

The background of the slide features a large, light blue watermark of the City of Edinburgh Council's coat of arms. The coat of arms is a shield divided into four quarters. The top-left quarter shows a castle tower, the top-right a stag's head with antlers, the bottom-left a three-masted sailing ship on waves, and the bottom-right an eagle with wings spread. Above the shield is a crown with four fleurs-de-lis. A banner at the bottom contains the motto 'ANE FOR A'.

# **Agenda Item 14**

## **Mothballing of Primary Schools**

Falkirk Council

**Title:** Mothballing of Primary Schools  
**Meeting:** Education Executive  
**Date:** 4 September 2018  
**Submitted By:** Director of Children's Services

**1. Purpose of Report**

1.1. This report seeks to:

- set operational parameters for Children's Services to progress consultation on the "mothballing" of a primary school when the number of catchment area pupils on the school roll has fallen below an agreed level; and
- propose the amendments that would be required to the current Admissions Policy if the recommendations are approved.

**2. Recommendations**

2.1 The Education Executive is asked to:

- (1) agree the criteria and parameters for schools to be considered for "mothballing" (as outlined in section 4.1);
- (2) agree the proposed changes to the Admissions Policy (Appendix 1);
- (3) agree to the proposed Children's Services management actions to be taken when schools are being considered for "mothballing" (as outlined in section 4.2); and

**3. Background**

Scottish Government Guidance on "Mothballing" Schools

- 3.1 The term 'mothballing' is used, according to Scottish Government guidance, to refer to a temporary decision to close a school where the roll has fallen to zero. Mothballing, rather than closing a school gives the opportunity for it to reopen should circumstances change. There is no legal process for mothballing.
- 3.2 The Scottish Government has issued statutory Guidance under the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010, which deals with the issue of mothballing:
- Para 63.** In considering alternatives to closure, authorities may choose to consider "mothballing" a school (or a stage of education or a nursery class at a school). This is a temporary closure which does not lead to a consultation under the 2010 Act. It is only appropriate in very restricted circumstances.

When a school roll falls very low, the authority and/or community may consider that the school is not presently viable but do not wish to close it immediately because there is a reasonable prospect that the number of pupils in the area will increase such that it should be re-opened in the future.

**Para 64.** It is vital that this flexibility to close a school for a temporary period is not used to undermine the requirements under the 2010 Act to consult on all school closure proposals. Mothballing is only appropriate for a temporary period and should be subject to regular review, at least annually, against the same requirements which led to the original decision to mothball the school (or stage of education). The maximum length of its duration is likely to depend on the location of the school and the desirability of maintaining capacity to re-open a school there, but it is unlikely that it should exceed 3 years in areas that are not very remote. The condition of the school building and cost of maintaining the mothballed provision will also be relevant.

**Para 65.** A school can be mothballed where the school roll has fallen to zero and continues to be zero. It may also be appropriate where the roll or potential roll is very low and the authority considers the only other option to be closure. However, in circumstances where a school is mothballed rather than closed and some children and young people remain in the catchment area, this decision should be taken in consultation with the parents involved, and the possibility should be raised as early as possible, in order to ensure that families can understand the options open to them. Mothballing should not be a way of denying parents' access to the statutory consultation process required under the 2010 Act and if the majority of parents oppose mothballing, it would be appropriate to move to statutory consultation on closure as soon as possible.

#### **4. Considerations**

##### Proposed Criteria and Parameters for Considering "Mothballing" of Primary Schools

4.1 Children's Services propose that where a primary school roll has 10 or less catchment area pupils, as reported in the Annual School Census (September), then the Director of Children's Services should consider this for "mothballing", subject to:

- an assessment that confirms that the number of catchment area pupils is unlikely to increase above 10 within the next 2 years.

##### Proposed Management Action to Be Taken When Schools Are Identified For Mothballing

4.2 When a primary school roll falls into this category, the Director of Children's Services will arrange to:

- i) consult with affected parents, parent councils (if established) and other families who reside within the defined primary school catchment area, to discuss the position with them;

Note: That a statutory consultation is not required as “mothballing” is deemed to be a temporary closure of a school.

- ii) discuss the position with those staff who work in the defined primary school;
- iii) prepare a report for the Education Executive on the outcome of the consultation exercise and to make recommendations;
- iv) identify an alternative “catchment school” which will subsume the mothballed schools catchment area on a temporary basis; and
- v) support those parents who may wish to move their children to the “alternative catchment school” earlier than the start of the next academic year by applying the subsumed catchment area rule (outlined in 4.2 (iv) above), with regards to assessing transport entitlement.
- vi) The Director of Children’s Services will prepare a report for the Education Executive on future options for any school that has been “mothballed” for a period of 2 years.

- 4.3 “Mothballed” primary schools will be maintained on a “wind and watertight” basis pending their future outcome.

#### Proposed Change to Current Admissions Policy

- 4.4 In the event that some parents may wish their children to move to their “alternative catchment school” sooner than the start of the next academic year, the Director of Children’s Services should support them with that move.

#### Educational Concerns Where Primary Schools Have Very Low Rolls

- 4.5 While it may seem that having fewer pupils in a class would allow a teacher to provide more one-on-one attention, fewer is not always better, when it comes to our pupils learning experiences. Classes low in pupil numbers, have disadvantages. These disadvantages are further compounded when we have a single class school, potentially with only one or two children at each year stage. Some of the problems commonly associated with teaching a small group of pupils are:

- (i) Attendance Issues

While one or two pupils missing a large class isn't a major issue, a small number of absent pupils can make a big difference in a small class. If there are only five or 10 pupils in a class, two missing pupils represent a much larger percentage of the class population, making it more difficult for the teacher to continue with planned lessons.

