

ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL

COMMITTEE	Education and Children's Services
DATE	17 September 2024
EXEMPT	No
CONFIDENTIAL	No
REPORT TITLE	Denominational Primary Schools – Feasibility Study
REPORT NUMBER	F&C/24/264
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR	Eleanor Sheppard
CHIEF OFFICER	Stephen Booth
REPORT AUTHOR	Andrew Jones
TERMS OF REFERENCE	1.1.1; 1.1.2; 1.1.5

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 This report provides a summary of the outcomes of a recent feasibility study to assess the options for the long term future of denominational primary school provision in the City, and provides a recommendation for next steps. It also includes the findings of a stakeholder engagement exercise carried out to support the feasibility study.

2. RECOMMENDATION

That the Committee:-

- 2.1 Notes the contents of the report, and instructs the Chief Officer – Corporate Landlord to continue to monitor forecast pupil numbers for the three denominational primary schools, and to include recommendations in next year's annual school estate plan update report, on any required actions to be taken to ensure that the city's denominational primary school provision continues to be appropriate to meet the expected demand for pupil places.

3. CURRENT SITUATION

- 3.1 At its meeting of 8 September 2022, the Committee approved the School Estate Plan, and as part of this instructed officers to carry out a feasibility study and stakeholder engagement exercise, to identify options for ensuring appropriate and sustainable long term denominational primary school provision for the city to meet forecast demand, and to report back to the Education and Children's Services Committee with recommendations.
- 3.2 This instruction was in response to figures presented within the School Estate Plan in 2022 which indicated a predicted increase in excess pupil capacity across the three denominational primary schools (St Peter's RC School, St Joseph's RC School, and Holy Family RC School) in the future. Actual school roll data to 2021/22 had validated this position and confirmed that 2 of the RC

primary schools had seen a relatively steady school roll since 2015, and one a declining school roll since 2015.

- 3.3 A feasibility study was carried out between April and June 2024, to identify potential options for ensuring appropriate and sustainable long term denominational primary school provision in Aberdeen, to meet forecast demand. This included a stakeholder engagement exercise, in which members of school communities were invited to submit their comments on the options available, and the potential impact of these options. The stakeholder engagement was conducted using an online survey, to which there were 1,321 responses submitted.
- 3.4 Appendix A contains a summary of the findings from the feasibility study, which has already been shared separately with parents at the three denominational primary schools.

Next Steps for Denominational Primary School Provision

- 3.5 When the feasibility study was first instructed through the School Estate Plan in 2022, school roll forecasts at that time indicated that, following the completion of the project to improve and extend the facilities for St Peter's RC School (where capacity will be increased), there would be significant excess capacity across the three denominational primary schools. The feasibility study therefore focused on the possibilities of reducing the overall future capacity of these schools, to avoid any inefficiency.
- 3.6 Since that time, fluctuations in pupil numbers across parts of the school estate, which were beginning to emerge at the time of writing the School Estate Plan and which could not be predicted by the school roll forecasts, have continued to create challenges for school estate planning. Aberdeen City welcomed an additional 1,000 pupils to our schools over session 2023/24. Fluctuations in school roll have been particularly evident in schools with surplus capacity, as families moving to the area have been advised of available school places. As a result, pupil numbers at our denominational primary schools have increased significantly in the last two years.
- 3.7 These fluctuations are thought to be due to a number of unexpected demographic changes, including increases over the last two years in the number of international students enrolling at the universities in the city, and who have moved to Aberdeen with their families, therefore requiring school places for their children. Increases in the numbers of international refugees being welcomed to Aberdeen over this time period has also impacted on pupil numbers. The denominational schools were particularly affected by these changes, as the spare capacity which was previously available in these schools was used to offer places to incoming families where their zoned non-denominational schools were unable to accommodate them, or who were keen to secure faith based education.
- 3.8 Whilst these additional families have impacted on pupil numbers in our denominational schools over the last two years, and are therefore likely to continue to have some impact on school rolls whilst those children remain in

the system, the extent to which these factors will affect pupil numbers in five years' time and beyond, is much less clear. Recent changes in UK law relating to international students' rights to settle here with their families, are likely to reduce the impact that student populations will have on pupil numbers in the future, and it is not possible to predict whether similar numbers of international refugees will be welcomed to Aberdeen in future years. These could therefore be seen as 'short-term' factors which are affecting our current school populations, but which may have less of an impact on our schools in the future.

