups. It does not appear that Education Scotland, or indeed any of the parents share these concerns in relation to their children's development. Indeed, this quote from the most recent Education Scotland inspection in June last year¹ suggests that pupils benefit from the interaction with peers from different age groups: *"Younger children are becoming more confident in sharing ideas and experiences in the larger group."*

¹ <https://www.education.gov.scot/assets/inspectionreports/aeprimaryins140616.pdf>

- 2.3. In relation to section 5.21, the proposal document suggests that transition to Dumfries High School, where the premises are expansive and the school roll is 755 can be challenging for some pupils coming from such a small primary school as Ae. I would contend that the transition to high school can be challenging under any circumstances, but that these challenges can be met with suitable transition arrangements, which I am led to believe are already in place, supported by parents. Indeed, the Education Scotland Inspector highlights the great work that the school staff from both Ae and Dumfries High School do in supporting the transition to high school: *“Children are supported well when they move into S1. Staff offer home visits to support smooth transitions to school. Young children in the local area are invited to join children and staff throughout the year, for example for the Halloween Party and Easter Service. The school has fostered close links with Dumfries High School to support children as they move onto S1”* (Jackie Maley HM Inspector). In any event, it is unclear how moving to a primary school where the combined school roll is still only 46 would make any measurable difference in terms of preparing pupils for the transition to high school.
- 2.4. Section 5.6 of the proposal document suggests that because the school was evaluated as satisfactory in improvements in performance and the curriculum, this is evidence of the challenges faced in a small school setting where staff are working in isolation. However, the inspection report itself does not link any issues in relation to the curriculum or performance to staff working in isolation. In fact, the Education Scotland Inspector states that: *“Staff also take advantage of their strong links with their partnership school, Amisfield, to support delivery of the curriculum”* (Jackie Maley HM Inspector), which points to successful collaborative working.
- 2.5. Section 5.10 suggests that children with specific needs have less opportunity for support with peers and that their needs are magnified in the small class room setting. However, this seems to go against the general consensus that smaller class sizes have positive effects on pupil attainment. When the Scottish Government were putting in place their policy to reduce class sizes, the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), argued that: *“..reducing class sizes allows each individual child with more time to spend with their teacher, and this brings obvious benefits in terms of improved pupil behaviour, educational performance and attainment”* and that *“we support the placing of pupils with special needs in mainstream schools, but it can only be done properly in smaller classes. It would also be easier to tackle classroom indiscipline if there were fewer pupils in a class, so we think the benefits are obvious.”*² The Commission on the Delivery of Rural Education, which reported in 2013, also touched on this issue. They reported that: *“The Commission noted the level of individual attention possible in small schools and how much staff and pupils valued the ‘family’ atmosphere in these schools. The Commission came across good examples of smaller schools meeting the needs of pupils with additional support needs within mainstream classes and staff noted how much more was possible for these children within small schools.”*³

3. Likely effects of closure on the wider community of Ae

- 3.1. One of the most important aspects in this decision has to be the impact on the wider community. Section 6.9 of the proposal document recognises that there are no other public facilities in Ae village, and the community uses the school for lots of community events. I am concerned however that the Council has not taken into account just how devastating the closure of the school could be for the community – for instance, a suggestion in section 6.10 that the Council would be supportive of a transfer of the facility to the community does not consider the impacts of such a transfer to a resource poor community, particularly when the

² http://www.heraldsotland.com/news/12449724.The_cost_of_smaller_class_sizes/

³ <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2013/04/5849/6>

proposal document itself expresses concerns about the condition of the building (4.27). It is clear that community asset transfers tend to be successful where proposals to take ownership have come from the bottom up. It is unclear whether a community, particularly one which had just had its school taken away against its wishes, would be in a position to undertake such an endeavour.

