**Denominational Primary Schools Feasibility Study**

**Spring 2024**

**Initial Information for Stakeholders**

**Introduction**

The Council is carrying out a feasibility study to identify options for the long term provision of denominational (Roman Catholic) primary schools in Aberdeen. We are inviting comments and feedback from pupils, parents, staff, community groups and all other stakeholders, on the options available, and the potential impact of these options on individual schools and communities. This valuable feedback will be used to help inform the outcomes of the feasibility study and potential next steps.

This paper provides information for stakeholders on why the feasibility study is being carried out, and what the study will focus on. Stakeholders are invited to submit their comments and feedback about the feasibility study, using our online consultation hub, which can be found here: <https://consultation.aberdeencity.gov.uk/education-and-childrens-services/denominational-primary-schools-feasibility-study>

**Background**

Within Aberdeen, there are three denominational, or Roman Catholic (RC), primary schools. These are St Peter’s RC School, St Joseph’s RC School, and Holy Family RC School. These schools have much larger catchment areas than the other, non-denominational primary schools in the city, and between them their catchment areas cover the city as a whole, as well as some areas of Aberdeenshire. Any pupil can apply to attend a denominational primary school, although children with a Roman Catholic Baptism Certificate will be given priority for a place, over those who don’t.

St Joseph’s RC School in particular faces significant challenges due to the condition and suitability of the building, which was not designed for use as a school when it was first built in 1860. St Peter’s RC School faces similar challenges with its current buildings, although these will be addressed through plans already in place to refurbish and extend the school. Holy Family RC School is one of the smallest primary schools in the city, with capacity for 217 pupils, and a current pupil roll of 168 pupils. There are also some challenges with the suitability of this building for delivery of the modern curriculum.

Overall, the current denominational primary school estate offers 868 places, which will increase to 1085 places following the planned improvements to St Peter’s School, whilst the pupil population across the three schools in 2023/24 is only 771. Forecasts indicate that pupil numbers will remain at or below this figure for at least the next five years.

This over-provision of places, coupled with the challenges presented by the condition and suitability of the existing buildings, led to officers recommending that the denominational primary school estate should be reviewed, to identify options for providing an improved and sustainable denominational primary school provision in the future.

The Council’s School Roll Forecast, which shows the numbers of pupils expected to be attending each school in the city over the next six years, is available to download from the Council’s website, here: <https://www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/services/education-and-childcare/schools-and-education/schools-pupil-roll-forecasts>

In the Council’s approved [School Estate Plan](http://councilcommittees/documents/s135520/V2_APPENDIX1_SchoolEstatePlan.pdf), the need to review the denominational primary schools in the city has been identified, to help ensure that the buildings can continue to be run as efficiently as possible, and to avoid the schools having too much unused capacity. Officers have been instructed to carry out a feasibility study, to identify what actions the Council could take to bring about appropriate and sustainable long term denominational primary school provision for the city to meet forecast demand.

**Feasibility Study**

The feasibility study will be used to identify what options are available to the Council, and it will set out the advantages and disadvantages of each option. Details of what will be covered by the feasibility study are provided in Appendix 1, below. Officers will use the findings of the feasibility study to identify a “preferred option”, which will be presented to Councillors for consideration.

As the feasibility study is carried out, we are inviting pupils, parents, school staff, community groups and other stakeholders to comment on the likely options for long term Roman Catholic primary school provision, and how these options might impact on them if they were taken forwards. Feedback received from stakeholders will be included in the feasibility study and will be considered when identifying a preferred option.

Comments and feedback on the options listed in Appendix 1, and suggestions for any additional options which could be included in the feasibility study, can be submitted via our online consultation hub, which can be found here: <https://consultation.aberdeencity.gov.uk/education-and-childrens-services/denominational-primary-schools-feasibility-study>

The findings of the feasibility study, along with summaries of the feedback received from stakeholders, will be included within an Outline Business Case, which will be presented to the Council’s Education and Children’s Services Committee in Autumn 2024. The Committee will then make a decision on whether to accept the preferred option, and what action, if any, should be taken next. Any proposal to close a school would require a formal public consultation, before the Council could decide whether to implement such a proposal.

**Roman Catholic Secondary School Provision**

Whilst the feasibility study focuses only on the Roman Catholic primary schools in the city, it has been agreed that, as part of the stakeholder engagement exercise, stakeholders will also be asked for their views on whether there should be a Roman Catholic secondary school in Aberdeen. Stakeholders are therefore also invited to provide a response on the online consultation hub to the question, *“Given the choice, would you send your child to your local secondary school, or to a city wide Roman Catholic secondary school?”*

The responses to this question will be collated and reported to the Education and Children’s Services Committee in Autumn 2024.