This will also significantly impact on the class dynamics and learning experiences of children in the single class setting, with the likely consequence that a child may be the only pupil at a particular stage. Thereby having no other pupil to share their learning experience with and benefit from those interactions;

## (ii) Lack of Diversity

A smaller class is less likely to represent a diverse cross section of society. Pupils benefit from being members of diverse classes because they have the opportunity to hear viewpoints that differ greatly from their own. While some small classes do have a diverse array of members, many are relatively homogeneous in nature and, as such, do not offer pupils the opportunity to learn in a diverse setting;

## (iii) Overly Rapid Work Completion

While pupils having the opportunity to complete their work quickly may seem like a good thing, there are benefits to pupils moving through work more slowly and deliberately. In larger classes, pupils are commonly slowed in their work efforts by peers who need additional guidance. This temporary slowing gives these potentially speedy pupils the opportunity to more fully explore the topics covered in the lesson instead of simply racing through and failing to absorb the information;

## (iv) Fewer Activity Options

Some academic activities require a minimum number of participants. Activities such as small group projects, group discussions or peer to peer learning activities are much harder to implement in a small class because there are fewer pupils to divide into groups, limiting pupils' options. Other options, such as large-scale games, may be impossible in single small settings because there are not enough pupils to allow for game play, or due to the wide variation in the age and physical development of the pupils, potentially making an activity unsafe;

## (v) Increased Pupil Anxiety

Some pupils enjoy the anonymity associated with being a member of a large class. These pupils are uncomfortable in the spotlight and prefer to blend in with the crowd as they move through the process of learning. For pupils of this nature, small classes are far from desirable because in educational settings with reduced pupil numbers they do not have the same opportunity to mix in with their peer group; and

## (vi) Pupil performance

Smaller classes do not help children achieve better marks in primary school, according to research published recently. The findings, by academics at the University of London's Institute of Education, contradict the popular beliefs of teachers and parents that smaller classes make for a better learning environment.

There are many other similar research papers detailing the negative impact of small class sizes on the pupils' learning experience and academic performance, due to the negative impact of the factors described above.

## 5. Consultation

If the Education Executive agree Recommendation 2.1 (i), then consultation on the proposed “mothballing” of a primary school will be progressed for any school, who at the Annual School Census, reports a school roll of fewer than 10 catchment area pupils. This will involve Children’s Services undertaking a non-statutory consultation with stakeholders (as outlined in section 4.2). In addition, trade unions will be updated on this via the Service Partnership Forum, and the Local Negotiating Committee for Teachers (LNCT).

## 6. Implications

### Financial/Resources

None

- 6.1 If “mothballed”, the pupils of any school affected, will transfer to their alternative catchment school. Additional resources will be given to the alternative catchment school in line with the schools’ per-capita formula and normal class configuration assessments.

### Legal

- 6.2 As mentioned in section 3, a statutory consultation is not required when considering schools to be “mothballed”.
- 6.3 Any staff deemed to be “surplus”, following any school being “mothballed”, will be offered re-deployment elsewhere within the Service. No job losses would arise from this proposal.

### Risk

- 6.4 Not applicable.

### Equalities

- 6.5 An Equality and Poverty Impact Assessment (EPIA) has been undertaken on this proposal. The assessment found that there was a low risk to selected group(s) which can be mitigated against using existing policies.

### Sustainability/Environmental Impact

- 6.6 Any “mothballed” school would be maintained in a reasonable condition on a wind and watertight basis.

## 7. Conclusions

This report clearly highlights the educational, curricular and wider socio-developmental challenges that schools with low rolls may have on pupils. In addition, it also demonstrates that “mothballing” of schools can increase efficiency and can lead to positive outcomes regarding the educational and curricular learning experiences for pupils.

It is important that Children’s Services adopt a ‘best value’ rationale that considers the efficiency and effectiveness of schools which have low rolls and small numbers of catchment area pupils.

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Director of Children’s Services

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### Appendix

- Appendix 1 – Proposed Changes to the Admissions Policy

### List of Background Papers:

- None

### **Proposed Changes to the Admissions Policy**

In the event of a small school, the definition of the alternative non-denominational catchment primary school would be included in the Admissions Policy as follows. The text to be added is in *italics*.

#### **6. CHOOSING A SCHOOL**

6.1 Under the Act, parents are able to make a choice of the school their child attends:

##### **A. Catchment Area Schools - Non-Denominational**

Within the Falkirk Council area, each school has a defined 'catchment area'. This is an area designated by Falkirk Council to each school. Most children living within that area will attend their designated primary and secondary school.

Each secondary school's catchment area is made up from a number of associated primary schools. Most children will attend the designated secondary school for their home address once they have completed their primary school education.

*Where the roll of a small (primary) school falls below 10 catchment area pupils, the Education Authority can decide to offer an alternative catchment school. In these circumstances, all pupils living within or moving into that school's catchment area will be automatically included in the catchment area of the nearest alternative school. Full eligibility for transfer and enrolment to the alternative catchment school will then apply. This will also apply if the Education Authority decide to temporarily close (or "mothball") a school.*