- 3.2. A 2011 OECD report⁴ into the closure of rural schools, points to evidence which indicates that where schools are located outside of the locality where the child lives, the extra-curricular activities of the student is often reduced, as well as the active involvement of parents. The same report points to schools as key indicators of community vitality and sustainability – influencing where families choose to live, as well as property values and local tax revenues; areas without good schools do not readily attract young families, and thus it becomes a vicious cycle whereby the local authority are simply managing decline in rural areas. It is also an interesting point to note that community cohesion can be shaken by such decisions where the community has not been in agreement with the decision makers – as would be the case in this instance – with the fallout from strained community relations, such as eroded confidence in decision making affecting communities for years to come.
- 3.3. The extent to which the school is seen as the heart of this local community cannot be overstated, and has been recognised in the most recent Education Scotland Report *“It is evident that staff, parents and the local community are very committed to the school. It is very much regarded as the hub of this small community.”* (Jackie Maley HM Inspector)
- 3.4. To understand the impact of rural school closures on the community, you can look to examples around the country. For example, the Isle of Eriskay, attached to South Uist by causeway, lost its school around four years ago. Now the population is in decline; it is thought that there are only a handful of residents between the ages of 18 and 40, meaning that depopulation is likely to lead to the elimination of any sense of community on the island. We must commit ourselves to halt this rural decline.
- 3.5. The community impact assessment in this case is entirely insufficient for a school which is so obviously utilised by the local community to a great extent. This alone is a standout failure of this proposal and the consultation process and I contend would be sufficient grounds for Ministers to call in the decision should the result be closure.

4. Early Years Provision

- 4.1. The Council contend (6.14) that there is not demand in the area to site a nursery and provide wrap around care, however it is clear that some parents who would otherwise send their children to school in Ae, take their children further afield in order to make childcare arrangements that fit in with their working pattern.
- 4.2. The Scottish Government has been clear that its planned expansion of childcare should be flexible to recognise the needs of parents and particular communities. The expansion includes childminders who are working with government to ensure high quality provision. There is at least one child minder I have spoken to in Ae. At any rate it is the role of the council to ensure equity of provision in its rural areas.

⁴ <http://www.oecd.org/edu/innovation-education/centreforeffectivelearningenvironmentscele/48358265.pdf>

5. Financial Impact

- 5.1. I understand that in these times of austerity the Council are facing budgetary pressures, and there are financial aspects to consider keeping a school open when it is operating under capacity as outlined in section 8.0. However, as detailed below, three out of four of the high schools in Dumfries are operating very far under capacity, and yet under the Dumfries Learning Town proposals⁵ all of these schools are to be rebuilt or refurbished; there are no proposals for closure. This raises the question as to whether the Council is guilty of a bias against small rural schools, whose loss is likely to have a much more detrimental effect on the communities.

Table 1: Total student capacity of each Dumfries secondary school

School	Current Physical Capacity	Current Student Numbers 2016/17	Post-DLT works: max roll 2019 onwards
Dumfries Academy	943	614	730
Dumfries High School	1,126	771	810
Maxwelltown High School	650	315	490
St Joseph's College	765	731	730
Total Capacity	3,484	2,431	2,760
*The Bridge	0	0	320

Current Student Numbers for secondary are based on Enrolment data 15th August 2016

*The Bridge capacity figure of 320 will include pupil/student / lifelong learners

- 5.2. The proposal document mentions the word "transport" 18 times but in the financial calculation table the additional cost of home to school transport is listed as £0. The proposal suggests existing pupils and future siblings will be offered the choice of 3 schools (1.15). If this was taken up by the parents this would most likely be done by 3 private taxis. This would not be cheap. Scottish Rural Schools Network advised that in one case in Highland a single child lived 14 miles up an estate track. The cost to the council was £14k per annum (2008 prices). It is unbelievable that these costs are not shown in the proposal document.
- 5.3. A figure in the table entitled "other school operational costs (e.g. licences)" shows a saving of £27598. This is obviously a large percentage of the proposed savings with no explanation of what it is. We know it does not relate to staff or property cost and it is not learning materials or transport so what is it?
- 5.4. The document lists catering cost of 10 pupils as £0. The percentage of pupils at Ae utilising free school meals is not known, but I it seems likely that there are some, and that they would have to eat during the school day.
- 5.5. The table refers repeatedly to Excel notes but no legend to these notes is listed in the downloadable copy of the proposal document.
- 5.6. 5.6. The financial table and associated explanatory notes fall short of the standard of detail or care expected in a post 2010 Act proposal document. Many of the savings listed suggest 100% of the current costs. This is extremely unrealistic and there is no explanation as to what the biggest single saving element even is. Notes which may give their explanation of method are missing. This is extremely poor.