- 3.9 Given that our school roll forecasts (and particularly the forecasts for the denominational schools) rely on trends in actual pupil enrolments over recent years, to predict the likely pupil numbers in future years, there is a concern that the latest forecast figures will be subject to a greater margin of error than would normally be expected, as the data calculations will have been influenced by the above short-term factors, which may not actually be at play in the future.
- 3.10 This means that predicting future required capacity levels for the denominational schools, and recommending actions to achieve those levels, has temporarily become more challenging. Whilst it may be the case that pupil numbers will decline once the above short term factors are no longer at play, which could then lead to recommendations to reduce future capacity, it is not possible to confirm at this stage whether that will happen, or when it will happen.
- 3.11 In addition to the recent increases in pupil numbers described above, the confirmation earlier this year from the UK government that independent school fees will no longer be exempt from VAT, may have a further impact on future pupil numbers in Aberdeen's local authority schools. The increased costs associated with independent school places may result in parents, who would otherwise have enrolled their children at an independent school, choosing to enrol them at a local authority school instead. This may result in actual pupil numbers in some of our schools in the coming years being higher than the forecast figures.
- 3.12 This is an emerging issue and its true impact is likely to become more clear over the next one to two years, after which it will be possible for future forecasts to account for any changes in the pattern of parental choices with regard to independent schools, but in the short term, the likely impact is unclear.
- 3.13 Aside from considering the options for reducing excess capacity across the denominational primary schools, the feasibility study also focused on opportunities to make improvements to the existing facilities within the school buildings. Due to the current uncertainty with future capacity requirements described above, it is not possible to make recommendations at this stage for long term and significant capital investment in the existing buildings, given that there may be a requirement in future to make changes to one or more of the buildings to reduce the overall capacity. Officers will however continue to monitor the condition and suitability of the existing buildings, and ensure that the necessary maintenance, repairs and any essential improvements are carried out, as would be the case with all other buildings in the school estate.

- 3.14 Taking all of the above into consideration, it is recommended that no action is taken at this stage to make any changes to the future capacity of the three denominational primary schools, but that officers are instructed to continue to monitor pupil numbers and forecasts, and to bring forward recommendations within next year's annual School Estate Plan update report, should the available data at that time indicate that any action is required to maintain an appropriate level of provision for denominational primary education.

Catholic Secondary School Provision

- 3.15 The online survey which was used to gather stakeholder feedback during the feasibility study, whilst focusing predominantly on the future of the three denominational primary schools, also included a question to help gain an understanding of the level of potential demand that there would be for a Roman Catholic secondary school in Aberdeen. The specific question included within the survey was:

“Given the choice, would you send your child to your local secondary school, or to a city wide Roman Catholic secondary school?”

