

Proposal to close Garlieston 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 Garlieston 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 disagree with some of the points made therein, and contend that it does not make a sufficient case in favour of closure.
- 2.2. Section 5 outlines the educational benefits statement; which is based on the suggestion that the children's social and emotional development needs will be improved by moving to a larger school. However, school is not the only opportunity for pupils to widen their friendship groups. It seems clear that the parents absolutely do not share these concerns in relation to their children's development.
- 2.3. In relation to section 5.7, the proposal document suggests that transition to Douglas Ewart, where the premises are expansive and the school roll is 580 can be challenging for pupils coming from such a small primary school as Garlieston. However, the transition is of course difficult under any circumstances but can be very successful when the right arrangements are in place – which appears to be the case here.

- 2.4. There is a 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”* 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.”*¹

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

- 3.1. An important aspect of any decision to close a rural school is the impact it will have on the wider community. It is clear that the community use the school for many other activities, such as a toddler group, and it is unclear what arrangements would be put in place for these to continue should the school close.
- 3.2. A 2011 OECD report² 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. 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.

4. Financial Impact

- 4.1. 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 proposals³ 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.

¹ <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2013/04/5849/6>

² <http://www.oecd.org/edu/innovation-education/centreforeffectivelearningenvironmentscele/48358265.pdf>

³ <http://egenda.dumgal.gov.uk/aksdumgal/images/att42066.pdf>

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

- 4.2. The proposal document mentions transport a number of times throughout, 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.
- 4.3. A figure in the table entitled "other school operational costs (e.g. licences)" shows a saving of £26,619. 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?
- 4.4. The document lists catering cost of 15 pupils as £0. The percentage of pupils at Garlieston utilising free school meals is not known, but it seems likely that there are some, and that they would have to eat during the school day.
- 4.5. 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. Other Comments

- 5.1. The document itself acknowledges that in fact the school roll is in fact projected to rise – to 34 in 21/22 – the highest it has been since 96/97.
- 5.2. The population and economic projections put forward in the consultation are entirely 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.
- 5.3. 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.

- 5.4. The educational benefit statement is not backed up by evidence and academic research.
- 5.5. The parent council have informed me that not all parents concerned have been contacted by the Council during the public consultation – this suggests a sloppy approach to the consultation process.
- 5.6. 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. 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. Conclusion

- 6.1. I do not believe that the Council has demonstrated in any way that there are educational benefits to be had in closing Garlieston 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.
- 6.2. 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 Garlieston primary. It is clear that the parents and the community value their school and do not want it to close.
- 6.3. 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.