⁵ <http://egenda.dumgal.gov.uk/aksdumgal/images/att42066.pdf>

6. Other Comments

- 6.1. The consultation meeting with parents was arranged in the afternoon where many parents were unable to attend.
- 6.2. The population and economic projections put forward in the consultation document (4.41-4.43) are relentlessly negative. I appreciate that the rise of automation as well as other factors such as an ageing population will continue to be issues, however, I am concerned about the poverty of ambition for the region. These projections are exactly that – projections. They are not inevitable and I do not recognise the economy that is being portrayed and the accompanying forecast. There is no recognition of the existing growth and potential of sectors such as the renewable and energy sectors.
- 6.3. I have serious concerns about the accuracy of the council's economic and employment projections for the region which seem to assume inevitable decline in all areas. This seems at odds with the council's stated objective of growing the economy and jobs in Dumfries and Galloway. It makes no allowance for the impact of policy decisions that could improve employment whether these are made at council level e.g. Total Access Point or Scottish Government level, e.g. South of Scotland Enterprise Agency. I also find the examples of projected employment decline contradict established fact. The council document predicts a decline in forestry, a major sector in the region. However, a report by the Forestry Commission in Scotland in 2015 found jobs in forestry grew from 13,000 in 2008 to 19,500 by 2013/14. Further expansion is expected particularly if replanting meets targets. Meanwhile the council's projections for a decline in social care jobs seems to contradict the evidence that the population is ageing. These are just two examples of flaws in the council's gloomy economic projections.
- 6.4. More specifically in terms of Ae village itself, the proposal document does not take into account the fact that Ae was created 70 years ago by the Forestry Commission as a 'forestry village,' and populated with young men and their families in the post war decades. There is thus a private housing 'cycle' which has large peaks and troughs. These original foresters will soon downsize and private housing will become available fit for more young families to move in. The last four houses that have been bought in the village have been purchased by young families.
- 6.5. The note from the public meeting in Ae village on the 23rd of August mentions that the council has engaged informally with the school, parents and community in advance of this formal process. However, it is clear from speaking to the local community that this process was completely insufficient for the community to be able to react in the way it would have wanted. As stipulated in the 2010 Act guidance: "*there is a particular need for engagement with communities in preparing and informing a rural school closure proposal.*" This absolutely does not appear to have happened in this instance.
- 6.6. I also want to note that the consultation document is poorly written and includes typos which suggest that it has been created in a rush; for example, the school is referred to as Garlieston in section 6.25, rather than Ae. It might seem a minor point, but it does create the perception of a 'cut and paste' job, that has not been given due consideration.

- 6.7. A final point to note is the fact that the community are feeling exhausted from the whole process, and the next stage, the Education Scotland inspector visiting, is only two days after the consultation closes, which hardly gives them room to draw breath, and gives off the impression that the council is simply in a rush to get through the process.

7. Conclusion

- 7.1. I do not believe that the Council has demonstrated in any way that there are educational benefits to be had in closing Ae Primary School. It seems rather that the Council have tried to come up with these benefits in their proposal when in actual fact the closure is being proposed for financial reasons.
- 7.2. One of the most significant points to note, is that unlike in the past where schools in the region have been closed with community support where pupil numbers have fallen to nearly zero, this is categorically not the case for Ae primary. It is clear that the parents and the community value their school and do not want it to close – as the Council itself acknowledges in section 7.2 of the proposal document.
- 7.3. The closing of this school should absolutely not go ahead. We cannot be in a situation where we are merely managing decline in rural areas, but rather we need to focus on rejuvenating these beautiful small villages and making them attractive places to live for families and young people.