

WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL

Report by the Executive Director of Educational Services

Council: 16 December 2009

Subject: The Results of the Formal Consultation on the Proposals in Respect of St Martin's Primary School

1. Purpose

1.1 The purposes of this report are:

- a) to report the outcomes of the formal consultation for the proposed closure of St. Martin's Primary School in June 2010 to Council;
- b) to report the outcomes of the formal consultation for the proposed amalgamation of Renton, Ferryfield and Vale of Leven Early Education & Childcare Centres into St. Martin's school building to Council;

2. Background

- 2.1 At the meeting of Council on 30 September 2009, the report entitled "Strategic Plan for the Regeneration of West Dunbartonshire Schools' Estate: "Phase 2" included a proposal to conduct statutory consultations immediately on the closure of St. Martin's Primary School in June 2010 with St Martin's pupils transferring to St Mary's, Alexandria.
- 2.2 The same report also recommended the amalgamation of Renton, Vale of Leven and Ferryfield Early Education & Childcare Centres (EECCs) into St Martin's school building.
- 2.3 At the meeting Members instructed that further consultation should take place on the proposals in respect of St. Martin's Primary School

3. Main Issues

3.1 Proposed Closure of St. Martin's Primary School in June 2010

- 3.1.1 A public consultation meeting took place in the school on 10 November 2009. Letters had been issued to parents and public notices were posted in the local library and CLD Centre.
- 3.1.2 Approximately 25 people attended the meeting comprising parents, staff, elected members and members of the member/officer working group on schools' regeneration. Questionnaires were issued at the end of the meeting.

3.1.3 Fourteen questionnaires were returned on the evening. They unanimously disagreed with the proposal to close St. Martin's Primary School. Thirteen of the returns also disagreed with the proposal to amalgamate the three EECCs into the school building. One was unsure.

3.1.4 Some of the salient points taken from the meeting and the questionnaires returned on the evening are listed below.

a) There was general support to the idea of retaining St. Martin's Primary School and also amalgamating two or three of the local EECCs into the same building, thereby making the running of the building more cost effective. It was felt that this would also encourage others in the area whose children do not currently attend the school to consider enrolling them there.

b) Reference was made to the fact that retention of the school in a socially disadvantaged community is necessary.

3.1.5 Twenty submissions were received through the post. Twenty were against the closure of the primary school, seventeen were opposed to the EECCs moving into the vacated building and two were in favour. Some of the salient points noted in the posted returns are listed below.

a) Similar statements to those noted in 3.4(a) above.

b) A strong bond exists between the school and the Renton community and this would be weakened through transferring pupils to St. Mary's Primary School.

c) Renton would be the only area in the Authority where there is no denominational primary school. This could deter people from moving into the area.

d) Ferryfield EECC should remain at its current location.

e) There was a concern that St. Mary's Primary School had insufficient resources and spaces to take in the pupils from St. Martin's.

f) Pupils used to a small school would be unsettled or intimidated if they are moved into a bigger school.

3.1.6 A note of the meeting is attached as Appendix 1.

3.2 Proposed amalgamation of Renton, Vale of Leven and Ferryfield EECCs into St Martin's school building

3.2.1 A public consultation meeting took place in the school on 24 November 2009. Letters had been issued to parents and public notices were posted in the local library and CLD Centre.

3.2.2 Approximately 50 people attended the meeting comprising parents, teachers, nursery staff and Members of the Council. Questionnaires were issued at the end of the meeting.

3.2.3 Eleven questionnaires and five separate statements were returned on the evening. Fifteen were opposed to the merger of the EECCs into St. Martin's building and one was unsure. Nine were opposed to the closure of the school and two were in favour.