- 3.16 Of the 1,321 responses to the online survey which were submitted, 1,081 (82%) of these indicated a preference for a city wide Roman Catholic secondary school. 208 respondents (16%) indicated that their preference would be to send their child to their local secondary school, whilst 32 respondents (2%) did not answer this question.
- 3.17 Of the 1,081 respondents who indicated a preference for a Catholic secondary school in Aberdeen, 730 (71%) of these confirmed that they were parents of current pre-school, primary or secondary school aged children, and that they live within an Aberdeen City postcode area.
- 3.18 Of all of the respondents who indicated a preference for a Catholic secondary school in Aberdeen, 814 (75%) of these confirmed that their child held a Baptism certificate. 239 respondents (22%) indicated that their child did not hold a Baptism certificate, whilst 28 respondents (3%) did not answer this question.
- 3.19 Roman Catholic Education is currently available to secondary school pupils in the form of weekly after school tuition, which is held at Harlaw Academy and available to pupils from all Aberdeen City secondary schools. These classes were stopped in October 2023 as no pupils were attending, but the classes have been reinstated from August 2024, with seven pupils attending.
- 3.20 Based on the above survey results, and given that the Council has made a commitment to any new secondary school having a minimum capacity of 1000 pupil places, it is unlikely that there would be sufficient demand from parents to support the creation of a new Roman Catholic secondary school in Aberdeen.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from the recommendations of this report.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Section 1 of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 provides that it shall be the duty of every education authority to secure that there is made for their area adequate and efficient provision of school education.
- 5.2 Section 17 of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 provides that it shall be the duty of an education authority in the performance of their functions under sections 1 to 6 of the Act, to provide for their area, sufficient accommodation in public schools and other educational establishments under their management to enable them to perform their said functions. In addition, an education authority shall maintain and keep efficient every public school, and other educational establishment under their management, and shall from time to time provide such additional accommodation as may be necessary to enable them to perform their functions under the Act and may, provide, alter, improve, enlarge, equip and maintain schools and other educational establishments within their area.

6. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 There are no direct environmental implications arising from the recommendations of this report.

7. RISK

- 7.1 The assessment of risk contained within the table below is considered to be consistent with the Council's Risk Appetite Statement.

Management Of Risk

Category	Risks	Primary Controls/Control Actions to achieve Target Risk Level	*Target Risk Level (L, M or H) *taking into account controls/control actions	*Does Target Risk Level Match Appetite Set?
Strategic Risk	No significant risks identified			
Compliance	Risk that the Council is seen to make significant changes to schools without considering the available school roll forecast data.	The recommendation to take no action at this time demonstrates that full consideration has been given to the available forecast data.	L	Yes

Operational	Failure to engage and consult with communities on the future of the school estate which serves them, could lead to a breakdown in relationships with community members. Proposals to close schools may not be popular with some stakeholders	An engagement exercise has been undertaken with stakeholders and the findings of this have been included within the report for Members to consider.	L	Yes
Financial	No significant risks identified			Yes/No
Reputational	Failure to engage and consult with communities on the future of the school estate which serves them, could lead to reputational damage for the Council. Proposals to close schools may not be popular with some stakeholders	An engagement exercise has been undertaken and the findings of this have been included within the report for Members to consider.		Yes/No
Environment / Climate	Taking no immediate action on reducing the number of denominational primary schools will not provide opportunities for reducing	The recommendation to keep pupil numbers at the denominational primary schools under review, and for officers to report back with recommendations in the future, may provide additional opportunities to	L	Yes

	carbon emissions from the school estate	contribute to reducing carbon emissions.		
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8. OUTCOMES

Council Delivery Plan 2024	
	Impact of Report
Aberdeen City Council Policy Statement <u>Working in Partnership for Aberdeen</u>	<p>The recommendations within this report support the delivery of the following policy statements:</p> <p><u>A City of Opportunity</u> Policy Statement 2 - Review and invest in our school estate, ensuring all of Aberdeen's schools are fit for the educational needs and the challenges of the 21st century. The report considers the options for providing improved facilities for denominational primary schools in the future.</p>
Regional and City Strategies	<p>This project forms part of the School Estate Plan which will support the delivery of the Council's Property and Estates Strategy and the Net Zero Routemap for Aberdeen City.</p>

9. IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

Assessment	Outcome
Integrated Impact Assessment	New Integrated Impact Assessment has been completed
Data Protection Impact Assessment	Not required
Other	No other assessments required

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 10.1 Education Operational Delivery Committee, 8 September 2022: [School Estate Plan 2022](#) (RES/22/184)

11. APPENDICES

- 11.1 Appendix A: Denominational Primary Schools Feasibility Study: End of Feasibility Study Report

12. REPORT AUTHOR CONTACT DETAILS

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