

Progress Update 2

29 May 2023

Introduction

The Council is carrying out a feasibility study between March and June 2023, to identify potential options for reducing the number of primary schools in the Northfield Associated Schools Group (ASG). To help inform the outcomes of the feasibility study, 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.

Stakeholders have been 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/northfield-primary-schools-feasibility-study>

This paper provides an update on progress with the feasibility study, and a summary of the feedback received so far from stakeholders.

Feasibility Study Update

Activity to Date

Activity over the past four weeks has focused on analysing the most recently available school roll forecast data, to understand the likely available capacity at each of the schools over the next six years, and to consider how school catchment areas would need to change if any one of the buildings was to close. This information will assist in the consideration of the benefits and dis-benefits of each individual option.

Further work has also taken place on reviewing each individual school site, to look at the space which is currently available, and any works which may be required to reconfigure individual buildings, to provide suitable accommodation for larger numbers of pupils should any other school in the ASG be closed. An analysis of the extent to which the sites could accommodate a new, larger school building has also been carried out.

Next Steps

Further feedback from stakeholders during the final weeks of the feasibility study is very much encouraged, and officers will continue to read and consider the comments and questions being submitted. The FAQs document will be updated further with any new questions received.

The feasibility study will draw to a close on Friday 16th June, and a report providing a summary of the study will be drawn together and made available on our online consultation hub by 3rd July. Following this, work will begin on creating an outline business case, which will use the findings from the feasibility study to consider each option in detail. A preferred option will also be identified. The outline business case will be presented to the Education and Children's Services Committee on 12th September, when elected members will consider whether to go ahead with the identified preferred option. Any recommendation to consider closing an individual school will require the Council to first carry out a full public consultation on the proposal, before a decision can be taken on whether the closure should go ahead.

Stakeholder Feedback

Over the past four weeks further feedback from stakeholders has been submitted through our online consultation hub, for which we are very grateful. New points made and issues raised in the most recent feedback include:

- Concerns that the quality of the existing schools, their sense of community, and the benefits these have the children attending them may be lost if the schools were to close.
- Concerns that closing schools would have a negative impact on families on low incomes who are facing challenges with the cost of living.

- Recognition that constructing a new school would provide modern, purpose built facilities to benefit pupils, particularly those with additional support needs.

All of these points and any other feedback received in the final weeks of the feasibility study will be given careful consideration, when producing the final report and outline business case.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

We have used this feedback to compile a list of frequently asked questions (FAQs), which is available on the consultation hub, via this link: <https://consultation.aberdeencity.gov.uk/education-and-childrens-services/northfield-primary-schools-feasibility-study>.

We will continue to update the FAQs as the feasibility study progresses and as new questions are received.

Appendix A – 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 number of primary schools operating within the Northfield ASG
- An overall revenue saving in terms of building running costs
- A positive impact on reducing carbon emissions and on the Council's net-zero ambitions
- The remaining primary schools to be maintained at between 80% and 95% occupancy for at least 6 years following implementation, as determined by the most recently available school roll forecast data
- All remaining schools to be below 2 miles' safe walking distance from all homes within the catchment area

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

To achieve the objectives outlined above, the following options will be considered in the Feasibility Study. Within each of the options below there will be several sub-options, which consider the various combinations of schools which could potentially be merged, closed or replaced:

- Option 1 – Close one school, and re-align catchment areas to provide pupils from that school with places at the remaining schools
- Option 2 - Merge two schools together, to form one new school in an existing building, and close the other building
- Option 3 - Merge two or three schools, to form one new school in a new building to be constructed, and close the existing buildings

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?
 - 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 maintain reasonable safe walking distances to school?
- Which would be the optimal site to be retained and to 'host' a merger with another school?
 - Consider running costs, carbon emissions, accessibility, sustainable travel
 - Requirements for improvement / refurbishment of buildings
 - Consider forecast pupil rolls and capacity of existing sites to accommodate future pupil numbers
 - Consider benefits / dis-benefits of merging each combination of schools
- Which would be the optimal site for a demolition and rebuild to 'host' a merger of 2 or more schools?
 - Consider size of sites and requirements for a building to accommodate 2 or 3 existing schools
 - Consider impact on carbon emissions and contribution to the Council's net-zero ambitions
 - Likelihood of planning consent
 - Costs vs savings of replacement building
 - Likely timescales for demolition and construction
 - Likely temporary arrangements for accommodating pupils during demolition and construction