

Denominational Primary Schools Feasibility Study
April to June 2024

End of Feasibility Study Report
July 2024

Introduction

The Council carried out a feasibility study 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. A summary of the brief for the feasibility study is included below. To help inform the outcomes of the feasibility study, comments and feedback were invited from school communities on the options available, and the potential impact of these options.

This paper provides a summary of the feedback received from stakeholders, and the key themes which have emerged from the feasibility study.

Feasibility Study Summary

The study involved a detailed review of the existing denominational primary school sites, focusing in particular on St Joseph's RC School and Holy Family RC School, given that plans are already under way to improve and increase the size of the St Peter's RC School building. Data was gathered on each school's circumstances, including building layout, condition, accessibility, overall size of the site, and how spaces are currently being used. This information was used to assess the available options for potentially reducing the overall future pupil capacity within our denominational primary schools, including any options for closing one or more of the existing school buildings, to reduce any excess pupil capacity.

Alongside this, architects were instructed to review opportunities for making improvements to the existing school facilities, including options to extend and / or refurbish the buildings.

This work is helping to identify a number of potentially viable options for improving the condition and suitability of our denominational primary school estate, whilst also minimising any excess pupil capacity in the future, to ensure they can continue to be run as efficiently as possible.

Analysis of the information gathered during the feasibility study will be used to help assess all available options, and the impact these may have on stakeholders and school communities. This will assist in the development of an outline business case, to set out the advantages and disadvantages, and any cost implications of each option, before finally recommending a preferred option to be taken forwards.

Feedback from Stakeholders

The feedback submitted by stakeholders throughout the feasibility study has been invaluable, and has been used to help shape the direction of the study and in assessing how viable each option is likely to be.

The key messages from stakeholders which have helped to influence the study include:

- The value placed on denominational schools for their role in developing moral values, ethics and discipline
- The importance of faith education and support for religious principals which are provided by the schools
- The schools are highly regarded for providing very good quality education and having high quality teaching staff
- The schools are valued for supporting cultural diversity and inclusivity
- The importance of the ethos and environment, sense of belonging, and sense of community provided by the schools
- The assertion that the denominational schools benefit from being open to people of all faiths, and focus on different beliefs

Comments received through the stakeholder survey also included:

- A strong feeling that the schools should be refurbished and improved, and not closed
- Concerns from parents about increased travel time and cost, if one of the schools was to close
- That closing a school would reduce the level of parental choice over school placings
- Concerns that the Council's school roll forecasts may not be accurate and that there is limited spare capacity available in the existing schools.

Emerging Priorities

Taking into account the information gathered from the site investigations, and the important messages from stakeholder feedback, the following key priorities have emerged, which will help to inform the development of an outline business case:

- **Maintaining access to denominational schools in the City**

The stakeholder feedback has made it clear that significant value is placed on the role of denominational primary schools in delivering high quality learning and teaching, and also in supporting children's moral and personal development. Options presented within the business case will therefore need to ensure that children in any part of the city continue to have an opportunity to attend a denominational primary school in the future.

- **Condition and Suitability of the school buildings**

The site investigations and feedback from stakeholders have confirmed and supported the requirement to make improvements to the condition and suitability of the facilities, particularly at St Joseph's RC School, if these are to continue operating in the future. Options presented in the business case will need to take this into account.

- **School Roll Forecasts**

It is acknowledged that any recommendations to reduce future capacity within the denominational primary schools will require to be based on up to date and robust information about the likely numbers of pupils who will be attending the schools in the future. The outline business case will therefore take into account the latest available school roll forecast figures, and their reliability when identifying any preferred option to be taken forwards.

Next Steps

A report on the outcomes of the feasibility study and recommendations for next steps will be presented to the Education and Children's Services Committee on 17th September 2024.

Feasibility Study Brief

Below is a summary of the Feasibility Study Brief, outlining the objectives for the project and the options which were to be considered during the feasibility study.

Project Objectives

The options identified through this feasibility study must 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 this feasibility study should 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, which 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 should not result in any changes to the number of places available at St Peter's School which will be brought about by the separate St Peter's project.

Similarly, given that the St Peter's 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 in section 2 above, the following options should be considered in the Feasibility Study. Within these options it may be necessary to include several sub-options, which consider the various combinations of action which could be taken:

Options relating to reducing capacity

- Close one school, and re-align catchment areas to provide pupils with places at each of the two remaining schools
- Merge two schools into one existing building, and close the other building

Options relating to improving condition and suitability (St Joseph's School and Holy Family School)

- Carry out 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

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:

The feasibility study should address the following key 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 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
- Likely temporary arrangements for accommodating pupils during refurbishment or demolition and construction