3.2.4 Some of the salient points taken from the posted returns are listed below.

- a) Renton EECC is a perfect location with brilliant staff.
- b) Things should stay as they are.
- c) Amalgamate Renton and Vale of Leven EECCs.
- d) Retain St. Martin's Primary School and amalgamate parts of the local EECCs into the same building.
- e) Traffic congestion at Place of Bonhill needs to be looked at.
- f) A quick decision is needed so that I know where to enrol my child. Uncertainty will push parents away from St. Martin's Primary School.
- g) Ferryfield EECC has close links to the railway station and all bus routes. A move to St. Martin's would cause problems for parents. A 15 minute walk would be necessary. Concerned over nursery children walking the same route as secondary children. Traffic concerns around the Academy at start and end of day.
- h) Many parents have children at Ferryfield and St. Mary's and some don't have transport. It would add half an hour to the journey.
- i) Ferryfield should stay. Only one entrance meaning good safety for children, dedicated staff, no benefit in amalgamating three EECCs. Education starts at nursery level and there is no benefit in amalgamation.
- j) Many parents using Ferryfield are from deprived areas and a move further away would put too big a financial burden on them. Would class sizes become bigger? Would places be cut for the 0-3 year olds?
- k) The school is out of the way with too many children and not so personal. Each nursery has been chosen individually by parents for reasons such as convenience, position, etc.

3.2.5 One submission was received through the post from a parent of a nursery child who is opposed to the merger of the EECCs into St. Martin's building as well as

being opposed to the closure of the primary school. Concern was raised over the point that any child/children with additional support needs would find a step up from a small nursery into a large primary to be overwhelming.

3.2.6 A note of the meeting is attached as Appendix 2.

3.3 Issues facing the Council

- 3.3.1** Whilst the quality of education delivered at St. Martin's Primary is not in question it is considered that the current class structure of multi-composite classes is less favourable than two-stage composite or non-composite classes, as would be the case in the St. Mary's Primary School. In the current school session, there are three multi-stage composite classes in St Martin's Primary, while 2 of the 9 classes in St Mary's are two-stage composites. If the 45 pupils currently at St Martin's Primary School had been transferred to St Mary's in August 2009, it would have been possible to timetable St Mary's in such a way that there would only have been one or at most two composite classes in the whole school.
- 3.3.2** The very small number of pupils at each stage in St Martin's Primary School limits the scope for social interaction among children of the same age. In addition, a larger school allows pupils to interact with more teachers. Larger schools can provide pupils with a wider range of educational experiences than can very small schools.
- 3.3.3** St. Mary's Primary School has the capacity to absorb all pupils currently in St. Martin's Primary School. Its increased roll would be under 250 pupils, still a modestly sized primary school.
- 3.3.4** It has been recognised by Her Majesty's Inspectorate in Education and the Accounts Commission that West Dunbartonshire has a number of schools that are over-capacity and that this needs to be addressed. St. Martin's Primary School is currently running at 24% capacity. Over-capacity in schools means that Council continues to spend a significant amount of its limited resources maintaining places in schools which are not needed and so it is unable to use that finance to enhance educational opportunities throughout the Council as a whole.
- 3.3.5** The current roll at St. Martin's is 45 and the cost to educate a child at St. Martin's Primary School is £7,310 as against the average cost in West Dunbartonshire of £3,582. This is not considered to be value for money and causes a strain on existing budgets.
- 3.3.6** Taking into consideration that St Mary's is only one mile from St Martin's, has a strong reputation within the community as an excellent school, and has the capacity to take in all 45 pupils, together with the high cost to run such a small school, St Martin's has now become unsustainable and therefore it is recommended that St Martin's Primary School closes in June 2010. A statutory public consultation would be required on the proposal to close the school.