**Key Dates for Stakeholder Engagement**

Monday 22nd April: Stakeholder Engagement Launched

Friday 31st May: Stakeholder Engagement and Feasibility Study Close

Monday 1st July: Feasibility Study Report shared on Consultation Hub

Tuesday 12th September: Outline Business Case presented to Finance & Resources Committee

Tuesday 17th September: Outline Business Case presented to Education & Children’s Services Committee

**Initial Questions for Stakeholders**

We would like to know your initial thoughts on the information presented in this paper, and on the options identified to date, as listed in Appendix 1 below.

Stakeholders may wish to consider the following questions:

* *What are the likely advantages and disadvantages of the options which have been identified?*
* *Are there any other options which should be included in the feasibility study?*
* *What additional information should the Council consider as part of the feasibility study?*
* *What questions about the feasibility study do you have at this stage?*

We also invite you to respond to the following question:

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

Feedback on the above questions, and any other relevant comments, can be submitted via our online consultation hub, which can be found here: <https://consultation.aberdeencity.gov.uk/education-and-childrens-services/denominational-primary-schools-feasibility-study>

**Appendix 1 – Feasibility Study Brief**

Below is a summary of the Feasibility Study Brief. This outlines the objectives of the project, the options to be considered, and what information the final Feasibility Study Report needs to provide:

**Project Objectives**

To be sure that the feasibility study can meet the requirements set out in the School Estate Plan, the options identified in the study should be aimed at achieving the following:

* A reduction in the overall number of denominational primary school places within the city, so that the total number of places across the denominational estate remains no higher than 868 (i.e. equivalent to two 2-stream schools)
* An overall revenue saving in terms of building running costs
* Solutions to the challenges brought about by the condition and suitability of St Joseph’s School and Holy Family School.

The options identified in the feasibility study will take into consideration the instruction issued by Council in December 2023, for officers to proceed with plans for the improvement and expansion of the St Peter’s School site. This will result in an increase in the number of places at the school from 217 to 434. Given that this instruction is in place, any proposed options generated from the feasibility study will focus on reducing the numbers of places at the other two schools, and not on the number of places available at St Peter’s School which will be determined by the separate St Peter’s project.

Similarly, given that the St Peter’s School project will result in improvements to the condition and suitability of that school, there is no requirement within this feasibility study to provide options for improvements to the St Peter’s site.

**Options to be included in the Feasibility Study (not exhaustive)**

To achieve the objectives outlined above, the following options are being considered in the Feasibility Study. Within each of the options below there may be several sub-options, which consider the various combinations of actions which could be taken:

Options relating to reducing capacity

* Review and consolidate existing school buildings, based on their capacity, forecast pupil rolls, and building condition and suitability
* Merge two schools into one existing building
* Re-alignment of catchment areas as appropriate, to reflect any changes to the use of buildings

Options relating to improving condition and suitability - where appropriate

* Consider opportunities for refurbishment and repairs to improve the condition and suitability of the existing buildings
* Rebuild existing buildings on their current site to provide improved facilities
* Rebuild existing buildings on an alternative site (if suitable sites are available) to provide improved facilities
* Relocate schools to alternative existing site(s) within the city, which offer improved facilities

Additional options may be identified and added to this list as the feasibility study progresses.

**Questions to be considered by the Feasibility Study**

The feasibility study will address the following key questions, and a final report will be provided at the end of the study which sets out the answers to these questions:

* What are the benefits / dis-benefits of potentially closing each school site? (St Joseph’s School and Holy Family School)
  + Consider costs / savings, benefits / dis-benefits of closing each site
  + Consider impact on carbon emissions and contribution to the Council’s net-zero ambitions
  + How could the existing catchment areas be realigned to account for the closure of the school?
* Which would be the optimal site to be retained and to ‘host’ a merger with another school?
  + Consider running costs, CO2 emissions, accessibility, sustainable travel
  + Consider the size of the building and the capacity it offers
  + Requirements for improvement / refurbishment of building
  + Look at forecast rolls and capacity of existing sites to accommodate future pupil numbers
  + Consider benefits / dis-benefits of merging each combination of schools
* What are the benefits of refurbishing an existing building vs. rebuilding or relocating the school to bring about improved facilities?
  + Consider the extent of improvement required and cost benefit of refurbishment vs. rebuild
  + Consider impact on carbon emissions and contribution to the Council’s net-zero ambitions
  + Likelihood of planning consent
  + Likely timescales for refurbishment vs. demolition and construction / relocation
  + Likely temporary arrangements for accommodating pupils during refurbishment or demolition and construction