- 3.3.7** The proposal from Cordale Housing is to build a community school and not a co-located Renton Primary and St. Martin's Primary and so this is not an option under consideration.
- 3.3.8** It should be noted that, should St Martin's close, the village of Renton would continue to have a non-denominational primary school (Renton Primary) in the heart of the community
- 3.3.9** In the event that St Martin's Primary closes it was originally proposed to merge the three local EECCs, namely Renton, Ferryfield and Vale of Leven into the St Martin's building to create an integrated Early Years and Family Support Unit. However, following the public consultation meetings it was recognised that there is significant merit in retaining Ferryfield in its existing locale, beside St Mary's Primary School with which it has very close links. It is also situated close to main bus routes and the local railway station thereby allowing ease of accessibility for public transport.
- 3.3.9** It is also acknowledged that Ferryfield provides excellent support for some very vulnerable families in the central Alexandria area. To move the Centre to the St Martin's campus would pose significant logistical problems for some of these families.
- 3.3.11** The revised proposal is therefore to merge Renton and Vale of Leven EECCs into the St. Martin's building. It should be noted that there is currently one Head of Centre in charge of both establishments. Amalgamating the two centres would therefore facilitate their administration. It might also be possible to provide a wider range of pre-5 services in the new, larger establishment.
- 3.3.12** Should funding become available in the future for a new build St. Mary's Primary School consideration should be given to the possibility of including a new Ferryfield EECC on the same campus.
- 3.3.13** These revised recommendations were endorsed by the Member/Officer Working Group on Schools' Regeneration at its meeting on 1 December 2009. At this meeting, the Catholic Church's representative on the Council's Education and Lifelong Learning Committee indicated that, while regretting the necessity to close any denominational primary school, the Archdiocese of Glasgow also recognises the difficulty of sustaining such a small school and would not oppose the closure of St Martin's.

4. Personnel Issues

- 4.1** Staffing in schools is based upon a formula which takes into account, amongst other things, pupil rolls and the formula would be similarly applied to take account of any change due to the school closure.

- 4.2 Staffing levels and the management structure would need to be reconsidered in the event of the merger of the two EECCs. Such levels would reflect ratios required by legislation and the Care Commission.
- 4.3 Should Council elect to approve the closure of St. Martin's Primary School and the amalgamation of the two EECCs in Alexandria then the established departmental policy on the deployment of staff in closing or amalgamating schools and EECCs would apply.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1 Closure of St Martin's PS would effect revenue savings in 2010/2011 of an estimated £ 89,000 and annual savings of £135,000 in subsequent years.
- 5.2 If the Council chooses not to close St. Martin's Primary School and transfer the children to St. Mary's Primary School the cost to educate children at St. Martin's Primary School will continue to run at around £7,310 per pupil per annum as opposed to the average cost of £3,582 per pupil per annum in other West Dunbartonshire schools. .
- 5.2 Revenue savings would accrue from the amalgamation of Renton and the Vale of Leven EECCs into St Martin's school building. However, staffing and management arrangements for the new establishment would require to be considered and discussed with the relevant trade unions. It is not therefore possible to quantify the revenue savings at this stage.
- 5.3 There would be a requirement for a limited capital spend on the St Martin's building to accommodate the additional EECC. This would be managed within existing capital budgets.
- 5.4 There would be the possibility of realising a capital receipt for the sale of the Renton EECC site.

6. Risk Analysis

- 6.1 As St Martin's Primary School's roll continues to fall there is a risk that the running costs will increase to the extent that the financial strain on the Council budget could be unsustainable. There is a risk of a challenge that the Council is not achieving value for money due to the continued existence of St. Martin's Primary School.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

- 7.1 The public response to the consultation clearly reflects a strong desire to retain St. Martin's Primary School. However by transferring children to St. Mary's Primary School delivery of education would be improved through the abolition of multi-composite classes and the exposure of the transferring pupils to a greater number of teachers and a wider range of social and educational experiences.

Furthermore, the costs incurred in running such a small school are becoming increasingly unsustainable. Value for money would be questionable, particularly bearing in mind that the alternative receiving school, i.e. St. Mary's Primary School, is only one mile from St. Martin's, is recognised as an excellent school, and has the capacity to absorb all of the pupils transferring to it.

7.2 It is recommended that Council should:

- a) instruct officers to conduct statutory consultations immediately on the closure of St. Martin's Primary School in June 2010 with St Martin's pupils transferring to St Mary's, Alexandria;**
- b) in the event that Council ultimately closes St. Martin's Primary School, approve the merger of Renton and Vale of Leven EECCs into St. Martin's building at the earliest opportunity thereafter.**

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Appendices: Appendix 1: Notes of Formal Consultation Meeting: St
Martin's Primary School
Appendix 2: Notes of Formal Consultation Meeting: 3 Early
Education & Childcare Centres, Alexandria

Background Papers: Report to Council: 30 September 2009 "Strategic Plan for
the Regeneration of West Dunbartonshire Schools' Estate:
"Phase 2"

Wards Affected: Ward 1